

Newspaper Objectivity

WASHINGTON POST

Approved For Release 2004/09/28 : CIA-RDP88-01314R000100480005-8

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

There exists in the plethora of publications we're lucky we don't have to read a magazine called Editor & Publisher. It is read or at least subscribed to by most executives in the newspaper business. This makes it a faithful reflection of the mentality which guides most, but not all, our daily newspapers.

In makeup, story selection, editorial policy and use of language, Editor & Publisher consistently lives up to the best in journalism as it was practiced circa 1935. Leafing through its pages will tell you why so many newspapers are dull, uninformative and reactionary.

A recent issue of the magazine contained a story with this headline: Readers Split Over Reporter's Beard. The article that followed in E & P's notable prose said that, "The public image of newspapermen got perhaps its severest test when the Dayton Daily News invited readers' response to photos of a bearded reporter. Appearing on the front page was a picture combo showing the daily growth of Dale Huffman's hirsute adornment, complete with a ballot for readers to indicate whether they wanted the beard shaved or saved. Readers turned thumbs down on the reporter's beard."

At least it can't be said that newspaper editors are holding out the good stuff and privately circulating it among themselves. They treat themselves as badly as they treat their readers. Another story in the same issue describes a speech given by the assistant managing editor of the Santa Ana (California) Register to his local Rotary Club. If you want to know more, you'll find it on page 22 of the June 13 number.

Editor & Publisher isn't wholly given over to trivia. It has articles about important topics and they too tell us something about the minds that edit the American daily press, as with the piece that was run with this slightly paranoid headline: Attack on Objectivity Increases From Within.

The article quotes from a speech given by an important Associated Press editor to a group of Pennsylvania newspeople. What he says tells more about print journalism than the story about the reporter and his beard:

"Those of you who read the various professional journals are aware that objective reporting is coming under increasing attack from within our own ranks. There is abroad in the profession a movement, unorganized but vocal, generally known as the New Journalists. Basically, their argument is that the reporter has the right to draw conclusions from the facts he gathers. Unless he is permitted to do so, they say, it is impossible to put simple, unvarnished facts in perspective. To quote the New Journalists, the self-discipline required to remain impartial reduces reporters to the status of mere eunuchs . . . the catch words and phrases of the New Journalists betray their real concern. They are not content to be observers. They are determined to exert an influence, to be opinion makers. They talk about the importance of what reporters think, of the reporter's right to take a moral stance, to have firm convictions and to express them in print. Always beware of the man who talks in terms of 'moral commitments.' Invariably he is a man who has totally bought the line peddled by advocates of one cause or another."

Most American newspaper editors would agree with our speaker, who's not named here because his words are so prototypic. Vice President Agnew would agree; so would many other politicians and many newspaper readers who believe the news is slanted and who, like our editor, would agree to print the "unvarnished facts."

In practice, printing the unvarnished facts can be highly deceptive.

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ad absurdum with Agnew's attack on the media. Newspapers have dutifully reported the attack every time he gives it, making themselves a conveyor belt for the impression that he and his buddies are being persecuted by a hippie-controlled national press. Seldom do these accounts include a paragraph saying that most American newspapers editorially support him and his boss.

By these standards objectivity consists of limiting oneself to accurate quotation. Let the speaker be a liar, an ignoramus, mistaken or a truth teller, this school of thought holds that journalism has no responsibility to establish the facts independently. It's left to the reader to get the facts to judge our public controversialists, an obvious impossibility in a society disputing over topics that range from the storage of pathogens in biological warfare, to monetary liquidity, to the presence of CIA agents in Laos, to the identity of major polluters of Lake Erie.

Our current definition of news suggests a range of motivation that runs from extreme A to extreme B: patriotism, honor, votes, public service, self defense, love of freedom and peace and a few others. In a time when more people grow up having absorbed the precepts of the social sciences, such inferences as to why events take place are unbelievable. Only Marxists and Christians of the Billy Graham stamp, that is behavioral determinants, can read the accounts of the words and deeds of men on most of our front pages and take them seriously.

Objective news is not only incredible to people brought up in the contemporary mode, it's also biased. This kind of objectivity rejects information that tends to throw doubt on ancient institutions and established practice by calling it partisan. Editors don't want to print that kind of bad news.

They will print bad news that makes an evil appear to be the work of bad men or criminals. They will print bad news that is the work of God, like fires, earthquakes, and plane crashes. They will print bad news that may lead readers to question other country's social systems, that may cause people to wonder about the way other countries select their leaders, make their decisions, transact their public business, but rarely and only in our few good papers, do they do this in regard to ourselves.

When our speaker says editors should be on guard against reporters who have "bought the line peddled by one cause or another," his words mean editors should be on guard against reporters who've not bought the line that editors are trying to peddle.

But editors themselves only half believe in this mythic objectivity. If they did they'd pay the highest wages to the men who most excel at this kind of formula journalism. This isn't the case at all. The best paid writers are the columnists and feature writers who're hired to express opinion.

Newspaper executives are well paid. Most reporters aren't. They don't enter the business for money but for other reasons—excitement, prestige, fascination with politics, many reasons. One of them is the uplifting delusion that if a man chases after it long enough, he may be able to write, not unvarnished facts, but some form of the truth is never objective.

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