

“Covering the Press: Ethics Values and Social Issues”
UC Berkeley
April 21-24, 2002

“Covering Competitors, Covering Ourselves”
Bob Steele
The Poynter Institute

Certainly we should cover our competitors and ourselves.

Our primary duty as journalists is to seek the truth and report it as fully as possible. To gather information about significant issues and events and tell factual, fair, substantive stories that serve the public.

That duty, I suggest, includes the obligation for journalists to “Hold the Powerful Accountable.” That means we should be using our resources to cover the institutions and people in our communities and our society that are influential – powerful by virtue of role, position, finances, connections.

It would be difficult, if not impossible to argue that news organizations don’t fit that description. Newspapers and television stations are certainly among the most powerful and influential institutions in most communities. The same, I suggest, can be argued on the national level for television networks, national newspapers, and specialty publications that provide news and information. Add to this mix radio, the Internet, and business and other specialty magazines. To be sure, different media and media organizations carry different weight depending on their size, scope, range and role. But, news organizations *are* influential and powerful. Information providers are essential and influential elements of our larger society and our communities. That’s especially true in a democracy where the value of information is at the core of the government system.

It’s logical to argue that journalism should cover journalism in much the same way it covers other institutions and issues – banking, religion, medicine, science, the arts, and so on. The

reality is that we haven't, in the grand scheme of things, done as well as we should have. Sure we can cite plenty of examples where the press has been covering the press pretty well. Our major newspapers have expanded and upgraded coverage in recent years. The networks occasionally do something meaningful on this front. There are a few papers across the land that have fine media writers. But, for the most part, the news media too often cover the news media when something big or very fascinating happens. When journalism is in the spotlight for its coverage of a major crime or a natural disaster. Or when journalism covers itself in the face of an ethical explosion – fabricated stories for instance, or a big legal issue – The ABC vs. Food Lion case for instance. Or when journalism covers itself in the wake of a major merger on the media business front.

But, let's give credit where credit is deserved.

There are the Shaw's and Barringer's and Kurtz's and the Alter's and Alterman's of the national press. There are a handful of quality media writers at regional papers across the land, from the Jurkowitz's to the Folkenflik's. And AP has a small stable of media writers including Seth Sutel and Dave Bauder.

There are other forms of media coverage. The alternative press can, and sometimes does, do a good job of reporting on the mainstream media. The Nashville Scene's insightful examination of the Tennessean comes to mind. Too often, though, the alternative press is very cynical in tone and shallow in substance when it comes to its critiques and commentary about the news media.

Let's also recognize the role and work, often substantive, of AJR and CJR. Factor in NPR's *On the Media*. Note the industry trades like *E&P*, *Presstime*, *Broadcasting*, and *Electronic Media*. Factor in the publications of the various professional groups, from *The American Editor*, to *Communicator*, to *News Photographer* to *Quill*. Bookmark the work from *Salon*, the *Nation*, *Mother Jones*, *The New Yorker* and others. Cite Romenesko's *Media News* and the other reporting, analysis and

commentary that comes from Poynter and API's sites. Include the Nieman Reports. Note the publications from the Casey Center and the IRE journal.

And, then there is the work of a few dozen ombudsmen/public editors/reader representatives. Some of them, from Getler to Pynn to Lubrano to Wycliff write regular and often insightful columns explaining, critiquing and sometimes criticizing the work of their own newspapers.

In fact, it's this last group, small though it is, that I'd like to focus on for a minute. I believe the ombudsmen/public editors/reader reps are different than any of the other forms that cover the press. For they do so with a different lens and with a different purpose. Their role is to serve as an essential connection between their individual newspaper and its readers. When they do their work well, and some do, they create a unique and powerful interaction between journalism and citizenry. They are "connectors." More on that in a few minutes.

But first, a couple of other observations – notions from someone who wears a handful of hats when it comes to this "Covering the Press" framework.

In some ways, I'm one of those who covers the press. I write a column – "Talk about Ethics" – for Poynter.org. I also sometimes write other articles or commentaries on the news media for Poynter.org and occasionally for newspapers or magazines.

Beyond that, my thoughts on the news media are transmitted through the reporting of other journalists who are in some fashion covering the media. I'm on the receiving end of a couple hundred interviews each year – newspapers, magazines, television, radio, Internet.

I recognize and admit that there are times when I'm no more than the designated "sound bite" or "quote" for a journalist seeking a particular element to her story. I can tell that very

clearly by the nature of the questions I'm asked and/or the reporter's reaction to what I have to say. (the old, "Wouldn't you say" question or the "Uh, huh" response to a thought I offer, followed by "But, let me rephrase my question." There also are, to be sure, many times when a reporter is exploring a story and legitimately examines issues by asking a range of open-ended questions. In some cases even, reporters who hear something I have to say and follow-up with a related question.

The range of quality when it comes to reporters covering the press is quite broad. What's clear to me, however, is that many of the newspaper reporters who are assigned to do a story related to some element of television news come at the story with a stacked deck. It's not unusual for me to easily detect a strong bias in the reporter's view as reflected in his/her questions, tone or side comments. To be sure, there's plenty to challenge when it comes to television news, but I'm always astounded by how many print reporters build their story on strong assumptions and their own bias against broadcast journalism.

The same can be said about reporters who are writing or producing stories about the business side of the news media. It's not unusual for me to hear questions from a reporter that reflect the reporter's strong anti-business feelings.

So, why don't we cover ourselves better or sometimes at all? Here are a few reasons:

- Journalists by their nature tend to be very defensive.
- Many in our profession see the issues as "inside" stuff that the public is not interested in
- We are unwilling or afraid to critique and challenge others within our "brethren," not unlike the way cops protect themselves.
- We fear that we will anger the boss or the big boss who runs the company.

- We don't see it as our role
- The convergence dynamics. For some companies, like Belo in Dallas and Media General in Tampa, there's an extra challenge because of the cross ownership situation. In other cases you have newspapers and television stations that are partners in some fashion even though have separate ownership. It does, to be sure, make it more challenging to cover the news media in your community when you have a stake in and loyalty to those you are writing about.

I discount the argument of some that this is merely "inside baseball" stuff and that the public could care less. We know from both surveys and anecdotal interviews that many citizens want to better understand the modus operandi of the news media. And, I think it's essential that the public know more. We tell citizens – with our reporting -- a great deal about what happens behind the scenes in our other major institutions from hospitals to accounting firms, from churches to power companies. We should apply that same standard of transparency to our own business.

One reason our media coverage of the media is often weak is because of the approach we use. Take for instance the shallow and often snide reporting done by too many television writers for local newspapers. Exceptions noted, but most of the writing about local television tends to focus on the personalities and the ratings game. Yes, those are key elements of the broadcast equation, but there is much more to it. The TV writers seldom meaningfully explore the economic issues of broadcast and cable and they very seldom do any reporting on the "process" of journalism that produces the products. The public would truly benefit from knowing more about how and why editors and news directors make the decisions they do when it comes to covering or not covering certain issues and the methods they employ to produce the stories.

To be sure, newspapers should apply that same standard to themselves in covering newspapers and magazines should do

the same in covering magazines. Journalists should find substantive ways to cover the “process” of journalism – how and why decisions are made for instance – and not just the products that are produced. And, there needs to be much more substantive reporting on the economics of the news business.

So, how can we move toward improved coverage of the media? Here are five key elements:

Conviction – News organizations must recognize that it is the “right” thing to do. It’s essential to cover our competitors and ourselves in order to hold ourselves accountable.

Commitment – News organizations and their leaders must be committed to the cause. They must commit the necessary resources to hire talented, skilled journalists to cover the media beat.

Competency – The media reporters must have the craft skills and the knowledge to effectively cover the complex issues related to the media. They must be part economists, part sociologists, part technologists, and more. They must be good reporters and storytellers to convey complex stories to the public.

Courage – The media reporters and their editors must resist any undue pressure that would detract from the quality and accuracy of their stories. They must resist the pressure, whether it is internal or external, from execs and owners of the news organization to the advertisers.

Credibility – Public trust grows when journalists practice committed, high-quality, courageous media reporting. The commitment must be genuine. The approach must be substantive and professional. The journalism must be compelling and honest.

Allow me to return to the point I made earlier about news organizations that see value in having a journalist on staff who connects with the public and serves as their connector to the

journalists. I'm disappointed by unwillingness of more news organizations to see the considerable value in having a staff ombudsmen/public editor whose duties include shining the light of scrutiny on his or her own organization. There are only about three dozen papers in the country who have someone in this role. National Public Radio has an ombudsman, but the major TV networks and Cable News Networks don't really have someone in that role. And, with a single exception, the ombudsman concept does not exist in local television. That's great shame. The concept is imperfect to be sure. The person who's job it is to connect with the public and then hold the news organization publicly accountable is an employee of that organization. There is an inescapable tension and even conflict in that equation. But, as proven by some papers including the Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, The Oregonian, The San Diego Union-Tribune, the Sacramento Bee, The Boston Globe, and a handful of other papers, the concept can work. These papers have or have had an ombudsman or public editor who is allowed – even encouraged – to write strong, substantive columns that not only explain how and why decisions are made, but to challenge and criticize the paper when needed.

Will increased and better quality coverage of our profession/craft/industry/business serve any good purposes beyond accountability? Does the economic model for our industry preclude meaningful impact from the coverage and healthy criticism?

Does Tony Ridder really care when AJR or a mainstream newspaper writes about Knight-Ridder's business strategies?

When The Baltimore Sun's David Folkenflik writes an insightful story revealing how Geraldo Rivera failed to tell the truth in a story he reported from Afghanistan – maybe even fabricated the details – does it really make a difference. Do Roger Ailes and the execs at FOX News Channel even give a whit about such reporting about their journalism?

And the same can be said about all the other stories media writers produce about the weaknesses of our profession and

mistakes made by particular journalists or news organizations. I'm not suggesting that we don't cover the issues and the indiscretions and worse. I'm just posing the concern that the impact may be minimal within our profession and industry.

Which leads me to this point. What can journalism do to both better cover itself and have more impact.

The greatest challenge, I suggest, is to create a stronger interest among citizens in how and why journalism does what it does. I believe that a citizenry that better understands the role of the press (in all its production and delivery forms) will have a greater respect for journalism and its essential role in a democracy.

How can we create that interest?

- More news organizations – and not just newspapers – should have a journalist on staff who fills the ombudsman/public editor/reader-viewer representative role.
- News organizations should make coverage of the profession/business/industry a priority, not just an afterthought.
- News organizations should create and develop new ways to connect with citizens for purposeful, substantive discussion and deliberation on the process and products of journalism. It's not just in our own interest to do this (though we in journalism may benefit from a heightened respect for what we do based on that greater understanding of what we do). A stronger connection between journalism and citizens will serve our communities and our society.

And, if we create these connections we put ourselves in the position of having to measure up – we hold ourselves accountable.

We come full circle to the essential obligation of journalists. Holding the powerful accountable.

