

THE 1997 CATTO REPORT
ON JOURNALISM AND SOCIETY

Market Journalism:
New Highs, New Lows

Robert MacNeil
The 1997 Catto Fellow

with

News Values in the
New Multimedia Environment:
The Case of Privacy

The Report of the 1997 Catto Conference
on Journalism and Society

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Foreword

This is the first in a series of annual reports published by the Aspen Institute's Communications and Society Program as part of a larger project aimed at enhancing the contribution of journalism to democratic social and political life. The concern over the role of journalism in democratic societies is intensifying. Recent public opinion surveys suggest that citizens in the United States and other advanced democracies are questioning the faith they have traditionally placed in major societal institutions, including the media. They question how well these institutions are adapting to the changing needs of their communities. They question whether the privileges of power and influence of these institutions are justified by what they contribute in return to society. And they question the ability of journalism to remain relevant to the daily lives of the people. The purpose of this report and the larger Aspen Institute project is to explore these issues and foster a national dialogue about journalism's enduring values within a dynamic democratic context.

The Aspen Institute Project

The Aspen Institute project, conceived and funded by The Catto Charitable Foundation, seeks to accomplish these goals through three major activities:

- The *Catto Fellowship*, awarded annually to a leading figure from journalism, the media, or public office whose scholarship and professional accomplishments advance the cause of healthy, vital journalism in the service of democratic society.

- The *Catto Conference on Journalism and Society*, an annual roundtable meeting of leading journalists, media owners, political figures, business executives, and social critics held each summer in Aspen, Colorado. The conference selects a specific issue relevant to the field of journalism to address in detail, then generalizes from the particulars of the discussion to make recommendations for the improvement of the profession.
- The publication and dissemination of an annual report, *The Catto Report on Journalism and Society*, informed by the scholarship of the Fellow and the findings of the annual Conference.

The 1997 Catto Report on Journalism and Society

Robert MacNeil, distinguished journalist and author, served as the 1997 Catto Fellow. His keynote address, “Market Journalism: New Highs, New Lows,” marked the official start of the Conference, held on June 26-28, 1997, and provided a touchstone for the ensuing discussion at the Conference. It appears in the first section of this report.

MacNeil examines changes in the news media wrought by competitive pressures that too often place greater emphasis on market values over journalistic values. He sees a mixture of positive and worrisome trends in journalism that raise three key questions which go to the heart of the debate over journalism and its role in society (and which were discussed in detail at the Conference and in this report):

- (1) *What are, or should be, the core values of journalism?*
- (2) *How do they relate to the diverse sets of standards that currently guide journalists in the practice of their profession?*
- (3) *And what happens when standards are absent, or when journalistic values are overtaken by market values?*

To explore these questions in a more specific context, conference participants examined the issue of privacy in the news

media. In the second section of this report, David Bollier summarizes from his perspective the major themes that emerged from the lively discussion occurring at the conference. Accordingly, while this report generally reflects the sense of the group, the statements made here should not be taken in any way as the views of any particular participant or participant's employer unless noted otherwise. A list of conference participants follows in the Appendix.

Privacy and the News Media

Journalists have always been able to obtain confidential information about the private lives of individuals and, until recently, have practiced considerable restraint in publishing such information. But several high-profile cases in recent years are forcing journalists and others in society to ask critically, *When does personal information about an individual become newsworthy? What limits, if any, should the press observe with regard to invading the privacy of individuals? And, Are current legal and ethical guidelines sufficient to maintain the delicate balance between First Amendment rights and respect for the privacy of individuals?*

It is important to note that the conference was held and the report drafted prior to the untimely automobile accident that claimed the life of Diana, Princess of Wales. The public debate following that tragedy over where to draw the line between the acceptable pursuit of a news story and the unacceptable invasion of privacy has raised the level of tension between First Amendment rights and privacy interests. And this applies to all media, not just the Fleet Street and supermarket tabloids. The power of the press to impact individuals in profoundly significant ways makes it imperative that journalists and the organizations that employ them evaluate the principles that guide their work and the values that guide their judgments.

Ironically, one of the most interesting findings of the conference is that, for all the control the public assumes journalists have, journalists themselves oftentimes feel they have lost their editorial sovereignty, mainly due to the competitive pressures of the news business. Ultimately, the best a journalist can do is use

sound judgment guided by a commitment to the core values of journalism. The challenge that lies ahead is to address how the enduring values of the journalistic profession can reinvigorate the constructive role that journalism can play in a democracy.

Leadership on the part of prominent journalists can play an important role in the development and continued recognition of core values for the profession. Communicating, in words as well as in actions, the code of conduct one adheres to as a journalist can help to clarify the fundamental values of good journalism and establish a voluntary framework for the adoption of enduring practices and standards. Such leadership is especially important in influencing younger journalists who are in the process of developing their own professional identities and standards.

To this end, we invited conference participants to submit personal statements of either the core values that guide them as journalists, or reflections on the fundamental issues discussed at the conference. The statements submitted in response to this request are included in the final section of this report. We should emphasize, however, that these are personal statements of individual participants, and do not necessarily represent the views of any other participants or employing organizations. Certainly there is no intent or implication that such values be imposed on any individual news organization or journalist. To the contrary, these statements are part of a continuing dialogue among journalists and others in society as to the significant roles of journalism in our democracy, consistent with strong First Amendment sensitivities.

Acknowledgments

The Institute would like to acknowledge and express its gratitude for the sponsorship of The Catto Charitable Foundation, and in particular Jessica and Henry Catto, whose commitment, vision and guidance made this Conference and report possible. We would also like to thank Robert MacNeil, the first Catto Fellow at The Aspen Institute, for his thoughtful and insightful comments that launched the first Conference; conference moderator Geoffrey Cowan, Dean of the Annenberg School for Commu-

nication at the University of Southern California, who did a masterful job at keeping the lively discussions on track; conference participants, who generously gave several days out of very busy schedules to reflect on their own work and the state of their profession; members of the advisory committee for their assistance in putting together this first conference; David T. McLaughlin, president of The Aspen Institute until his retirement on July 1, 1997, for shepherding this project from its inception to fruition; David Bollier, conference rapporteur, whose considerable talents have produced an insightful and interesting report on the broader issues of journalism and on privacy in the media; and Communications and Society Program Assistant Director Amy Korzick Garmer for her extensive research, preparatory materials, and editorial supervision, and conference coordinators, Tricia Kirsch and Gia Nolan, for their work on the Conference and this report.

Charles M. Firestone
Director, Communications and Society Program

Market Journalism: New Highs, New Lows

Robert MacNeil

Keynote address delivered at
The 1997 Catto Conference on Journalism and Society

Perhaps it is in the nature of a society as diverse and dynamic as this that some people always feel it is the best of times and some the worst of times. For it seems to many today that American democracy has never looked more successful, while to others it seems under great strain. Perhaps that paradox is always also true in the journalism that serves the democracy, and serves us, and serves itself so profitably.

As usual, our journalism is seen to be worse than it has ever been, declining disgracefully, and better than ever, improving magnificently. In a recent textbook, two communications scholars debate with equal passion the propositions that American journalism is a source of embarrassment to the nation, and that it is a reason for great pride.

But in this particular summer, two and a half years before the millennium, and perhaps affected by its approach, our profession is more nervous than usual: acting like a man about to be married for a fourth time, anxious about his bald spot and waist bulge, perhaps guiltily remembering all the complaints he ignored from past wives.

Never before that I am aware have so many journalists, and so many prominent among them, set up to reform the business, nor have so many institutions come forward to embrace them. Besides us, they include: the American Society of Newspaper Editors, The Newspaper Association of America, the Freedom Forum, the Poynter Institute, the Knight Foundation, the Pew Trust, the

Nieman Foundation—and Mike Wallace, who wants reconsideration of a national press council. Does that sound like the fox calling for a guard on the chicken coop? There is a strong odor of self-preservation about all these efforts in an industry that has traditionally been grudging, even hostile, when asked to look to its shortcomings, greeting most criticism by pulling down the First Amendment shutters and retreating to the bar.

We, of course, are above such crass motivation: The Aspen Institute, with Jessica and Henry Catto, who bring us here for this first annual conference on journalism and society, have more detachment. But like the others, we are responding to growing public discomfort with the news media, as evidenced in recent polls, declining confidence in the product and, more recently, a suspicion that the vaunted Fourth Estate, bulwark of a free society, etc., etc., may not be serving the democracy well; perhaps actively hinders its institutions; concern that the media contribute to public disillusionment and alienation, while nurturing a younger generation scornful of all the things citizens in a democracy are supposed to respect—government, legislatures, executives, courts, elections—in short the foundations of the democracy itself. Further, it is feared that commercial forces in the rapidly changing media marketplace are driving our journalism in ways that do not merely annoy sensible people—they usually have—but scare them.

That's a big mouthful. Sounds a bit apocalyptic. Should we journalists be worried sick or, frankly Scarlett, as usual, should we not give a damn?

Certainly we see a condition of information anarchy; new sources of supposed authority spawned almost daily and challenging the old-established authorities and centers of media power. Can all this seething energy be directed into paths that will serve the democracy, or is it telling us something deeper, as some claim, that we need fundamental changes in our institutions?

As journalists, we may be trained observers but I believe we are not totally disinterested observers. We may not be social engineers but each of us has a stake in the health of this democracy and its institutions. Democracy and the social contract that makes it work are held together by a delicate web of trust, and all of us

in journalism hold edges of the web. We are not just amused bystanders, watching the idiots screw it up.

But are the institutions outdated? To make government relevant again to the people, to remake a fractionalized union, do we need institutions better adapted to the computer age? Or can the existing institutions continue to adapt?

Or, is there a less dramatic but simpler explanation of where we find ourselves? That for half a century or so, say 1935-1985, we have lived an age of uncommon consensus on threats to peace and the pursuit of happiness—Depression, Nazis, Communists—and that consensus on challenges (if not on how to meet them) produced a mass journalism of high earnestness that was anomalous, out of character, with the irreverent American spirit; that the same threats produced uncharacteristic deference to swelling government, deference rudely withdrawn when Vietnam, Watergate, etc., produced, in reaction, uncharacteristic churlishness towards shrinking government.

We are unlikely to see that mass-audience journalism of high earnestness return until some genuine new crisis comes along, until some real threat, some catastrophe reboots the national psyche, and then the good sense of the American people will sort it out. Don't need to pay too much attention to all that stuff right now: things aren't that bad. Ours is the first generation of children who don't have to go off to war, or hide under their school desks for A-Bomb drills. Tom, Dan, and Peter are all nice fellows but they don't have the same dire things to tell us that Walter, Chet, and David told Mom and Dad, so it's no longer basic civic hygiene, like brushing your teeth, to watch one of their shows. Besides, if you want it straight, you can watch Jim Lehrer.

Let's examine some of these points, starting with the quality of the journalism that has the public apparently so upset and the industry apparently so concerned. I say *apparently* because behind all these worthy studies and conferences, millions of Americans are still avidly consuming this media product and the people who purvey it are making a lot of money.

Margaret Gordon, dean of the Graduate School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, reports that, in the decade 1985-1995, corporate executives in news enterprises "grew accustomed

to profits of 15 to 20 percent and some earned 30, 40, and even 55 percent.” She says that in the same period resources devoted to the production of news declined dramatically in the late 1980s from an average of 20 percent of revenues to six to eight percent.

Simultaneously, as the number of print outlets and broadcast channels increased, the competition for circulation figures and audience ratings grew fiercer. So we now have a journalism driven by market forces in two ways: more competitive than ever (at least on the broadcasting side) for eyeballs that can be sold to advertisers; more driven in both print and broadcasting to market research and tailoring the product to its findings.

Indeed, as Michael Janeway says in the readings prepared for this conference, “what used to be called *editing* in news organizations is increasingly called marketing.” Janeway sees it ironic “that many of these strategies further fragment markets, thereby undermining the traditional press role as voice of the community.”

So, what is this new kind of market journalism giving us that has everyone so exercised? What new lows have the media discovered, and can we point to any new journalistic highs in this environment?

First, a word on the word *media*.

It is still strange to me that standard usage lumps all this bewildering variety under a singular term, *media*, not only because it offends linguistically (what is the plural of *media*?), but because it may be responsible for some of our problems with the public.

Why should elements as diverse as our media of communications, information, and entertainment be considered *it*? Even narrowing the field to news media, how can we encompass the *New York Times* and *Hard Copy*, *C-SPAN*, and the *National Inquirer*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *A Current Affair* in a single term? Surely the name *media* inappropriately besmirches some as it launders others. The term *media* now engenders such contempt in some quarters that to apply it to all our journalism institutions is like calling all hotels flophouses, even though we know that exotic things may happen in respectable hotels—like the Jefferson, Dick Morris’s love nest in Washington.

I’ve made this complaint a lot and obviously it’s futile. The usage is fixed, but the more we call *media it*, the more the public will think it’s all the same phenomenon, and the more jour-

nalists' minds will be confused about how much to borrow from the seductive entertainment media.

Unfortunately we can't just take our section, the news media, in isolation. The compartments between ours and other segments of the media are not colorfast. Our products are tossed in the same frenzied laundromat of competition for the public's attention and dollar, and the fabrics bleed into one another. The ravishing colors of entertainment media bleed into the necessary black, white, and grey of journalism, both literally and metaphorically, in print and video and on the Internet: advertising, public relations, politics, religion, education, popular arts and science, and arrant nonsense—some innocent, some virtual treason—all washed together these days. The result is an information coat of many colors, tie-dyed in the eyes of consumers who, especially the young, could probably care less what category of media they are consuming. Such indifference seems increasingly true of the media's corporate owners.

The range of media activities now resemble the electromagnetic spectrum. All human activities, from a Mozart opera to pornography, to war on Saddam Hussein, to a learned article in a scientific journal, to a movie like *Pulp Fiction*, to a presidential news conference, to a chronicle of the Civil War, to the computer on which I composed this talk, are reducible to digital bits and bytes, ever more tightly compressed, ever more quickly flashed in mega-, giga-, tera-, or exa-byte quantities around the globe in the blink of an eye, like the billions in currencies traded in milliseconds in transactions more powerful than the power of great nations.

When it's all reduced to the abstract language of computers, it is human nature, especially human business nature, to think of it all as "stuff" to be sold, pushing the stuff that sells best—books, operas, sitcoms, magazines in print or video or TV—jettisoning what does not sell, whatever its artistic or public service value to a few.

In that business environment, our Fourth Estate, our earnest seekers after truth, go to work every day bearing like the scarlet letter on their breasts, the word *media*.

Preparing for this talk, testing my own observations against others', I found it much easier to identify new lows than highs.

The general consensus was that the new market-journalism produced not only a new all-time low but a watershed event in the criminal trial of O. J. Simpson. And that coverage has cast its shadow over everything since, perhaps even, soberingly, the trial of Timothy McVeigh for the Oklahoma bombing.

The first O. J. trial demonstrated the enormous power of alternative media, often representing a supermarket tabloid sensibility, to compete with and even drive mainstream journalism, including the three major networks, which had built their credibility on decades of solid, reliable, unsensational journalism.

That NBC, CBS, and (to a slightly lesser extent) ABC led their nightly newscasts night after night and devoted further minutes lower down to Simpson sent a message of major change in our journalism culture. It said to half the television population in the world's leading democracy that these respectable sources of responsible information considered the latest O. J. Simpson twist the most important thing that happened in the world that day. Of course the network journalists did not think that, but they felt competitively obliged to put Simpson first to get customers into the tent. Ten, twenty years ago they would not have.

It illustrates a trend in which the bottom-feeding media appear to drive even the serious big fish because their audience share is declining and they fear to lose more.

Millions of Americans who used to get information from institutions with respected journalistic credentials are now getting it from talk shows that grow ever more lurid and leering, real-life crime and rescue shows, syndicated tabloid news, docu-dramas and reenactments—where traditional journalistic standards seem irrelevant. A Roper survey found that half of Americans find these programs “fairly credible sources of information.”

So, increased competition in the marketplace may be the enemy of conventional standards of journalism. The question is whether these hot new kinds of information programming, with their high entertainment values and appeal to the young, are forcing serious journalists to follow them for survival. And the O. J. Simpson story is evidence that they are. It is coverage driven by the dealers in gossip, rumor, and sheer invention in the race for leads, scoops, and speculation, and the obsessive coverage of one story reduces the attention the media pay to anything else.

Michael Schudson of the University of California at San Diego uses an interesting phrase in describing how certain stories were traditionally placed on the newspaper page or in a news broadcast. "Readers and viewers understand the hierarchy of importance this creates. It is a hierarchy of moral salience."

What hierarchy of moral salience does a consumer understand when a network news broadcast repeatedly leads with some titillating tidbit about O. J. Simpson? It is the amoral salience of market values.

What other lows distinguish this marketplace? I thought the Gulf War coverage overblown, jingoistic, and unskeptical much of the time. But there were other factors, the nation starved for glory and hungry to exorcise the ghosts of military impotence in Vietnam.

Now there are three all-news networks, each getting tiny audiences. For all the promotion for CNN, Fox and MSNBC, it is interesting to note that all together, their news shows attract 1/10th or less of the average nightly audience for the *NewsHour* on PBS. (And the moral salience of that observation I leave to your imaginations!) So I tremble a little for the next sizable crisis with three all-news channels, and scores of other cable and local broadcasters, fighting for a share of the action, each trying to make his twist on the crisis more dire than the next.

I think we touch new lows in some of the leering magazine show interviews. Ed Murrow may have stooped to gossip in *Person to Person*, but he didn't ask Marilyn Monroe with whom she was having sex, or what it was like. Some of his successors do, and call it journalism.

Similarly, I think we have reached an embarrassing point with undercover, hidden-camera, investigative reporting. The public thinks so too: witness the jury in the Food Lion suit suggesting that ABC News look to its methods of news gathering.

I know these programs are capable of good journalism, but the customary mawkish, self-important, and often prurient sensibility they trade on to build audience drags down the good.

This is important, because these programs are the great success stories of the network news departments and are proliferating accordingly. They fly the flag of network news at a time when the

early-evening flagship news programs are losing audience and some predict that a strip of early prime-time magazines (with a hard-news top) may eventually replace them. I think we have a new low in the apparent entrapment by the *Globe* supermarket tabloid of Frank Gifford which—again journalism driven by the bottom-feeders—became a news story for mainstream journalists. As Richard Cohen pointed out in the *Washington Post*, “If indeed the *Globe* paid a woman to have sex with a public figure so that he could be exposed for the presumed benefit of the paper’s circulation numbers, then we have hit a new low both in journalism and American life. And yet in both the press and on the radio, this episode has been treated as just a stitch.”

This prurient pile-on was apparent in the Marv Albert story: the *Arlington Journal* noted that no fewer than 15 satellite trucks were lined up to broadcast news of his arraignment on charges of sodomy, assault, and battery.

Let’s not leave newspapers out of this, since they have fallen in public esteem and are usually rated lower in credibility than television.

The *San Jose Mercury News* has had to apologize, some think still too guardedly, for the stories alleging CIA complicity in drug trade by Nicaraguan Contras. It became an immediate national story because it seemed to confirm what some in Congress, but particularly some African-Americans, had always contended. How does a respected newspaper permit such sensational but deficient reporting to get through its editorial screens?

How did NBC some years ago permit a producer to attach an explosive device to a GM truck to prove, on camera, that its gas tank exploded in collisions?

Obviously the answer is that the new market forces provide incentives for journalists, reporters, producers, editors, to take those extra steps into dangerous territory.

You might argue that market forces seem to be driving all sorts of Americans to excessive behavior. You might even say we live in an age of excess. It wasn’t just the news media who crossed new frontiers of excess with the O. J. Simpson trial. What about lawyers, policemen, prosecutors, judges? But I won’t pursue that. We’re talking about the news media.

And there are new highs to report in this same environment. Journalists I respect consider the hour-long news with Brian Williams on MSNBC a laudable attempt at serious but matchable journalism, a square-seeming activity on a venue noted for trying to be cool for generation-Xers. It is interesting, given the enormous publicity, that so few people watch: on average, according to the *New York Times*, 27,000 homes.

Last week David Broder wrote: "The good news is that those citizens who hunger for solid information on public affairs are better served than ever before—wherever they live . . . three national newspapers—two of them, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, among the best in the country, and the third, *USA Today*, rapidly improving the quality and depth of its reporting." He goes on to list National Public Radio, C-SPAN, and CNN "and a growing number of other cable outlets, bringing far more real-time, unedited coverage of important events than ever before . . . PBS, the Internet, and a wealth of special-focus publications are available for those with greater curiosity."

I agree with him. Personally, no longer in daily news myself, I find it quite easy to ignore all the nonsense I've been deploring here. I watch the *NewsHour* and read the *New York Times*, I dip into other papers and magazines as I feel like it, and I know that beyond them is an infinity of information when I choose to reach out for it. For all the excesses of this marketplace, no American with any desire to be informed has any excuse not to be. He just may not get it as he did on the channels he was used to; as the *Columbia Journalism Review* said recently of the network nightly news, "It's not your father's newscast anymore."

The question with relevance to the health of the democracy I think is this: have the mainstream media driven people away by going less serious, down market, deemphasizing foreign news, stressing touchy-feely news, news you can use, and hitting the sensation button from time to time in sweeps week? Millions of Americans, especially but not exclusively younger, have switched to other things. *Seinfeld*, Letterman, *Hard Copy*, *Entertainment Tonight*, sports, may be as much of a window on the world as they want. And local news. To me one of the real anomalies the surveys show is the public attachment to local TV news. As we

know from Max Frankel's frequent reminders, if we didn't know from our own viewing, local news is "body bags at 11:00." Relentless and quite cynical exploitation of people's fear of crime at a time when violent crime is going down. Frankel passed on the *Rocky Mountain Media Watch* finding that on February 26, 1997, 1,172 of the lead stories at 100 stations in 35 states were about crime and violence, mostly murder. Indeed, fully one-third of all the news on local TV that night dealt with crime.

And if it isn't crime, it is other craziness. The *Wall Street Journal* reported from L.A., the frontier of helicopter journalism, that "as many as 13 full-time media ships may be cruising for news at all hours. . . ." The *Journal* quotes one of the pilots, a Lawrence Welk III, saying, "The reality is that news is entertainment today. In a kind of weird irony, I am in the entertainment business, although I don't bring pleasure to people like my grandfather did. I bring them action and tragedy."

To be fair to adult viewers of such stuff, many have very busy lives, two-or-more-wage-earner families, for whom 11 o'clock may be the only moment they can spare for news. That is why some of us in public television are trying to launch a national news program at 11:00.

Now let us come back to the companion theme of this conference, sustaining a healthy democratic society.

What is unhealthy about American democracy now and how, if at all, is it journalism's fault? What are the symptoms? As I said at the beginning, many might think the democracy is in fine shape. The nation is at peace, the economy is the envy of the world, competitive and vital, important compromises are being made on issues like budgets, taxation, and social services. A majority of Americans say they are more hopeful about their futures than in recent years, consumer confidence is the highest in 28 years, and, despite all the negative publicity about him, the president enjoys popular support. Under our traditions of free speech there is continuous and healthy debate about many vital social issues, and some less vital, perhaps, such as whether it should be unconstitutional to burn the flag. And the system manages to both encourage and absorb breathtaking change in culture and morals.

American society remains a cauldron of social and moral exper-

iment which, carried by its huge export in products of popular culture, influences the world. (On a sobering cultural note, *Baywatch* is seen in 140 countries.) This remains a noisy, fractious, competitive, but dynamic society, which immigrants from all over the world are still pressing to join. Out of moral conviction and self-defense, the United States led the world in the defeat of fascism and communism and remains, if not as enthusiastic about it, still ready to do good in the world.

So, what is wrong with this picture? Well, it is true that the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is unevenly realized. The gap between rich and poor grows larger, greatly exacerbated by race. Millions of Americans, including many children, are ill fed, millions have inadequate medical care, and poor or no housing. Education—a fundamental democratic right—fails many; the United States has more of its people, per capita, in prison than all except some surviving dictatorships; and that is directly related to our heavy drug consumption, even as alcohol and tobacco addiction fall. Adult violent crime is down but youth crime is up and demographically that promises to increase.

The United States has, among developed democracies, a very low participation in the central democratic rite, its elections; millions don't think voting is relevant to them. That process is awash in money, giving ordinary people the impression that money buys anything in politics. A considerable number of American citizens believe, in a quite virulent and dangerous way, that government is their enemy and arm themselves to fight it: Timothy McVeigh believed that and it produced the greatest act of domestic terrorism, I believe, in any advanced democratic state. There may be more McVeighs coming. Many, including Pierre Salinger, think a military missile shot down TWA flight 800 and that the government is hiding it. Forty-two percent of Americans believe that creatures from space have visited us and many are convinced the United States government is lying about that. New movies coming this summer will probably reinforce such beliefs, as Oliver Stone's JFK renourished conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination. Of course, you don't have to be crazy or paranoid to be anti-government, but the sentiment has reached new levels.

Still, putting all such evidence in context, I don't think this

democracy is in all that bad shape. It may not be in a period of high inspiration or great leadership but it may not need to be. Greatness usually grows out of serious trouble. While looking up the Dickens quote in my *Bartlett's*, I came across a line by José Martí, the Cuban poet-hero: "This is the age in which hills can look down upon the mountains."

But suppose you took all the shortcomings I have mentioned and declared them a crisis in the democracy, you would still have to point out that we know about them all through regular coverage by the news media. That is how I know about them.

Perhaps we do not know enough about, say, poverty. There is criticism that the demographics of journalism have changed in a couple of generations, that reporters have become part of the economic elite and can't identify with the lives of socially humbler Americans. I think that exaggerates the influence of well-paid, celebrity journalists. Average journalism wages across the country suggest that your typical reporter or editor has every reason to understand life as it is really lived and sweated for.

Then how are the media complicit (that lovely Washington word)? What are we really worried about?

So, the people have lower respect for politicians and elected officials? To what degree is that unhealthy in a democracy? Politicians in a big country are always going to be a mixed bag. Does journalistic portrayal of politicians instill undeserved contempt? Are the media too negative about politicians, too quick to find fault, too slow to praise accomplishments? Perhaps, but very hard to generalize about. Tom Rosenstiel, one of the journalists now bent on reforming the profession, said when he was at *Newsweek*, he felt "we were less interested in covering the essence of the Republican revolution than in the divorce rates of the freshman class." Maybe less interested, but *Newsweek* did cover the revolution.

Margaret Gordon, whom I quoted earlier, writes, "One thing the public doesn't like is what it sees as incessant negativism, much of it fed by the rampant cynicism of reporters towards government and government officials. If journalists are continually publicizing blunders, conflicts, and scandals, and rarely, (if ever) publicizing innovations, achievements, or outstanding performances, it is not surprising that a self-fulfilling prophecy has taken place:

The public has little trust in government. Ironically, the public *also* has little trust in the media.”

Well, perhaps the public has less trust but still demonstrates a lot by voting with its pocketbook. Further, my sample is small, but I know very few cynics among reporters, and they are more couchant than rampant. And the cynics I do know keep it well hidden professionally and manage—considering what they have witnessed—to work up a fair quotient of idealism when doing their work.

I think there *is* some difference between national media and local, as reflected in the Pew surveys, which rate national newspapers and TV much lower than local product. It is an effect that Andy Kohut has called “cognitive dissonance” and it runs through American life. You hate doctors, love yours; hate Congress, think your congressman is OK; think schools are a disaster, but your kid’s teacher is great; hate the media, love your favorite news show.

On the national level, as everyone has remarked for years, there was a culture change in journalism. When I covered the White House briefly, 1963-64, the culture encouraged us to believe what government told us, unless it was later found to be lying. We were more deferential to the institutions, especially the presidency. We felt skeptical, not gullible, but warily respectful. After Vietnam, Watergate, and the CIA scandals, that all changed. There was a precipitous fall from grace. Thenceforth Washington journalists, especially some White House correspondents, wanted to make their names by being tough. Journalism had brought down a president: they were vigilant in case it was necessary again.

Today, some media representatives are still acting out a ritual hostility learned when their predecessors thought government was lying to them every day about virtually everything. It is as though the media have not yet fully digested events like Watergate but still feel obliged to deal with ghosts.

But of course they also have had to deal with increasingly smooth manipulation by succeeding administrations. As they saw a more adversarial press, various presidencies became more skilled in self-defense and image manipulation, which made the media more suspicious, the politicians even more paranoid and

manipulative, the press in turn more contemptuous, and the public just plain disgusted.

What we now have is government, certainly at the presidential level and percolating downwards, government by perpetual campaign. The campaign techniques of image creation, diversion of attention, direction of message, damage control and spin-meistering drive the daily conduct of the White House, not just Clinton's, but in all modern presidencies.

So, to the public, president and media appear to be riding on the same merry-go-round, spinning faster and faster, dizzying and ultimately disaffecting voters, who see all politics, as Michael Janeway says, "as a media game."

When CBS hired Congresswoman Susan Molinari to be a news anchor, the game seemed extra transparent to many: two old print hands [Jack] Germond and [Jules] Whitcover saying, "some final line between journalism and politics has been crossed;" others calling it "the triumph of celebrity in journalism;" David Broder worried that "corporate news executives who have so little confidence in their own farm system . . . that they are prepared to hand the most visible and influential jobs in their organizations to transplants from the world of partisan politics."

Such evidence of journalistic-political coziness may contribute to voter apathy or disillusionment, but I would argue that there are deeper historical factors contributing.

One is the atrophy of ideology in our politics, except on peripheral social issues. This was a country founded on ideas men were prepared to die for and did; a country which fought for ideals in a civil war; and often in this century fought and died for ideal causes, some better considered than others, even prepared to risk annihilation in nuclear war. Now what is there on which Americans might pledge their lives, their sacred honor today? And if any politician said that today, would he be taken seriously? Play this parlor game: what could President Clinton do now, with nothing politically to lose, to make his presidency great? He can't go to Red Square and put his arm around Gorbachev, as Reagan did: that stuff's over. Putting your arm around Yeltsin won't hack it historically.

Ideology exists today mostly as theater, on *The McLaughlin Group*, on *CrossFire*, on late-night comedy.

Perhaps the public is deeply wise to be resting from a politics so enervated.

Not only have we lived through two generations, or three depending how you count, of great strain and fear, but decades of them coincided with the growth of a new medium. When 90 percent of American TV homes tuned into the networks in the '60s, not only were there enterprises of great pith and moment (Berlin, Cuba, Dallas, Civil Rights, Vietnam), but they came in an entirely new way of getting the news: There were only three or four channels in each city and what they carried at suppertime mattered to everyone.

It is hard to make the case that it matters so much now, and there's so much else to watch.

Forgive my perhaps trivial view, but I think expecting much of the democratic public to be tuned in to the issues all the time is like expecting other people to be tuned to your sexual wishes on demand. There's a wonderful play by Ionesco called *The Balcony* about an imaginative brothel in a nameless authoritarian state to which individual clients go to gratify rarefied tastes, like dressing up as an archbishop. But only the kinky go.

We should not, journalists or politicians, or groupies of either, have overheated expectations from the casual public. If not exactly kinky, politics remains an act for consenting adults and usually a minority of them.

Michael Schudson quotes William James as saying our moral destiny turns "on the power of voluntarily attending," but that such acts of voluntary attendance are brief and fitful. My hunch is that we are in a time of voluntary abstention, unattendance, inattention which increasingly crass media behavior may encourage, but which will change when events conspire. Then this now anarchic marketplace of new and old media will find it profitable, even patriotic, to pay attention and provide the needed information.

But, with all this said, to end more constructively, what might those motivated to improve journalistic performance (in a way that encouraged more voluntary attendance by the public) actually do? How do we dismount from the perceived merry-go-round on which journalists and politicians appear to be spinning self-servingly together?

There are three ways by which the public is brought to attend: One, by genuine crisis, and we have discussed that. Two, by sensationalism, the stock in trade of tabloid journalism, and we have discussed that.

The third way is to increase the participation of the public, to restore some sense of empowerment in the issues and policies that affect them, to address that part of alienation born in passive witness to debates they can't enter, social evils they cannot personally address.

The civic journalism movement is an attempt to address this by finding what issues the public cares to see covered, and then following their editorial agenda, not ours. Another attempt was the issues convention mounted by public television last year, in which a representative sample of Americans were chosen as delegates to a convention to study issues, debate among themselves, and interact with political leaders. In both experiments may lie the seeds of a journalism genuinely concerned to make the democracy work better.

I also like the proposal by Tom Rosenstiel, now with the Pew program, that prominent journalists adopt a set of core values above and beyond the codes of ethics their individual shops may have endorsed.

If the news media as a whole knew what core values the biggest names in journalism professed, if their employers knew, perhaps some of it would trickle down—and up.

The fundamental core value is what motivates good journalists anyway: a basic fairness, the intention to treat people you cover, high or low, as you would like to be treated by journalists in their place. Simply subscribing to basic fairness and making it a priority value in each newsroom, as speed and accuracy are priority values, would go a long way to making less fashionable much of the malicious, cheap, “gotcha!” motivation that informs a lot of reporting today. If we wish to stop the Murdochization, the Murdoch-style tabloidization of the American media, that is a way to begin.

I think the core values might include a resolution to stop reflexively screaming “First Amendment! First Amendment!” every time someone slams us, for example, after the verdict against ABC in

the Food Lion case. Some lawsuits may be justified to curb media arrogance: not all juries and judges are wrong.

These core values might include some willingness to submit, if not to a national news council, at least to panels of citizens and journalists, when opinion is outraged by some journalistic behavior—short of going to the courts.

I think core values might include some admonition to our peers to consider ratcheting down some of the macho, posturing stuff younger journalists may adopt because they think it makes them look professional, when often it merely makes them look arrogant and self-important.

It could include an intention to give public servants, including presidents, the benefit of the doubt, one of the sacred traditions in Anglo-American jurisprudence. It's as though journalists after Watergate decided to switch to the Napoleonic Code, vis-à-vis public officials, holding them guilty until they could prove their honesty. I don't mean abandoning skepticism of public officials. But how will citizens of this country have a decent respect for the people willing to fill the institutions of the democracy, if the media through which they see them do not?

These are all values the American people hold dear—fairness above all. And why should American journalism not reflect the values of the people it serves?

News Values in The New Multimedia Environment: The Case Of Privacy

David Bollier

Q. What happens when the fierce competitive realities of the new communications marketplace collide with the traditional norms of American journalism?

A. *New genres, practices, and values collide with old ones, eliminating some and spawning new hybrids. Confusion mounts.*

In thoughtful circles, there is a growing sense that some of the basic, respected norms of daily journalism are eroding, or at least changing dramatically, as the communications marketplace undergoes a convulsive restructuring never before seen in modern times.

While it remains difficult to dissect the changes still evolving, it is clear that tabloid sensationalism, ratings-driven entertainment shows, cable and satellite television, and exploding Internet venues are highly influential forces reshaping American journalism. The tumult of competition has left much of the profession in a nether zone, distressed at the threats to its historic sovereignty and values, yet seemingly unable to reassert control in a rapidly changing environment.

“Our profession,” confessed Robert MacNeil, the former co-anchor of *The MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*, “is more nervous than usual: acting like a man about to be married for a fourth time, anxious about his bald spot and waist bulge, perhaps guiltily remembering all the complaints he ignored from past wives.”

And no wonder. Journalists must now operate in a larger, more variegated marketplace than ever before; endure fierce competition with smaller staffs and leaner budgets; and try to retool traditional journalistic values for a multimedia environment that revolves around highly sophisticated technologies, much shorter news cycles, and a stricter business sensibility. A once-distinct profession, in short, risks becoming just another “content provider” in a vast digital bazaar. In MacNeil’s words:

The compartments between ours and other segments of the media are not colorfast. Our products are tossed in the same frenzied laundromat of competition for the public’s attention and dollar, and the fabrics bleed into one another . . . advertising, public relations, politics, religion, education, popular arts and science, and arrant nonsense—some innocent, some virtual treason—all washed together these days. The result is an information coat of many colors, tie-dyed in the eyes of consumers who, especially the young, could probably care less what category of media they are consuming. Such indifference seems increasingly true of the media’s corporate owners.

THE CATTO CONFERENCE ON JOURNALISM AND SOCIETY

To help make sense of the perplexing new realities facing the news business, the first annual Catto Conference on Journalism and Society was convened in June 1997 to initiate a new, more focused dialogue about the professional values and standards of American journalism. The gathering brought together 25 of the nation’s most prominent journalists and editors, and leading journalism-oriented foundation presidents, educators, and others. (A complete list of participants is included in the Appendix.)

The conference, the first in a planned series of five annual conferences, was made possible by the Catto Charitable Foundation. The three-day event was hosted by The Aspen Institute’s Communications and Society Program, directed by Charles Firestone, and was moderated by Geoffrey Cowan, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.

The overall goal of the conference series is to explore how journalism can play a more vigorous role in sustaining a healthy democratic society. This first conference focused on three primary themes: the decline of traditional journalistic values in today's fiercely competitive media environment; the worrisome implications of this trend for the privacy of people in the news; and the voluntary steps that the press might take to improve its performance and bolster public trust.

"I do not think journalists or their bosses are, as a whole, radical or arrogant or cynical or hard-bitten," said Jessica Catto in her opening remarks. "I think that the profession, more often than not, is pretty idealistic, and I would not give any odds for the survival of democracy without a free and competitive press."

That said, Catto expressed concern about the growing "press zeal" to uncover personal information that may or may not merit front-page treatment, such as extramarital affairs, marijuana use, and illegal child care arrangements. On other occasions, private citizens are sometimes stripped bare to the world through their involuntary connections with violent crimes, famous relatives, or other news hooks.

"When is the right to know in conflict with the right to privacy?" asked Catto, "Or when is it simply a matter of lazy or too costly journalism and 'inquiring minds' wanting to know? Is there any limit to personal revelations, or should there be?"

The first domain in which to explore such questions, most conference participants agreed, is in the volatile media marketplace of the 1990s, whose competitive pressures and electronic technologies are transforming journalism.

NEW PRESSURES ON JOURNALISM'S CORE VALUES

One of the most profound results of media competition is the pressures it has unleashed on mainstream news organizations. Increasingly, the gray, stalwart guardians of the news feel obliged to compete with supermarket tabloids, entertainment shows, and news organizations of lesser repute. The watershed event in this trend was clearly the O. J. Simpson criminal trial, which saw the national news networks repeatedly lead their evening broadcasts with the latest twists in that lurid saga.

For Edward M. Fouhy, executive director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism and former CBS network news executive, traditional news standards began to decline in the 1980s and 1990s as new corporate owners began to treat journalism as just another communications product. “They squeezed the life out of network news in the name of greater profits,” Fouhy contended. “News is less profitable than entertainment and must be brought into line. People were laid off, foreign news bureaus closed, TV news magazines that celebrate mostly emotional morality plays or sheer fluff were created and became profitable. Only the bottom line counted.”

The content of the news, over time, came to reflect the economic motives of the corporate owners, Fouhy argued: “Diane Sawyer interviews Michael Jackson for an hour, Barbara Walters does an hour on why women are so fascinated by their breasts, and CNN—in a week when its globe-girdling news gathering tools could have taken us to the tragedy in Albania or Capitol Hill for a landmark debate on entitlements that will affect us all—instead brings us live coverage of the auction of Princess Diana’s dresses.” Such trends prompted CBS News anchor Dan Rather to complain to a reporter: “We’re right at the brink of being totally overwhelmed and consumed by entertainment values as opposed to news values.”

When Marketing Supplants Editing

The business side of news organizations has always influenced journalistic norms, of course. But in recent years, competitive pressures have subtly, and not so subtly, changed some of the basic sensibilities of journalism. When CBS News sought a new anchorperson, it hired a brisk, telegenic young politician who had no prior experience as a journalist, U.S. Representative Susan Molinari. The president of CBS News, Andrew Heyward, explained why he hired Molinari: “Because she typifies the demographic group we are trying hardest to reach.”

Such bald admissions speak volumes about the values of contemporary broadcast news, says Fouhy: “The deterioration of net-

work news standards has accelerated to the point where a news president now speaks in the language of the marketing trade, not in the language of journalism, and certainly not in the language of democracy.”

This is not a new trend, to be sure, but it does represent a new apotheosis. Decades ago, consultants such as Frank Magid helped transform local news programs into vehicles for soft news, lifestyle features and, as media conglomerates grew, for brazen cross-promotions of other media products in the guise of news.

James M. Naughton, president of The Poynter Institute for Media Studies and former executive editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, recalls how a consultant once told a group of Knight-Ridder editors that readers were no longer interested in “hard news,” but instead wanted “softer, more friendly news”—“news you can use” that generally displaced more probing, public-spirited journalism. Some editors had the strength and authority to say no to this business-driven trend, said Naughton; others did not.

This change was not just a matter of good editors going soft; it was also propelled by powerful economic forces that are transforming the culture of journalism. Writes Michael C. Janeway in a 1991 article in *Media Studies Journal*:

Today, for diverse reasons, including the decline of department stores and the rise of direct marketing techniques, advertisers are abandoning news media as the vehicles for their communication, and the news media are losing “power” as well as revenue accordingly. Shaken by audience defections, fearful of alienating the audiences they retain, frustrated in particular by failure to win younger readers and viewers, stricken simultaneously by the systematic vanishing of advertising and what that portends, the specter haunting the press is erosion of its mass media status. That is why what used to be called “editing” in news organizations is increasingly called “marketing”. . . . The irony is that many of these [marketing] strategies further fragment markets, thereby undermining the traditional press role as voice of the community.

Business Values and the Culture of Journalism

As a new business sensibility has insinuated itself into more newsrooms, it has changed aspects of the journalism profession. Reporters can now aspire to become not just editors, but publishing executives. At some news organizations, their performance is implicitly assessed not just by traditional journalistic standards, but also by the business criteria of the front office.

Editors, too, are encouraged to embrace the corporate culture through such incentive systems as MBOs (management by objectives), which reward editors with a certain percentage of bonus payments based on the economic performance of the newspaper and its parent corporation. Such schemes have the effect of encouraging greater coverage of suburbs at the expense of cities, the “red-lining” of some communities to boost newspaper circulation, and cheapened standards of coverage if there are no clear economic benefits, according to James Naughton.

But Max Frankel of the *New York Times* considers it a “false assumption that ‘news’ and ‘marketing’ are on opposite sides.” Even in family-run newspapers—traditionally known for their higher journalistic aspirations—management must grapple with economic pressures, stock prices, and staff bonuses, Frankel pointed out. In any case, he added, “You can’t run a newsroom without worrying about whether readers are responding to what you’re offering. . . . Marketing does not have to be a dirty word; you’re marketing *news*.” The subtle difference may lie in whether a newspaper *caters* to its readership or *panders* to it, pointed out Juan Williams, a staff reporter for the *Washington Post*.

While there may be a valid distinction between the two, it is also true that the new structures of corporate ownership intensify profit pressures, which invariably affect the character of journalism. Ken Auletta, communications columnist for the *New Yorker*, explained: “As journalism becomes a smaller part of a larger [corporate] pie, and doesn’t contribute the same profitability as the other divisions, inevitably the ‘MBO pressure’ becomes more intense.” This can result in subtle degradations of news quality, as when original reporting is replaced with cheaper alternatives, such as wire service copy and news service video used with voiceovers; news *coverage* is then passed off as news *reporting*.

Such adulterations are tolerated by many top editors, said Auletta, “because journalists, particularly as they get nearer to the top, want to prove they can ‘swing’ in that [business] culture and be team players. And so the culture of journalism and the culture of business are at war.”

The clashing priorities of the two cultures can be seen in the aggressive downsizing of network news even as the corporate side, in many media companies, has grown more extravagant. Ed Fouhy of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism pointed out that the new corporate owners of CBS News closed down a large number of foreign news bureaus in the 1980s, saving about \$1 million on the staffing and operation of each one. Yet key executives and nonjournalistic ventures in media conglomerates are often showered with enormous sums, exemplified by the \$114 million that Michael Ovitz walked away with when Disney CEO Michael Eisner asked him to leave the company.

Alfred C. Sikes, president of Hearst New Media and Technology and former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (1989-1993), challenged the notion that business-driven journalism necessarily has “toxic effects.” “For people who want quality,” said Sikes, “there’s more quality than there’s ever been,” citing Cable News Network (CNN), C-SPAN, and the new newspaper-based Internet venture, New Century Network, which will draw upon and repackage the resources of diverse news outlets.

Impersonal structural changes in the news business have also affected the content and character of the news. American news consumers now have access to three national all-news broadcast networks—CNN, Fox, and MSNBC—as well as many other news outlets for business, sports, and general news. This proliferation of “real-time” news has radically shortened the news cycle (the window of time in which news can be gathered and edited). This has resulted in much less time for the editorial functions of screening sources, synthesizing information, and providing an interpretive context. More raw information, often poorly vetted, gets published or aired.

The near-continuous news cycle and wider array of competitors also creates new problems in *defining* appropriate news coverage. “What *is* the definition of ‘hard news’” asked Joyce Purnick,

metropolitan editor of the *New York Times*, “in an era when, by the time the morning newspaper comes out, 95 percent of readers, I suspect, have already heard the top headlines?” In the new media environment, the traditional categories of hard news, soft news, and interpretive news blur together.

Journalism and the Public Trust

In the more halcyon days of journalism, the lions of the profession, and even executives overseeing the business side of the news, considered their work something of a public trust. Gathering and presenting the news was a higher calling than manufacturing widgets or producing sitcoms. It was seen as vital to the community and to American democracy. That is one reason the networks supported top-flight news operations, coverage of the presidential conventions and debates, and serious public affairs programming.

“The ethic of the ‘loss leader’ was the ethic for a long time,” said Robert MacNeil, “especially in network television. [Media executives] realized that the news might not be profitable, but everything else was—and this was the flag of our honor.”

But does honor matter any more? With a wince, most participants seemed to agree that the high earnestness and integrity of journalism from the 1930s to 1960s are gone. Credibility and trust remain important to any news organization, of course, but not the aching sense of civic obligation and democratic purpose.

“The market revolution is to blame,” said Sikes. “So much of [the loss leader ethic] was funded by monopoly and oligopoly profits. There was almost no competition. So they could shovel *x* amount of money over into loss leaders, into civic virtue, into public trust. That, to a not-insignificant degree,” said Sikes, “is an old world.”

Judging by the market’s tendency to enshrine lowest-common-denominator values as the competitive standard, it remains an open question whether “old world” values can be revived in today’s environment. Certainly the widespread shift in newspaper ownership from families to publicly owned companies makes this more difficult. “Their value systems say we have to worry about

shareholders and shareholder values, and maximize our profits,” said Ken Auletta. “That is not the same issue facing the Sulzbergers and Grahams [who have long controlled the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, respectively].”

What are the criteria for judging the success of a newspaper? “If you ask Gannett or Knight-Ridder,” said Auletta, “they will say, ‘What’s our profit margin?’ But if you ask the Sulzbergers, they don’t say, ‘What’s our profit margin?’”

This fact stems not just from a family’s high-mindedness, pointed out Geoffrey Cowan, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at USC, but also from a more attractive cost basis for family-owned newspapers. “The Sulzbergers have, as a cost basis of the newspaper, the original investment 100 years ago plus whatever new investment they’ve had to make in plant. Somebody coming in and *buying* a newspaper has a cost basis which is vastly higher,” he said. “The economics of something you buy, at that price, can lead to different decisionmaking at the corporate level, than something you already own at a cheaper level.”

If the loss-leader ethic is largely defunct and family-controlled newspapers are increasingly rare, the real question may be whether a new economic basis or professional ethic for nurturing quality journalism can be developed. Market competition has generated some pockets of quality programming, to be sure, but its more notable contribution has been to squeeze existing resources and lower standards.

Can profit-maximizing public companies aggressively raise journalism standards despite a competitive climate that generally militates against that goal?

“There’s a battle between the maximization of profits and the public trust,” said John P. Mascotte, chairman of Johnson and Higgins of Missouri, Inc., and a vice chairman of The Aspen Institute. “You can’t go to any number of excessively paid corporate leaders, and say, ‘You really shouldn’t take 15 percent [return on investment], you ought to make it 13.5 percent, because the other 1.5 percent is what you owe the public trust’ (assuming you could calibrate the cost of the public trust, and I argue that you might be able to try).”

The problem, Mascotte argued, is that “profit maximization for shareholders stands over *everything*. . . . America is getting the

fruits of a very bad, fundamental ethic of what we think publicly held corporations are supposed to produce for our society. It is *not* just the maximization of profit.”

Changing this ethic, however (assuming it ought to be changed), is another matter entirely. “The people sitting around this table are not going to be able to change the corporate structure and mentality of news organizations, or any other corporation,” said Jim Lehrer, executive editor and anchor of *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. “But one thing we can do is to set core values for the practice of journalism. We can help the editors of this world by saying, ‘Here is the way that journalism should be practiced.’ We should give our colleagues a standard, which they can show to publishers and corporate owners.”

It is a noble ambition, but fraught with immense complexities. Consider a challenge as basic as the standards of privacy in the new media environment.

PRIVACY ETHICS IN THE NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

“Society,” Hannah Arendt once wrote, is “that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance.”

In this sense, mainstream journalism almost literally “creates” American society, or at least critically shapes national consciousness. It selects facts and themes, assigns social meaning to them, and gives them a wide public presence. It decides what is important and what is not, and sketches the boundaries separating public and private life.

Even though this formidable power is somewhat diffuse (“the media,” after all, is no monolith, but rather a cacophony of voices), a fairly small circle of prestigious general-audience news organizations has tended to set the standards for quality journalism and moral taste. Increasingly, however, this vital center and its values are being challenged by competition. The “race to the bottom” described in the previous section has been especially evident in how the press respects, or fails to respect, the privacy of people deemed newsworthy.

The Press and Privacy: A Matter of Taste

“The press has always feasted on the perversities of the rich and famous,” observed Max Frankel of the *New York Times*, citing a racy news article from the 1890s laden with laughably baroque euphemisms. Press fascination with the domestic lives and sexual peccadilloes of various public figures is nothing new. It is also true, Frankel added, that just because “invasions of privacy may be entertaining does not negate their importance to the public.”

As a matter of law, what privacy rights do individuals enjoy in the face of an inquisitive press? Frankel bluntly asserted: “The right to privacy, when placed against the First Amendment, is so weak that in practical terms, there is no right to privacy. I’m not saying we don’t have a responsibility to define our own sense of taste and privacy . . . but it’s ultimately a matter of taste. Taste, for good or ill, is what we print. And bad taste is very hard to define.”

From a legal standpoint, the standard of newsworthiness gives broad justification to print or broadcast highly private information about people, particularly if they are public figures. Notwithstanding various constitutional provisions, such as the Fourth Amendment and the *Roe v. Wade* ruling on the right of privacy (which are meant to restrain the behavior of government, after all, not private entities), the press is generally free to print what it chooses, constrained only by libel laws and its own standards of taste.

Taste is a very slippery concept. It is not amenable to clear definitions that can apply all of the time. And even if a unitary definition were possible, American culture is premised on a rich pluralism of voices. The *New York Times* occupies a very different niche than *High Times*, and *Foreign Affairs* aims for a different audience than *A Current Affair*. For all this diversity, most mainstream journalists, as a matter of custom, share a crude consensus about what general types of “private” information ought to be made public. It is when specific factual circumstances arise—Gary Hart’s infidelity, Judge Ginsberg’s marijuana use in college, Zoe Baird’s failure to pay taxes for her nanny—that the discussion becomes almost jurisprudential. It is not always clear whether the established norms are adequate, whether new norms need to evolve, or whether general principles are useful at all.

The “Relevance” Standard of Newsworthiness

As a general rule, “you don’t write about it unless it affects the public,” said Ken Auletta of the *New Yorker*. Purely private information is considered off-limits unless it reveals something about the performance of an elected official or other public figure. That is one reason there was such a hue and cry when tabloid reporters literally rummaged around in Henry Kissinger’s curbside trash and when mainstream reporters sought to discover Judge Robert Bork’s video rental records.

While such privacy violations are typically reviled, it is much harder to judge whether a politician’s extramarital affair should be considered newsworthy or not. Walter Pincus, a staff reporter for the *Washington Post*, told of a profile he had prepared with Bob Woodward of a major presidential candidate, which included the revelation that the candidate had had a liaison with a top staff aide. But was this information germane to the candidate’s past or future performance? “We looked into it,” said Pincus, “and decided that, whatever had happened, it was over and not relevant to his candidacy or his career. We decided not to run it.”

News relevance was a key concern when Gennifer Flowers claimed, during the 1992 presidential campaign, that she had had a long-standing affair with Bill Clinton. Jim Lehrer, executive editor and co-anchor of what at the time was called *The MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*, announced to his newsroom one afternoon that the program would not cover the planned Gennifer Flowers news conference. Cheers erupted. Hours later, when word came down that Clinton himself planned to go on *60 Minutes* in response, Lehrer saw no alternative but to convene a group of pundits to discuss the issue on that evening’s show.

“And then I went home and took the longest shower I’ve ever taken in my life!” said Lehrer. “For us not to have covered the issue that night, we’d have looked like damned fools. We may have been worse fools for having covered it, but I don’t have an answer.”

The queasiness that many journalists felt in covering the Gennifer Flowers story stemmed from its apparent irrelevance to Clinton’s public life and candidacy. It smacked of a tawdry per-

sonal attack, one that would have the effect of selling more copies of a supermarket tabloid and advancing Flowers's career—but not improving the level of public debate.

The Flowers story, argues David Gergen, editor-at-large at *U.S. News & World Report* and former presidential advisor, is vastly different from the charges of sexual harassment made by Paula Jones. The former allegation, if true, was a consensual matter and involved no abuse of public power; the latter allegation, if true, involved a predatory act and abuse of public office. The Paula Jones case is therefore far more deserving of press coverage than the Flowers case, Gergen believes.

Another problematic case of “news relevance” involves the marital status and love life of New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. It is known that the mayor and his wife, while living under the same roof, often lead quite separate lives. This prompted some journalists and political insiders to speculate that he was involved with another woman. Is this topic fair game for reporters?

Joyce Purnick of the *New York Times* said that the *Times* has published well-known facts about the mayor and his wife—that they are leading separate lives, that she wants to be called Donna Hanover, not Donna Giuliani, and that they rarely appear together at important public functions in their respective professional lives. “The fact that a politician and his wife can lead separate professional lives—that, in itself, is quite interesting,” said Purnick. “Was there an undertone in the piece that maybe there was something more there? Yes. But that was open to the interpretation of the reader.”

But should inquiring reporters ferret out more specific information? That, it seems, is a matter of taste. “At the *New York Times*,” said Purnick, “I would not go very far to find out about his private life unless he were creating a public image of marital togetherness. A lie, in other words.”

The “Hypocrisy Trigger” for Newsworthiness

The discretion with which most reporters have handled Giuliani's private life would quickly evaporate if a blatant disparity between his public statements and private life were detected.

It was just such a catalyst—the “hypocrisy trigger”—that led reporters to pounce on presidential candidate Gary Hart’s affair with Donna Rice. Hart had denied allegations of marital infidelity, and had explicitly challenged reporters to verify it. (The *Miami Herald*, which received the tip about Rice, had not been privy to Hart’s dare to reporters. Still, the fact that Hart made the dare takes much of the sting out of his claim to have been invaded.)

Politicians also give a license to probe when they inject their personal lives into their political campaigns as a means to curry favor with voters. “Inevitably, if you play that card, you’re inviting your opposition to play the rest of the deck, and the press gets drawn into that,” said David Gergen.

On the other hand, some public figures pointedly *exclude* certain aspects of their private lives from public scrutiny. How much should that desire for privacy be respected? The hypocrisy trigger often serves as a rule of thumb. For example, journalists during the 1988 presidential campaign declined to write about Jesse Jackson’s marital life, in part because Jackson did not trade upon his personal life in his campaign. When a public figure’s public statements directly contradict some aspect of his personal behavior, however, journalists generally consider that hypocritical and thus worthy of news coverage.

An entire genre of such news stories concern the “outing” of gay political figures, often conservatives, whose antigay statements seem to contradict their closeted homosexuality. In *Contested Closets: The Politics and Ethics of Outing* (University of Minnesota, 1993), author Larry Gross examines the complicated, personally traumatic consequences of outing, whether by journalists or activists.

In one notable episode, activists sought to make news (and thus reap political advantage) by publicly confronting U.S. Representative Steve Gunderson with his lack of support for various gay rights bills despite his own homosexuality (as inferred from his presence in gay bars on two occasions). Gunderson’s response: “Nothing in my personal life is legitimate discussion unless I am breaking the law or using my position for it.” Still, Gunderson’s apparent hypocrisy was the focus of articles in the *La Crosse Tribune*, a newspaper in his Wisconsin congressional district.

How Privacy Controversies Make Journalists Political Players

Instances of outing illustrate how journalists are, for better or worse, implicated in politics. They may strive for fairness and objectivity, but their power to publish or not publish certain kinds of private information makes them political players, whether they like it or not. Even if they have no partisan inclinations, news stories about public figures involved in socially stigmatized private behaviors—adultery, homosexuality, marijuana use, depression—can have serious consequences in partisan politics.

For political partisans, private information is suppressed or publicized based on how it may advance their political agendas. Thus gay rights activists have been known not to out known homosexual political figures because that knowledge can be a source of quiet political leverage or outright blackmail. But what moral criteria or standards should guide a fairminded news organization in deciding whether to publish a given story? As usual, much turns on the definition of *relevant*.

A case in point: the *Washington Post's* investigation of a major candidate known for promoting family values, who had apparently had two separate affairs decades earlier. (No names or details are included here because the allegations were never clearly substantiated.) Fearing that the *Post's* anticipated story would be published and be used against him in an upcoming debate, the candidate was virtually unavailable to the press in the weeks before the debate. When the debate finally occurred, the candidate surprised people by declining to attack his opponent's vulnerable personal life.

In this case, the news gathering process itself may have changed the conduct of the campaign in a significant way, even though no story was published. The failure to publish had other consequences. In apparent retaliation for the *Post's* involvement in the story, charges surfaced that a prominent editor of the *Post* had left his wife for another woman—a charge that sought to call into question the *Post's* credibility and motives.

The Publish-and-Be-Damned Standard

For Juan Williams, a staff reporter at the *Washington Post*, the handling of this particular incident illustrates the dangers of news organizations getting in the middle of a story: "Once we start to act with the pretension that we are gatekeepers and we will keep certain information secret, we open ourselves to be manipulated by people. We get turned around, we get confused."

Williams believes a publish-and-be-damned attitude is the most honorable, credible approach: "I think we should be in the business of putting the news out there, and trust the discretion of the reader to have some judgment." Otherwise, he said, "the public will suspect that the press is in bed with big business or big politicians. History indicates that whenever journalists have worked in cooperation with [public figures] to keep information out of print, the journalist has regretted it."

Journalists are invariably manipulated by partisan advocates as they pursue their political agendas. It is part of the business. President Clinton's opponents pushed the Paula Jones story to advance their political agenda, and liberals pushed Anita Hill's charges against Clarence Thomas for the same reason. "We get information from people with an ax to grind," said Juan Williams. "But our job is not to say, 'You know, that's really below us to publish that information.' Our job should be to determine, Is this true? and then to put it in context and tell the story in a responsible way." This includes exposing the motives of sources for stories.

Yet "putting the information out" without moral scruple—letting the chips fall where they may—is precisely what leads to press manipulation and ever-increasing invasions of privacy, contends David Gergen: "You argue that you don't want to be manipulated [by partisan advocates]. But if you put yourself in that position, you *are* going to be manipulated. Every political campaign is going to invest an enormous amount of money in gumshoes to invade the private lives of anyone in public life in order to get it into your newspaper. The real question," Gergen concluded, "is whether you have some standards by which you judge what ought to be in the public domain."

The absence of such standards needlessly derailed the career of General Joseph Ralston, said Gergen, when it was disclosed that

Ralston, a leading candidate for becoming chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had had an affair that reportedly contributed to the breakup of his marriage. That information had no relevance to his suitability for the job, argued Gergen, but was obviously obtained by someone who opposed Ralston, and then given to the *Washington Post*. Ralston's private life was dredged up for purely political purposes, and newspapers were unusually receptive to the story because of its superficial similarity to the Kelly Flinn story (the Air Force flyer who was dismissed for her affair with a civilian, and then lying about it).

It is somewhat disingenuous for the press to claim it is merely a neutral vehicle for news and not an active moral judge, warned Catherine Crier, host of *The Crier Report* on Fox News: "We make judgments all the time, if only to decide how to allocate scarce resources." The press has also been known to publish or not publish based on the perceived consequences for public safety, for example, publishing the Unabomber tract to prevent further bombings, and withholding news that American hostages were hidden in the Canadian embassy during the 1980 Iranian hostage crisis.

"Truth is not enough for me," said Crier. "I want to know, 'Is there relevance?'" Dick Morris's affair with a prostitute was relevant to the public, said Crier, because Morris was a key architect of the Clinton administration's many family values initiatives. If there is a relevance to the way they perform in the public arena, then it should be published, Crier argued. By that standard, she said, General Ralston's prior affair was irrelevant.

Proponents of the publish-and-be-damned standard have two powerful retorts to Crier's line of reasoning: that the press ought not to get into making judgments best left to the public and politicians, and that withholding information can be as pernicious as publishing it. For example, if the press had written about John F. Kennedy's dalliance with a woman with Mafia connections, it might have prevented organized crime's influence on U.S. foreign policy, as some historians allege. If Judge Ginsberg's marijuana use in college had not been publicly disclosed, that information conceivably could have been used against him during his tenure on the Supreme Court.

Printing private revelations can be distasteful, conceded Alfred C. Sikes of Hearst New Media and Technology, but it may be “the only realistic standard” for two reasons: First, competitive pressures will result in the information getting out anyway, and second, people have a right to know the information, especially if it involves “significant breaches of social mores” such as marital vows or marijuana use.

The troubling question that remains is how this standard of news judgment differs from that of the supermarket tabloids. The bottom-feeders are quick to publish without fear or favor, after all, and have a special affinity for breaches of social decorum, the more embarrassing the better. What makes their standards any better or worse than the *New York Times*? The only answer, it seems, are some very familiar journalistic standards: the levels of accuracy, intelligence, and taste shown by editors.

The Privacy of Involuntary Public Figures

One of the more vexing categories of editorial judgment concerns the private lives of people who are not public figures. These include people associated with crimes (suspects, witnesses, victims, friends of victims, and the like), spouses of public figures, and other individuals with entirely fortuitous connections to newsworthy events.

Aspects of these people’s lives are often germane to a newsworthy event, and need to be reported. Other aspects of their lives may not be particularly newsworthy, yet are published anyway, sometimes with devastating consequences.

An example is the Oklahoma news media’s extensive coverage of Shaun Walters, the 20-year-old son of Governor David Walters. In 1991 young Walters was arrested and pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor charge of possessing drug paraphernalia. Within a month, he took an overdose of prescription drugs and died. The governor and many others in the state accused the news media of “hounding” the youth and contributing to his suicide.

The episode illustrates the tension between legitimate news coverage of political leaders and the right of private individuals to control their private lives. On the one hand, any arrest, even a

misdemeanor, warrants public attention. On the other hand, this particular misdemeanor charge would not likely have received splashy news play but for Shaun Walters's connection to his father. On the third hand, not many misdemeanors, even well-publicized ones, result in suicides. Such possibilities suggest the need for serious, thoughtful deliberation when the newsworthiness of involuntary public figures is concerned.

In many circumstances, the privacy preferences of involuntary public figures can be determined in advance—and ought to be respected. This principle is dramatically illustrated in the movie *Absence of Malice*, in which Justice Department investigators leak a bogus story to a reporter that a businessman was under investigation for a crime. The businessman cannot present his alibi, however, without violating the privacy of an innocent third party, a woman-friend who was obtaining an abortion at the time of the alleged crime. The reporter meets with the woman, verifies the alibi and publishes this information, which results in the woman, a Catholic who works in a Catholic school, committing suicide.

The plotline is dramatic but, in one important particular, unrealistic. The reporter never sought to obtain the interviewee's "informed consent," a basic ethical rule for reporters' conducting interviews. "When you're dealing with someone who is not a public official and doesn't know 'the rules,' such as the meaning of speaking for the public record," said Joyce Purnick, metropolitan editor of the *New York Times*, "then you have to be very, very clear about what it means."

But even the informed consent rule can be complicated to apply. A *Washington Post* reporter got clear consent from a family to write about the gentrification of a downtown Washington, D.C., neighborhood from which it was being displaced. But once the story came out, the children were snubbed by their peers, and felt violated by the newspaper. When the *New York Times* ran a story about the stiff requirements for workfare recipients, and how one unfortunate woman was forced to work despite having to wear diapers for incontinence, the paper deleted that poignant detail because it felt there was not adequate informed consent.

The difficulty of establishing hard, fixed rules for respecting the privacy of involuntary public figures is illustrated by the William

Kennedy Smith rape case. In 1993, two years before that case, Max Frankel, then executive editor of the *New York Times*, assigned an internal committee to review the paper's policy of not naming victims of sexual attacks. The committee reaffirmed the policy and, as a corollary, said that the names of suspects in rape cases would also be withheld if the accuser was anonymous and the police had brought no formal charges.

Then William Kennedy Smith was charged with rape by an anonymous accuser, and the *Times* could not sustain its policy. "There was no way not to mention young Kennedy's name," said Frankel. "If we were dragging his name through the mud, readers have a right to know where this is coming from. . . . Our policy was being shredded," he said.

So the *Times* prepared a story about the accuser, exploring her background and credibility without naming her. The ethical quandaries suddenly became more treacherous when NBC decided to name Patricia Bowman as Smith's accuser. Should the *Times* also name her? Frankel reasoned that Bowman "had already lost her privacy, courtesy of NBC," so it ran its previously prepared story and identified Bowman. This action proved controversial in many quarters.

The basic question posed by the episode is whether the *Times* had lost its editorial sovereignty when another major news organization named Bowman—or whether the *Times* should have continued to withhold her name.

Robert MacNeil challenged the "virginity" theory of privacy, that once one media outlet has violated a person's privacy, then any other news organ can and should in good conscience repeat the information. But Frankel countered that that is exactly "the standard we use with information from the government. Once a national secret is out, no matter how top secret, it's out." A harder decision, concedes Frankel, is whether the *Times* would have published such sensitive information as Bowman's name if it had been released only by the *National Enquirer*.

Other newspapers refrained from mentioning Bowman's name, even after the NBC and *Times* disclosures. "The *Philadelphia Inquirer* continued *not* to mention her name," said James Naughton, former executive editor of the *Inquirer*, "assuming that

our readers do not necessarily watch NBC or read the *New York Times*.”

Covering the Spouses and Children of Public Figures

The treatment of spouses of public figures is another ethical minefield. Is a spouse's alcoholism or psychiatric treatment fair game as a news story? Kitty Dukakis, the wife of 1988 presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, mooted that issue by going public herself. Her “voluntary” disclosure was perhaps motivated by a desire to preempt the press from making that information public on its terms, and not hers.

The private lives of spouses are not wholly irrelevant to public life, however. According to *The Brethren*, by Bob Woodward, Justice Potter Stewart was asked to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court but declined because he did not want his wife's alcoholism made public. Justice Lewis Powell, too, allegedly had misgivings about his wife's depression being made public.

Are there ever grounds for disclosing such information? “No,” said Lee Cullum, a syndicated columnist with the *Dallas Morning News*. “Why did the public need to know that Alma Powell had suffered from depression? General [Colin] Powell decided to discuss it, but only because the media had already been rummaging around in the issue. Even if her health was a reason for his not running [for president], there was no need for that to be anything but private.”

But what of a story about the daughter of Vice President Al Gore, describing a party she attended at which alcohol was being served to minors, resulting in a visit by police? The *Washington Post* has a policy of not naming juvenile defendants, but Gore's daughter was named in this context even though she was not even charged with anything. Is being a child of politically prominent people sufficient justification for publishing this story and her name?

One speculative explanation is that editorial rules “go out the window” when someone of the vice president's stature is even indirectly involved. On the other hand, the press has been fairly restrained and tasteful in its coverage of the “First Teenager,” Chelsea Clinton.

For the most part, the mainstream press tacitly observes differential privacy standards for various categories of people; each enjoys their own penumbras of expected privacy and publicity. Celebrities are conceded to be the most exposed and have the least expectation of privacy, followed by elected officials, businesspeople, and others in positions of power, and involuntary public figures.

The tension between the two conflicting tendencies of news judgment—call them the libertarian and Victorian sensibilities—is ultimately unavoidable. As a matter of law, there are few restraints on what the press can publish and the private zones it can expose. On the other hand, public opinion is itself a restraining force on the news media in many instances. The power of the tabloids to dictate taste for the rest of the news media is not inexorable or absolute. Consider how ratings for one of the 1992 Clinton/Bush presidential debates beat out ratings for a baseball playoff game that one network had substituted for the debate.

Most media consumers would probably agree with Ervin S. Duggan, president and CEO of Public Broadcasting Service, that “If we conflate public and private life, and collapse the distinction between the two, it is impossible to imagine a decent life in our democracy.” Competitive pressures may be pushing toward the lowest common denominator in taste, yet there may also be rock-bottom limits which, if transgressed, may alienate large segments of the public. Contrarywise, the depth of audience taste for higher quality programming and news has received relatively little exploration.

The Fate of Editorial Sovereignty

In bolstering standards of journalism, the preeminent challenge may be reclaiming editorial sovereignty. Max Frankel of the *New York Times* asserts that news organizations “have lost their sovereignty, their ability to set their own standards of taste.” Increasingly, says Frankel, the *Times* and other mainstream news organizations find it harder to ignore stories that are receiving extensive play in other news outlets. The O. J. Simpson criminal trial was the most significant example of this, but it can be seen

in numerous other episodes from the Patricia Bowman rape case to the Menendez brothers' murder trials to the JonBenet Ramsey murder investigation. In each case, competitive pressures to provide more invasive, titillating news coverage "force" mainstream newspapers and news broadcasts to dilute their traditional standards of newsworthiness.

Participants cited many complex, overlapping reasons. The proliferation of broadcasting, cable, and print outlets has intensified competition, making the race for higher ratings and circulation that much more important. Injecting elements of sex, scandal, and entertainment into the news "product" is seen by many news organizations as a cheap and effective way to improve business results. The loss of editorial sovereignty has also been fueled by the recent consolidations of media ownership, which have generally placed a greater emphasis on cost-cutting and marketing at the expense of traditional editorial values.

Meanwhile, a number of new media—the Internet, satellite television channels, and new cable networks—are incubating new journalistic norms. To many such newcomers, it is no longer self-evident that news should be "objective," concerned with civic affairs and insulated from entertainment values. Indeed, the very definition of what is news and how it should be covered is undergoing a transformation.

If these developments challenge the editorial sovereignty of mainstream news organizations, the best response, counsels Robert MacNeil, is for news organizations to decide what their character will be:

The collectivity of our judgments within any particular news organization *defines* that news organization over a period of years, and contributes directly to the trust the public has in it—or doesn't have in it. I think we can reclaim some sovereignty simply by deciding within each news organization what our taste is going to be. Naturally, you have to go case by case. But you have *some* set of standards. And it's important to have some set of standards if you're going to draw a line and try to prevent the increasing tabloidization of the mainstream media.

Or as *Newsweek* columnist Jonathan Alter recently told *Columbia Journalism Review*: “Doing everything we legally can has been disastrous for the reputation of the press in this country. We have to draw a distinction between the right to do something and the right thing to do.”

A fine general sentiment. But as the following section suggests, setting specific standards for journalistic performance may be a very problematic proposition.

BOLSTERING PUBLIC TRUST IN JOURNALISM

The public’s growing distrust of the press as an institution is borne out by numerous surveys. While there is no simple explanation for the low esteem into which the Fourth Estate has fallen, it is clear that a great many people do not trust the unchecked, unaccountable power of major news organizations.

A 1996 survey by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press found that only 15 percent of Americans now have a very favorable opinion of network television news, down from 27 percent in 1992 and 30 percent in 1985. While large national newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* enjoy favorable opinion ratings of 41 percent of Americans, this is down from 53 percent in 1992.

Much of this decline can be traced to the public’s distrust of the news media. Only 21 percent of respondents to a 1997 NBC/Wall Street Journal poll, for example, rates the news media as very or mostly honest. A 1993 survey by the Pew Research Center disclosed similar opinions. Only about half of respondents think that newspapers and television get the facts straight. Two-thirds say news organizations tend to favor one side in its coverage of political and social issues. Fifty-four percent say the news media are getting in the way of society solving its problems.

Toward a “New Transparency” in Press Performance

“If we’re worried about an erosion of public trust and the tabloidization of our values,” said Robert MacNeil, “how likely is it that a line is going to be drawn *anywhere* between us and

supermarket tabloids if we don't say collectively, 'We do some things and we don't do other things?'

MacNeil urged the profession to assert some specific standards to differentiate responsible journalism from less reputable journalism. More to the point, he calls for a "new transparency" in press performance. This means that editors must begin to "take the public more into [our] confidence about what [our] standards are, why [we] do things the way [we] do, what [our] criteria are, etc. In other words, the press should have a more open dialogue with the public—much as other institutions in our democracy are required by us to explain themselves."

This concept was hailed by a number of other journalists as long overdue. "The public sees the media as an incredibly powerful institution that doesn't seem to be accountable in the same way that it holds other institutions and people accountable," said David Gergen. "We in journalism often hold other institutions up to ridicule, yet we don't want standards or to be too transparent ourselves." General standards, properly qualified, can help advance both the credibility and professionalism of journalism, he said.

Transparency could be fostered through any number of vehicles, most of them familiar. These include:

Ombudsmen. The ombudsman accepts reader complaints about poor press treatment and factual errors, investigates the merits of the complaints, and makes recommendations for change within the organization. Some papers publish regular columns by ombudsmen to show their concern for an open dialogue with readers. Of the nation's 1,500 daily newspapers, perhaps 70 have ombudsmen.

An aggressive corrections policy. To convey to readers that a news organ takes its errors seriously, many make corrections in the same place where the original error was made. A standing corrections box is used only for minor or inadvertent errors. Ensuring that corrections are made is especially important in this electronic age, when an uncorrected error can be repeated countless times by other journalists.

Forums for readers and listeners. Giving an open forum to media consumers is one of the best ways to nurture trust, said

Catherine Crier of Fox News. National Public Radio has a two-hour *Talk of the Nation* show to air listener complaints and viewpoints, with responses from NPR chairman Delano Lewis. Shows such as *60 Minutes*, *Frontline*, and *P.O.V.* also feature feedback from viewers. However modest in scope, such vehicles suggest an openness and willingness to admit wrong—a capacity that the “old media” may have to come to terms with as the interactive ethos of online publications spreads.

Explanatory features or columns by editors. Besides just correcting errors, it would be useful if editors gave readers and viewers a glimpse of the newsgathering and editing process, said Jim Lehrer, so that misjudgments can be explained better. This can fall short of a formal retraction, while acknowledging why a mistake or bad judgment was made. The idea is to admit fallibility and expose the journalistic process to greater public view.

TV shows about press performance. A regular television show critiquing press performance in a provocative, exciting manner could be quite popular and effective, suggested Robert MacNeil. Fred Friendly’s televised roundtable discussions showed how this genre could be instructional, but why not make it a lively popular forum as well? A British show, *What the Papers Say*, once showed how irreverent skewering of press foibles can be quite entertaining. More recently, public broadcaster WNET began producing an hour show, *Media Matters*, that profiles three case studies in each program. As entertainment for media-savvy Americans, this is a potentially rich genre worth exploring. Its impact in shaming wayward news organizations, and changing their habits, could be significant.

News councils. In December 1996, CBS journalist Mike Wallace helped revive the idea of a national news council. (Such a council had existed from 1973 to 1984.) A news council is an attempt to institutionalize press accountability by providing a public forum for adjudicating the complaints of citizens without involving the courts. Comprised of leading journalists, businesspeople, civic leaders, and others, a national news council would not have the authority to impose sanctions, but would encourage more responsible press behavior through publicity and peer pressure. The public ventilation of complaints about the press could

be a potent means of restoring public trust, say proponents of press councils.

Should Journalistic Standards Be Formalized?

Laudable as transparency may be, it implies a body of formal journalistic standards. This, to many editors and reporters, is anathema. It is not that standards are not important, they say. It is that formal, written standards seek to achieve the impossible while threatening First Amendment prerogatives and inviting litigation.

“Standards, necessary as they are, are very dangerous,” asserted Max Frankel of the *New York Times*, “and not just for the legal reasons. The first thing that the First Amendment implies is that we have a right to our own standards. That’s why the *New York Times* fought so hard against the National News Council,” he said: It wanted to hold fast to its own standards of proof, sourcing of articles, the use of obscenities in print, and others. “Just because we don’t nail our standards to the door doesn’t mean we don’t have them. We angrily and bitterly critique ourselves every morning.”

Standards are also problematic, Frankel said, because the daily circumstances of the news are so wildly unpredictable. “You cannot possibly imagine the circumstances that arise with each and every story, to allow a generalization of standards,” he said. “You learn about a U.S. invasion of Cuba. Do you write about it or not? Do you use the word ‘imminent’ or not? Do you say the CIA’s involved? Until you see the copy on your desk, it’s absolutely impossible to deal with that issue.”

Frankel argues that journalism standards, at least at the *Times*, are ad hoc, organic, and evolving, much as the common law grows and changes as society changes. “We operate by custom and habit, and learn by doing and case-by-case and by osmosis,” he explained. Yet this is not to say that the *Times* has no standards or that they are a secret, he said. They can be seen all the time in apologies, retractions, editors’ notes, and internal memos to staff—not to mention in the daily product that the *Times* is.

What this argument amounts to, said Ervin S. Duggan of PBS, is: “We have standards, but we’re not going to tell you what they

are.” Why this disinclination to write down formal standards, however broadly, and then share them with the staff and the public? asked Duggan. This is a basic measure of accountability that is performed in most other professions.

For some areas of journalistic practice, the *New York Times*, like most news organizations, does in fact have formal, written policies. Conflict-of-interest rules governing reporters’ stock ownership, their acceptance of fees for speeches, and their writing for other publications, are clearly spelled out. But no specific rules for news-gathering have been committed to paper except in various irregular documents. Where do you begin to compile such a corpus of rules? asked Frankel. “If you start with spelling names right, using middle initials, not making up quotes, not making puns out of family names, etc., you couldn’t carry the volume home.”

But Ervin Duggan finds this argument unconvincing: “I find it incredible that the very people who hold us accountable would insist that [standards for themselves] is all so complicated that we really could never codify it. I think it smacks of a double standard.”

Other journalists find it disturbing that newcomers to a staff have no formal way to learn the standards of that newsroom (an important issue, given the job mobility of journalists). Jim Lehrer tells the story of a broadcast segment that made a reference to “. . . a goddamn great story . . .” prompting Lehrer to erupt at his news staff for letting an obscenity go on the air. “Then a staff member asked, ‘Where is that written down?’ It turns out,” said Lehrer, “that we have policies that have never been enunciated. We assume that the people who come to work for us understand our principles.”

Clear journalistic standards also have the virtue of educating the next generation of journalists into a responsible tradition, noted Ancel Martinez, reporter for KQED, National Public Radio, in San Francisco. “[Standards] show new media ownership what we stand for as journalists. This is especially important as new media influence younger journalists.”

As for the argument that a journalist’s work should be judged by the final product, which is there for anyone to see, and thus that standards are gratuitous, Duggan retorts: “Anybody in any profession or walk of life could say that. And yet in virtually every

profession there are legal and ethical standards that are codified, which people are held to. That's what makes it a profession, the self-policing. We lay ourselves open as journalists to public dishonor and lack of esteem if we're not willing to say, yes we have the freedom to do anything under the First Amendment, but we choose voluntarily to have a standard that stops short of doing everything we're free to do. . . . Why would someone insist upon *not* enunciating standards?"

The answer, explains Laura R. Handman, a partner with the New York law firm of Lankenau, Kovner, Kurtz and Outten, LLP, is that too many editorial judgments are made on a circumstantial basis, and that so many factors go into a judgment, editorially and legally, that guidelines are frequently deviated from, justifiably.

Another compelling reason for the absence of written guidelines is the litigation risks. "If you say you uphold certain standards," said Handman, "and then you deviate from them, you've just admitted that you've deviated from the standards. That is fodder for plaintiffs' libel lawyers. . . . If you're dealing with a negligence standard, which is sometimes the case, the first place you look to establish negligence is the standards that have been promulgated."

General, broad standards about fairness, balance, and the opportunity to respond to criticism are one thing, said Handman. But written guidelines for specific circumstances (How many confidential sources do you need for a story? Can a suspect's name ever be published before an indictment?) are both unworkable and unwise, she said.

Even seemingly sensible rules cannot be applied across the board. It sounds easy for a newspaper to say that it will not engage in misrepresentations in reporting a story. (The issue is quite timely because a jury recently castigated ABC News for its elaborate deceptions in investigating food safety at a Food Lion supermarket.) Yet "misrepresentations" of various sorts have long been a custom in journalism. The *New York Times's* restaurant critic has been known to disguise himself with a wig when eating at restaurants; a *Times* reporter sought to test racial discrimination in real estate sales by pretending to be a buyer; and another *Times* reporter became an employee in a Manhattan sweatshop to expose working conditions there. As such examples suggest, it is

extremely difficult to promulgate a hard-and-fast rule for “good” and “bad” journalistic deceptions.

It is not just that journalistic standards are impractical, say some journalists, but that they threaten the First Amendment. Says Walter Pincus, a staff reporter for the *Washington Post*: “I don’t think the *Washington Post* ought to be an institution setting standards for a raft of publications which, under the First Amendment, can print every lie they want to print. . . . We shouldn’t be in the business of telling other groups what their rules ought to be.”

Juan Williams of the *Post* actually fears government sanctions if journalistic standards are set forth: “The great danger that becomes apparent to me . . . is that we might agree to some standards, that people would take them seriously, and the government would say, yes, [those standards] are a good idea. And eventually, we’d have government sanctions of journalistic standards. Essentially, young reporters wouldn’t have to be told what to do. They’d be *licensed*. And suddenly journalists would be licensed the way lawyers or doctors are licensed. This is the direction that [formal, written] standards would take us.”

It is a scenario on which other journalists dissent. Robert MacNeil inveighs against “an industry that has traditionally been grudging, even hostile, when asked to look to its shortcomings, greeting most criticism by pulling down the First Amendment shutters and retreating to the bar.” And Geoffrey Cowan, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, questioned the ability of government to do anything as drastic as license journalists, given the First Amendment’s clear meaning. “There is nothing, and should be nothing, that the government should do about journalists,” he said.

If mainstream journalism is going to maintain and improve its standards, argued Catherine Crier of Fox News, it will first have to admit that it actually exercises a profound influence, sociologically, economically, politically, culturally. “The media is the most powerful institution on the face of the earth, in many respects,” said Crier. “It’s an extraordinary responsibility. But without acknowledging that responsibility, we can’t get beyond that to [assess] how we *exercise* that responsibility. That frustrates me.

Because we cannot perform on a day-to-day basis and be unwilling to recognize the shaping that we are doing all the time.” It may be time, she suggested, for journalism to look beyond its own institutional values, and recognize a larger set of societal values and needs that are worth “supporting, defending, and furthering.”

CONCLUSION

The arrival of new electronic technologies and fierce competition in communications media has introduced some novel, even radical, changes to the practice of journalism. But go beneath the high-tech trappings of this new media universe, and one finds a very old, familiar theme being played out: How to grapple with the tensions between a First Amendment that sanctions the freedom of irresponsibility and a democracy that desperately needs high-quality, morally thoughtful journalism?

The economic dynamics of the new media marketplace are powerful, and naturally dominate our attention. But the professional ethos that comes to prevail in mainstream journalism will not be driven purely by economic factors, but equally by the profession’s moral leadership and creativity. One promising thought is that values-driven editorial practices will prove to be one of the most competitive long-term strategies for news organizations. In the tumultuous new marketplace, after all, the news organization that has stable bonds of trust and loyalty with its consuming public is likely to be the more successful competitor. But such a strategy, if it is to work, must defy the short-term, exploitative strategies that seem to predominate today.

Beyond any economic calculus, cultivating the character of the nation’s news organizations is important because it will determine, in a very real sense, what kind of people we are, individually and as a nation. That, indeed, is why so many efforts are now under way to reinvigorate journalistic values in the new competitive environment. As Henry David Thoreau put it, “The best that you write is the best that you are.”

Individual Statements of Core Journalistic Values

Leadership on the part of prominent journalists plays an important role in the development and continued recognition of core values for the profession. While no one should be able to impose his or her values on any other individual, communicating—in words as well as actions—the code of conduct one adheres to as a journalist can help to clarify the fundamental prerequisites of good journalism and establish a voluntary framework for the adoption of practices and standards of enduring value. Such leadership is especially important in influencing younger journalists who are just starting to develop their own professional identities and standards.

To this end, we invited conference participants to submit personal statements of either the core values that guide them as journalists, or reflections on the fundamental issues discussed at the conference. The statements submitted in response to this request are included in this section. It should be noted that these are *personal* statements of individual participants, and do not necessarily represent the views of any other participants or employing organizations.

Lee Cullum

Syndicated Columnist
Dallas Morning News

My primary principles for the practice of journalism are contained in these three questions:

- Is it true?
- Is it fair?
- Is it responsible?

If all three can be answered yes, then the story passes muster.

Jim Lehrer

Executive Editor and Anchor
The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer

I practice journalism in accordance with the following guidelines:

- Do nothing I cannot defend.
- Do not distort, lie, slant, or hype.
- Do not falsify facts or make up quotes.
- Cover, write, and present every story with the care I would want if the story were about me.
- Assume there is at least one other side or version to every story.
- Assume the viewer is as smart and caring and good a person as I am.
- Assume the same about all people on whom I report.
- Assume everyone is innocent until proven guilty.
- Assume personal lives are a private matter until a legitimate turn in the story mandates otherwise.
- Carefully separate opinion and analysis from straight news stories and clearly label them as such.
- Do not use anonymous sources or blind quotes except on rare and monumental occasions. No one should ever be allowed to attack another anonymously.

- Do not broadcast profanity or the end result of violence unless it is an integral and necessary part of the story and/or crucial to understanding the story.
- Acknowledge that objectivity may be impossible but fairness never is.
- Journalists who are reckless with facts and reputations should be disciplined by their employers.
- My viewers have a right to know what principles guide my work and the process I use in their practice.
- I am not in the entertainment business.

Robert MacNeil

Author and Journalist

The following are some core values I would put my name to. They are the values which Jim Lehrer and I observed in producing *The MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*, and which he continues to observe.

- Fairness: treat people as you would like to be treated. Make fairness as high a newsroom priority as speed and accuracy.
- Behave with civility: while honoring the special role of the press in American democracy, remember that journalists are no more important to society than people in other professions. Avoid macho posturing and arrogant display.
- Do not use the First Amendment reflexively as a shield against all criticism of journalists. Journalists do not have special rights. It is not our First Amendment, but the people's.
- Give people attacked or criticized, by you or others, a fair opportunity to respond.
- Correct errors quickly and prominently.
- Practice transparency: let your values and practices be known to your staff and the public. Be willing to discuss how well you implement those values when challenged.
- Put news in a context necessary to avoid distortion.

- Respect complexity. Other people's lives and professions are just as complicated and fascinating to them as ours to us. They deserve that presumption when we approach them.
- Do not sensationalize.
- Respect privacy unless there is an overwhelming need to invade it.
- Avoid "gotcha" journalism.
- Do not ambush.
- Quote accurately. Do not invent quotes. What appears inside quotation marks must have been said by the person quoted.
- Journalists are also citizens of the democracy and have an interest in the health of its institutions.

Ancel Martinez

Reporter
KQED, National Public Radio

Despite the media's relentless coverage of the event and aftermath of Diana Spencer's untimely death, very little light has been shed by reporters and editors on what exactly is at stake for those media companies that have created a highly profitable enterprise surrounding the life of Princess Diana. Not only is their subject now dead as the result of an accident, but that accident may in fact be linked by implication to the groups of journalists who hounded her throughout her adult life. Namely, it is the corporate officers of television shows, magazines, tabloids, and newspapers who are responsible for the spotlighting of the British Royal Family, and their intent is clearly economic: *People*, a Time Warner-owned magazine, placed Diana on its cover 43 times because photographs and stories of the Princess ensured strong revenues. The photographers waiting on motorcycles outside the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Paris that August night stood to gain so much from pictures of the Princess and her companion precisely because the corporate officials behind the presses stood to gain so much in revenue themselves.

Regardless of the ways in which the Princess may have used the press to her own ends, the American coverage of every stage of her life is a clear indication of how far even mainstream media outlets are willing to go to gain readers and viewers. The drive to maximize shareholder value has come to define how media companies operate, placing dividends before the illumination of the more pressing concerns of public life and policy. For an example we need look no further than the career of Barbara Walters, whose prime time accomplishments were once established through her insightful interviews with world leaders and are now defined by her rote question-and-answer forums with the latest celebrities du jour.

But must this trend towards the commercialization of the news media be its destiny?

This question is what I found most intriguing about our discussions in Aspen. More than ever, we journalists have a responsibility to address the standards of integrity of our profession. This new urgency is due in part to media companies which, having been permitted under new federal laws to increase their ownership of print and broadcast outlets, are now governed by corporate boards ever more removed from the values and standards that are the centerpiece of solid journalism.

At National Public Radio, the mission is to frame issues of public policy, both national and international. In public radio we have the luxury of not living and dying by Nielsen ratings based on prime time consumption. Although at the end of the day we too are subject to the competitive market (not only must we maintain a base of listenership in order to continue, but we also rely heavily on listener contributions for our operating budget), we do have a mandate and strategy to deliver news free from the pressures of profit-hungry shareholders and corporate management. Public radio's goal is unique, and one that would make Edward R. Murrow proud. No doubt Americans do demand solid news reporting, and market research shows that desire for quality journalism.

We in public radio do fight our battles in the newsroom every day over what is and should be "news," but we supply America with a variety of voices and perspectives in a well-edited format that is, unfortunately, widely ignored in today's electronic media. Our salaries are not large; we do incur a personal cost as we stand by these values, but such decisions are the foundation of a strong commitment to a struggling profession.

My lasting impression of our discussions in Aspen is that it has become necessary to delineate and enunciate our principles as journalists. Furthermore, we must encourage both the industry and the public to acknowledge what is at stake if journalists, especially young ones who have neither experience nor management skills, are placed in potentially compromising situations. We lose more than news coverage when journalists are allotted fewer resources, and must rely on shortcuts to put a nightly newscast together or to cover a metro beat, or are forced to shave time off a story segment that deserves more exploration.

It is precisely the resulting shallow headlines, poor reporting, and sensationalism that has created an erosion of public trust in our profession. It is time to hold the boards of directors of large media companies, be they Knight-Ridder, Westinghouse, Tele-Communications Inc., or Disney, to a clearly defined standard of professional integrity. If we as journalists are not prepared to hold large companies accountable for what they do and how they do it, it is unlikely that we who feel the profession's needs changing will ever achieve much improvement. In other words, to choose our goal without a concrete method of action is to choose complacency.

Media companies do not differ from their peers in the business world in that economically productive officers and their divisions are rarely confronted about "soft" issues such as company values if their bottom lines are healthy. We must resort to a stronger voice, and perhaps outright confrontation.

A possible method of self-regulation for the Journalism industry is demonstrated by the California Public Retirement System. "Calpers," the nation's largest public pension fund with over one hundred billion dollars in assets, selects each year from the fifteen hundred companies in its portfolio those ten whose long-term stock market performances place them last in comparison to their industry peers. The list of ten is publicized, and the fund asks for meetings with company managers to trouble-shoot and agitate for change. Calpers has now announced a similar strategy to push for what it feels to be the basic requirements for the structure of public boards of management. Calpers is attempting to develop standards and to hold various managing boards accountable for maintaining those standards.

If the Catto Conference on Journalism and Society can arrive at a mutual consensus on establishing standards of journalistic integrity, it would be the first step towards initiating the implementation of such standards. We are both able and obligated to determine a set of purposes and parameters that goes far beyond the Nieman Foundation's recent "Statement of Concern." We must decide upon and articulate the guiding principles which will illustrate that to be supportive of our profession means to subscribe to certain behavioral and professional ethics, ethics which apply

equally to journalists as well as the corporate officers behind the media.

Of course, it is treading on dangerous ground to ask various boards of directors to be primarily loyal to journalists as stakeholders in their companies as opposed to the shareholders. I suggest this concept not only in the interests of corporate loyalty. Indeed, the consideration of the interests of journalism and its function in a democracy may, over the long term, maximize shareholder wealth. Although in the immediate sense efforts leading to ethics seminars for staffers, minority mentoring programs and concentration on civic journalism may seem costly and unrelated to increasing bottom lines, the argument may be made that media corporations will benefit in the long run.

It is, after all, the role of the journalist in a democratic society to represent news events, figures, and issues free of the influence of both political and economic forces. It is our responsibility as journalists to establish and regulate adherence to the standards by which we maintain journalistic integrity, and the consequent trust of the American public.

Gerald Warren

Editor, Retired
San Diego Union Tribune

Journalism as practiced by American newspapers does not need new standards. Journalists need to apply new, more relevant meaning to the old values which have served the profession well for many years.

I relate these thoughts to newspapers because of my 35-year experience as a reporter and editor and because I agree with Richard Reeves, when he said print journalists “know what they are doing. Television doesn’t. Network television keeps changing and experimenting.” I trust Reeves would make an exception of *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, as I do.

The bedrock standard for all journalists is credibility which cannot be earned if we do not understand how our communities rank our adherence to the other basic values of journalism: balance, accuracy, an appreciation of the leadership role a newspaper is expected to play in its community, and a realization that a newspaper must be accessible to all segments of its community.

These values are tested daily by the news judgment, taste, and intelligence of senior editors who are expected to frame important issues for their communities by the selection of news stories to be given positions of prominence in the paper.

The editors are saying, in effect, “We choose a big headline for this story because our experience and knowledge of our community tell us it is important and meaningful to you.”

A recent study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) of how our communities believed we were doing the job, surprised many of us. Our readers told us that while they agreed that the basic values of journalism are credibility, balance, accuracy, leadership, accessibility, and news judgment, they did not

think we were applying those values with the communities in mind; they defined them differently.

A handbook compiled for editors at the conclusion of the ASNE study listed some new definitions for our old standards:

1. *Balance/fairness/wholeness reflect the wholeness of communities. Coverage needs to capture diverse voices and viewpoints; solutions and problems, the profoundly ordinary as well as the unusual, the good with the bad.* Too often, we were told, we quote self-appointed experts representing the extreme edges of issues instead of addressing how those issues are affecting the communities.
2. *Accuracy/authenticity to get the facts right but also get the right facts. Coverage needs to provide background, context, and perspective and it must capture the tone, language, experiences and emotions of people.* It is not enough to report that a fistfight broke out at a community meeting. If serious issues were being discussed, they need to be placed in context.
3. *Leadership to frame and illuminate important issues in the communities a newspaper serves. Coverage needs to stimulate discussion about public concerns and help people see possibilities for moving forward.* Editors chafe at the idea they should be community leaders. They don't like boosterism of any type. But the readers left no doubt that they expected newspapers to be involved in important community issues.
4. *Accessibility to connect the public to important community issues. Coverage needs to create give-and-take between the newspaper and its communities, and connect citizens to one another.* Focus groups made clear that many of our neighbors do not see their views or those of their friends reflected in newspaper coverage.
5. *Credibility to consistently fulfill journalistic values over time and convey a deep understanding of the communities a newspaper serves.*

And the one most susceptible to arrogance and cynicism,

6. News judgment to act as the regulator of the other journalistic values by selecting, shaping, and bringing definition to what is important, interesting, and meaningful in a community.

It is clear that newspapers, who after all set the agenda for local television stations as well as for public policy discussions, cannot possibly reflect these values as defined by the communities unless they become much more involved in those communities.

We journalists prize our independence. We must stand apart if we are to be objective. Our neighbors are saying our objectivity is clouding our ability to truly understand the different forces tugging at communities and is not allowing us to place major issues in the context readers need.

Richard Harwood of The Harwood Group, which facilitated the two-year ASNE study, suggested that journalists must see the need for an interplay between independence and interdependence: "Journalists must practice journalism independent of any outside influences, yet the fate and vitality of newspapers relies on an interdependence with their readers and communities."

The editors agreed that we need to deepen our understanding of our communities by engaging "readers as citizens" so that a respectful relationship is built which allows newspapers to deliver unpleasant news in ways that help readers understand its importance.

The only way I know to do that is for reporters and editors to get out into their various communities and listen to what is being said and by whom.

We might find out that our neighbors do not want us to emulate the supermarket tabloids or the television tabloid shows by violating our principles simply because these other news organizations did. We might find out that a part of our leadership responsibility is to separate news from entertainment.

We just might find out that readers do not want us to pander to them.

Juan Williams

Political Analyst and National Correspondent
The Washington Post

There is an old dictum that comes to mind when I am asked to explain my core journalistic values. It says good journalism should “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted.”

I would add that good journalism should also stir the soul, prompting self-critical review by the people and institutions with the power to change the world for the better. If that journalism is sensational, even tawdry and rude, it would not bother me.

In my core journalistic values there is little reproach for sensationalism or discretion over privacy matters. Newspapers, TV, radio and whatever other media exist, should not be in the business of denying information to people. At most, the media might defuse sensationalism with a clear-eyed account of the facts. For editors to argue endlessly over whether the president’s affair with Gennifer Flowers is more or less newsworthy than the charges of harassment against him by Paula Jones is really useless navel-gazing. Both are stories that readers, even historians, have an interest in reading about. And both stories reveal a great deal about America’s preoccupations today.

What is essential for today’s editor to consider about those stories is that their stories be accurate, complete (by that I mean fair), and timely. The best publications, according to my core values, would offer context and explain what provoked the disclosures.

Similarly, reports about illegal child care arrangements, marijuana smoking, and petty indiscretions by prominent people should be presented without reservation. To my way of thinking there is value to having journalists use these situations as morality tales that force the nation to confront old taboos. After these stories see the light of day it may be that public opinion shifts and a majority of Americans no longer feel that a person who once

smoked marijuana in college should be disqualified from consideration for the Supreme Court.

The point of good journalism should be to prompt readers, as well as corporations and influential individuals to reconsider not only conventional thinking but the who, what, where, why and when of their use of power, money, and might. The best journalism should be a mirror to yesterday, allowing people to see their actions and the consequences clearly. Great journalism might go beyond the mirror to the crystal ball by trying to offer a glimpse of what corrections might make for a better future.

In my perfect world, the core value of good journalism would be to inform and explain people, events, and ideas. Stopping voyeurism by more prurient journalists, or even crazed journalists, is not a concern for me.

The ultimate goal is to produce thoughtful, thorough reporting on critical issues which reveals more of the world and how it can be improved.

To my mind, journalism that loses sight of that goal is nothing more than an exercise in vanity—a text for people trying to determine the social mores of the owners of the press in a certain era.

Appendix

The 1997 Catto Conference on Journalism and Society
Aspen, Colorado
June 26-28, 1997

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

Ken Auletta

Communications Columnist
The New Yorker

David Bollier

Independent Journalist and
Consultant

The Honorable Henry Catto

Vice Chairman
National Public Radio

Jessica Catto

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Geoffrey Cowan

Dean
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Catherine Crier

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Lee Cullum

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Dallas Morning News

Ervin S. Duggan

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Washington Journalism Review

Charles M. Firestone

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Max Frankel

Magazine Columnist
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Laura R. Handman

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Jim Lehrer

Executive Editor and Anchor
*The NewsHour with
Jim Lehrer*

Robert MacNeil

Author and Journalist

Ancel Martinez

Reporter
KQED
National Public Radio

John P. Mascotte

Chairman
Johnson & Higgins of
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**The Honorable Ann
McLaughlin**

Chairman
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About the Authors

Robert MacNeil

Until his retirement in October 1995, Robert MacNeil was executive editor and co-anchor of *The MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*, a 20-year nightly partnership with Jim Lehrer on PBS.

MacNeil's 40-year journalism career began at Reuters News Agency in London. He moved to television in 1960 as an NBC News London-based correspondent, and in 1963 he was transferred to NBC's Washington Bureau to report on the civil rights movement and to help cover the White House. MacNeil was the NBC News correspondent covering President Kennedy on the day Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. He returned to London in 1967 to cover American and European politics for the British Broadcasting Corporation's *Panorama* program.

MacNeil left the BBC in 1971 to join PBS, where he first teamed with Jim Lehrer as a co-anchor of PBS's Emmy Award-winning coverage of the Senate Watergate hearings. Their common disenchantment with the style and values of network news programs resulted in *The Robert MacNeil Report with Jim Lehrer*, which eventually became known as *The MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour*, the nation's first full hour of evening news.

MacNeil has authored several books, including two memoirs, *The Right Place at the Right Time*, and the best seller *Wordstruck*, and two bestselling novels, *Burden of Desire* (1992) and *The Voyage* (1995). He was co-author of *The Story of English*, companion volume to the BBC-PBS television series which he hosted. Most of his time since he retired is devoted to writing.

David Bollier

David Bollier is an independent journalist and consultant with extensive expertise in electronic media, consumer advocacy, public policy, and law. A long-time collaborator with television writer and producer Norman Lear, Bollier works closely with People for the American Way and The Business Enterprise Trust, and writes about the civic and social implications of emerging electronic media. The author of five books, including *Aiming Higher* (1996), Bollier is a graduate of Amherst College and Yale Law School.

The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program

The overall goal of the Communications and Society Program is to promote integrated, thoughtful, values-based decision making in the fields of communications, media, and information policy. In particular, the Program focuses on the implications of communications and information technologies on democratic institutions, individual behavior, instruments of commerce, and community life.

The Communications and Society Program accomplishes this goal through two main types of activities. First, it brings together leaders of industry, government, the nonprofit sector, media organizations, the academic world, and others for roundtable meetings to assess the impact of modern communications and information systems on the ideas and practices of a democratic society. Second, the Program promotes research and distributes conference reports to decision makers in the communications and information fields, both within the United States and internationally, and to the public at large.

Topics addressed by the Program vary as issues and the policy environment evolve, but each project seeks to achieve a better understanding of the societal impact of the communications and information infrastructures, to foster a more informed and participatory environment for communications policymaking, or to promote the use of communications for global understanding. In recent years, the Communications and Society Program has chosen to focus with special interest on the issues of electronic democracy, lifelong learning and technology, electronic commerce, the future of advertising, and the role of the media in democratic society.

The Program also coordinates all of the activities of the Institute for Information Studies, a joint program with Nortel, and engages

in other domestic and international Aspen Institute initiatives related to communications and information technology and policy.

Charles Firestone is director of the Aspen Institute's Communications and Society Program. He is also serving as the Institute's Interim Executive Vice President for Policy Programs. Prior to joining the Institute, Mr. Firestone was a private communications and entertainment attorney in Los Angeles and an adjunct professor at the UCLA School of Law, where he also directed the Communications Law Program. Firestone worked previously as an attorney at the Federal Communications Commission and as director of litigation for the Citizens Communication Center in Washington, D.C.