

*Not only must the press be as accurate as possible, but it must appear to be accurate. The citizen's dilemma is that, while at no time has there been greater need of a credible press, his confidence in the press has fallen.*

## ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY

# PRESS CREDIBILITY – THE CITIZEN'S DILEMMA, 1972

### *Media Responsibility and Accuracy*

*This essay was published the year the Democratic campaign headquarters in the Watergate apartment complex in Washington, D.C., was vandalized; three years later, the Watergate scandal monopolized national politics, and Richard Nixon was forced to resign as president. During this unprecedented time in America, the public looked to the media to furnish accurate, unbiased information.*

*How does the press control what we know and when we know it? Is all the information we receive accurate and unbiased? Today, the number of independent daily newspapers has diminished; the staffs of broadcast news organizations have been cut. Judge Learned Hand said, "...that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative selection. To many this is, and always will be, folly; but we have staked upon it our all."*

*Twenty years after this essay was written, the television news show Dateline admitted that it had faked an accident to substantiate a premise that a certain truck was dangerous and should be taken off the market. As noted in the essay, it is increasingly difficult to get the print or broadcast media to acknowledge or correct a mistake; yet how can the public believe the media if it refuses to admit it is wrong? Have we given the press too much power in our lives?*

*Many of these issues of press credibility and power continue to be alive and controversial today. The Markle Foundation identified these important public concerns about the press 10 years before they became widely debated.*

In today's complex, interrelated society, much of the information on which personal action is based comes from the press, newspapers, television, and radio. However, just at a time when the individual is most in need of accurate, unbiased information, many Americans seem to be losing faith in their sources of news.

*The Citizen's  
Dilemma*

This dilemma has not been brought about by design or evil intention. Rather, it is the result of the changing conditions of modern life, the battle for press freedom, and the advance of technology.

Frank Jones has recently received a raise in salary. Wanting to save his money, he is debating whether to purchase United States savings bonds, to put his money in a savings bank, or to invest in a mutual fund. Frank's neighbor, Bill Austin, has received two job offers — one in New York and one in Chicago. He is trying to decide whether to move his wife and young children to one or the other of those cities, or perhaps he should remain where he is in a small town in the Southwest. Finally, a third neighbor is beginning to plan a long-awaited trip to Europe and the Middle East. This man, Dan Fredericks, and his wife, Eileen, have wanted to visit relatives abroad. Now, they are trying to decide whether to travel immediately or to wait and see if international conditions will improve so that they can plan their trip with greater peace of mind.

Naturally, the Joneses, the Austins, and the Fredericks are each attempting to get the best advice they can on how to save their money, whether to make a move, and if this is the time to travel abroad. Friends, bankers, lawyers, and travel agents are helpful. In common, however, all these families are dependent upon the major sources of news available to them — their newspaper, radio, and television — to give both specific and background information for making their decisions. In each case, their decisions will be affected by events far distant from their home town — interest rates determined in complex ways by the economy and managers of money, the presumed benefits and dangers of moving to a strange city, and political conditions in foreign lands. In each case, information provided by the press will be an important part of the decisions they must make.

These families, like most of those we know, are faced daily with the necessity for personal action and individual responsibility. Indeed, the decade of the 1960s reemphasized for many Americans the necessity for individual responsibility. Government programs and bureaucratic answers seemed to leave many of the country's dilemmas unresolved. Americans, stimulated by questioning youth, began to reaffirm the importance of individual initiative.

Although men's motivations and goals remain relatively constant, the nature of the environment in which these goals are to be achieved is rapidly changing. In order to act successfully, a man must try to keep up with the changing world by keeping himself educated and well informed. Action is the end point of a process that includes attention to information, comprehension of the information, acceptance or rejection of the information, its recall, and, finally, action on the basis of what is known. Today the press has emerged as a principal means of providing the information and education necessary for personal action.

Modern conditions have forced on the press some of the responsibility that once belonged to school and family. Whether schooling ends at the high school, college, or graduate level, the necessity for up-to-date information and education goes on. Because the environment is changing, because technology is advancing, formal education is simply unable to provide all that is necessary for citizens to meet their everyday needs

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and desires. The press supplements the school by informing and educating about everyday events, about economics, foreign affairs, social science, science, health, and a host of other subjects that are important for daily living. The responsibility of the press is not and cannot be simply providing information. It is now a responsibility to educate people for living in a modern world.

In fact, the press is more and more the portrayer of external reality, as pertinent aspects of the world become more distant from personal experience. This comprehensive change in the nature of existence is one of the pervasive facts of modern life. In older and simpler times, the important events in a man's world — those that determined his day-to-day personal actions — were much more accessible to his immediate experience. A man could use his own eyes and ears to find out what he needed to know. If he needed to know more, he could talk to a neighbor. Events in the state capitol were quite peripheral to everyday life, and events in the nation's capitol, in foreign countries, in world banks, or in the laboratories of a university had little effect upon day-to-day living. This is obviously no longer true, although some people attempt to deny this change and retreat from the modern world by trying to re-create earlier and simpler conditions.

The press is, however, not simply a portrayer of external reality, even though this is one of its main functions. The press also helps create reality. Despite the best efforts of cameramen or news reporters, their very presence may influence the events they report. For example, television coverage has seemed to exercise a calming influence on some demonstrators while apparently stimulating others toward violence.

Not only do observation and reporting affect the nature of the events being covered, but a number of studies have shown that reporters and editors necessarily transmit an unwitting bias. Among the other factors that affect a newspaper editor's choice of news are his own values, the values of the paper for which he works, and the perceived values of his audience — even though it also has been shown that an editor's concept of his audience's values is frequently inaccurate. The television news editor tends to choose news for conflict value, significance, timeliness, proximity, and visual availability. In each case, the factors influencing the editor's judgments are both objective and subjective, and the result is that bias of one sort or another is an unavoidable part of reported news. When a citizen is exposed to few sources of news or sources that have the same management or ownership, there is greater likelihood of a resultant distortion of his world view.

One of the citizen's primary means of keeping his own perception of the external world unbiased is to expose himself to multiple sources of news in order to cancel out any unwitting bias that has affected a single source.

The citizen needs an accurate portrayal of reality, but it must not only be accurate — it must be credible if the citizen is to take personal action with confidence. The press, in this case, is much in the position of Caesar's wife. Not only must the press be as accurate as possible, but it must appear to be accurate. The citizen's dilemma is that while at no time has he been in greater need of a credible press, his confidence in the press has fallen.

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### *Press Credibility Today*

In recent years, the American citizen's confidence in many of his institutions has waned. The press has not been an exception to this loss of confidence. Polls have shown that people do not have as much faith in the press now as they did formerly. In 1966, for example, a survey by the Louis Harris organization found that only 29 percent of those polled said they had great confidence in the people running the press. This percentage had fallen to 18 percent by 1971. In addition, confidence in the press was low when compared to confidence in other institutions in both 1966 and 1971.

This decline in press credibility has been highlighted on a number of occasions by Vice President Spiro Agnew. In 1969 the Vice President said, "Normality has become the nemesis of the network news. Now the upshot of all this controversy is that a narrow and distorted picture of America often emerges from the televised news....Perhaps the place to start looking for a credibility gap is not in the offices of the government in Washington but in the studios of the networks in New York." In a subsequent speech he said, "I don't seek to intimidate the press, or the networks, or anyone else from speaking out. But the time for blind acceptance of their opinions is past. And the time for naive belief in their neutrality is gone."

Regardless of the truth in any of the specific criticisms offered by the Vice President, it has seemed to more than one observer that his remarks strike a chord of response in the minds of many citizens. Perhaps that chord is simply the citizen's recognition of his increasing dependency on the press as a portrayer of reality, while at the same time recognizing that the press is fallible. In this way the Vice President may have been articulating a vague apprehension shared by many Americans. In order to understand the basis for this apprehension, it is necessary to consider the battle for press freedom, the advent of television, and the economic conditions of the press today.

### *Press Freedom*

Freedom of the press is often taken for granted — being regarded as an unchanging factor in American life guaranteed by the Constitution. The fact is that the press freedoms that are taken for granted have been won in battles over three centuries and are constantly undergoing change. The press is now substantially freer than at any time except for a brief period following the Revolutionary War. Until the most recent Supreme Court decision determining that under some conditions reporters have to reveal their sources of information in court, the trend for three centuries has been toward more and more freedom for the press.

Prior to the Revolutionary War, it was a crime in England to criticize public officials in the press. Judges in the colonies tended to follow the English common law, and only gradually were sanctions against the criticism of public officials eliminated. Press freedom as guaranteed by the Bill of Rights was a major departure from the English tradition. Much of the impetus for press freedom came from the beliefs that the English common law was too restrictive and that the citizen's right to know was paramount to the rights of government. The framers of the Constitution believed particularly that the citizen had a right to know about his government. Thomas Jefferson wrote: "The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without

