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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.

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.

The Citizen's Dilemma

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

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.

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

government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I mean that every man should receive these papers and be capable of reading them." Victories for press freedom have remained grounded on the citizen's right to be informed.

Immediately following the Revolutionary War, there were no important restrictions on freedom of the press. But in 1798, when the press had become virulent and partisan in its approach to politics, Congress passed the Sedition Law, making it a crime to criticize public officials. At the same time, the remaining English common law was still generally interpreted to make it a criminal act to criticize officials of government. The expiration of the Sedition Law in 1801 was only one landmark in the gradual relaxation of the penalties for libel that had been applied in the early years of the country.

As it became more and more difficult for public officials to prove criminal acts of libel, such prosecutions tended to switch to the civil courts. In the civil courts, as well, there continued to be a relaxation of the penalties for libel and interpretations of proof made it more difficult to obtain libel judgments. In 1964 in the case of *Sullivan* vs. *The New York Times*, the Supreme Court for the first time promulgated a national standard for libel. In this case, the Court said that state courts could not award libel judgments to public officials for statements about their official conduct unless it could be proven that such statements were made with actual malice. In order for actual malice to be proven, it had to be shown that such statements were false and made with the knowledge of falsity or with reckless disregard of whether they were true or false. More recently, the Court extended this decision to private individuals, saying that they cannot collect libel judgments for falsehoods published or broadcast in the course of reporting matters of general public interest unless the private individual can also prove actual malice. Thus, over the years, the press has won the freedom to make honest mistakes in good faith in discussing either public or private figures when concerned with matters of general public interest.

The easing of penalties for libel and lack of effective recourse for misstatements tend to create a situation in which the press often stands as sole judge of its own accuracy. This makes the press especially vulnerable to accusations of bias and, in practice, may be seen by the citizen as the right of the press to inaccuracy and error without penalty. In almost any other branch of American life, there is some recourse for the citizen if he thinks errors of judgment or fact have been committed. For both the legal and health professions, there are recourses through the courts. Some professions have internal mechanisms by which the citizen can obtain relief if he thinks he has been wronged. While recourse continues to exist in principle for the citizen if he thinks he has been libeled by the press, in practice this has become a closed door. The citizen will not necessarily understand how his interests are being protected by press freedom unless the press also finds adequate means to evidence a sense of responsibility.

Press freedom was originally justified on the basis of the citizen's right to be informed. The defense of press freedom, however, is most often against encroachment by the government. The natural concern of the press with this sort

of danger has led to a relative neglect of the factors that give the citizen confidence in his news sources; the result has been a decline in press credibility. The paradox is that as freedom has been won credibility has diminished.

Journalism in the Electronic Age

As the age of print has given way to the electronic age, newspapers have been displaced by television as the most widely used and trusted source of news. Whereas television might have been expected to enrich greatly the existing news diet, the enrichment has been moderated by the structure of television and partially negated by rising costs.

The economics of print journalism have tended to reduce the number of competing newspapers and thus an important safeguard for the citizen is being lost. Newspapers have been affected by the same rising cost spiral that has affected other sectors of American life. Newsprint has gone up in price, but the sharpest rise has been in labor costs. In order to survive, most newspapers have been forced to try in every possible way both to increase their circulation and to increase their advertising revenue. The resulting fierce competition has led to more and more cities and towns in which only one daily newspaper remains. In 1960 there were 22 states in which there were no competing daily newspapers. This is to be compared with 11 states with no competing newspapers in 1945. In New York City alone, the 1960s saw the loss of four major daily papers.

The advent of television shortly after the Second World War introduced a new source of competition for newspapers. But television by its very nature has not been able to provide the multiple independent sources of news needed by the citizen. A limited number of television channels, the large organization necessary to produce a national television program, and the resultant costs have meant that the citizen has usually one to three television news sources. It may be that in the coming years the growth of cable television will change this picture, because cable television has the ability to provide many more independent channels than broadcast television. However, the great cost of gathering and reporting national and international news makes it likely that the citizen will have few sources of television news for a long time to come.

All too often, news programs from one network are shown at the same time as those from another network. The citizen has to choose one or the other and cannot ordinarily compare these sources of news. In addition, of course, once a television program is shown, it is consumed and cannot be looked at later by the viewer in order to compare it with what was presented on another network or in the daily newspaper. He must depend on memory.

The average newspaper carries much more information than the typical television news show, as the newspaper does not have television's time limitations. It is also more efficient to read the news than to watch it on a television program. Half an hour of television news would, if printed, occupy less than a single page of a newspaper. Despite these inherent differences favoring newspapers, television is more widely used and trusted as a news source than is the newspaper. Examination of this fact shows that television has a number of intrinsic advantages as a credible source of news when compared with print.

First, a television program appears more powerful and can be more attractive than a newspaper. The television program seems more powerful to the average citizen because he knows the scale of organization necessary to produce the television program, and he knows that it is a national program. As television uses color and motion, it is also more attractive than the newspaper. Both power and attractiveness have been shown to be associated with credibility. They give credence to the information that is being conveyed.

A second feature that gives television an advantage as a credible source of news is that its limited time forces it to concentrate on major themes rather than on the details of a story, thereby reducing the likelihood of qualification, inaccuracy, and ambiguity.

Third, and very important, is that television has the apparent ability to show news rather than tell it. The newspaper seems to be retelling a story seen by someone else's eyes or heard with someone else's ears, and the retelling is done in print. Television, on the other hand, uses pictures which apparently show what really happened. This is only apparent, however, as studies have indicated that selectivity in both the taking of pictures and their editing are a necessary part of television.

A fourth factor which tends to give television news greater credibility than print is the fact that television stations are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission. For television this is both a blessing and a curse. It is a curse to the television station operator and to the newscaster when FCC licensing and its rules seem to be a restriction on freedom to operate. On the other hand, it is a blessing, in the sense that licensing by the government tends to give the television station and the television program greater credibility in the eyes of some people. The newspaper is seen as the private property of an individual or company trying to make money and not under the same restraints and fairness restrictions as the television station.

All those features tend to make television news programs more credible to the average citizen as sources of news than newspapers. As has been shown, however, both television and newspapers are subject to unwitting bias in the selection, reporting, and editing of news. In some cities, the newspaper reader can check his information by reading other newspapers. The television viewer has much less chance for this because of the structure of the medium and the way it is used.

From the point of view of the consumer, television and print should reinforce each other; but from the point of view of the news organizations involved, they are competitive. It may be that the citizen's interest could be best served if television news and the newspaper were consciously supplementary. One potential avenue for such cooperation, an avenue possibly limited by present regulations, is for television news to serve primarily as headline information keyed directly to details given in the newspaper. Under such a scheme the qualities of television news and print news could be used to the best advantage of each to provide the citizen with systematic news coverage.

Television has offered the citizen another set of news sources, thereby enriching and diversifying the total news diet. Unfortunately, economic competition, partially

resulting from television, has tended to reduce the number of competing newspapers. Though there are fewer daily newspapers, they and the organizations that produce them have grown in size, rivaling television news organizations. A corollary of large size in any organization is the tendency to become remote — to lose direct contact with its clientele. The size and remoteness of major news organizations — sometimes embedded within companies within parent companies — make it difficult for the citizen to gain access to the purveyors of news. Lack of access, or direct contact, tends to reduce the credibility of television and print news alike. Paradoxically, the conditions necessary for the production of a modern newspaper and news program may seriously reduce credibility unless deliberate and concerted attention is given to overcoming these problems.

Alleviating the Citizen's Dilemma

Today, the press is becoming ever more important as an extension of the eyes and ears of the citizen. It is indeed becoming as important as its champions have always thought it to be. However, at a time when the citizen is in ever greater need of a credible press, his confidence in it has diminished. As already stated, this situation has been essentially brought about by three chains of events. First, the growth of society has made distant events more and more important to individual action. As a result, the citizen has become more dependent upon the press as a source of education and information. Second, the continuing battle for press freedom has led, on the whole, to a broadened and strengthened tradition of press freedom. The paradox is that, in fighting this battle, the press has tended to neglect some of the equally important factors that give the citizen confidence in his news sources. Third, the rise of television and the economics involved in modern television and newspaper publishing have tended to reduce multiple independent sources of news, an important check for the average citizen on the reliability of the information he receives. The dilemma is whether to accept the information provided by the press because of the importance of obtaining a basis for action, or to reject the information because of doubts about the credibility of the news source. Under these circumstances, the citizen either accepts information, suspecting that it may not be reliable, or he rejects the information he desperately needs in order to act. To alleviate this dilemma, the press must conspicuously and publicly commit itself to a process by which it can be corrected and become more self-correcting. Commitment to such a process is likely to be the most important safeguard to insure the credibility of the press in the future.

Several elements of such a process have been suggested, some of which seem more feasible and advantageous than others. Some years ago, W. Walter Menninger, a member of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, commented that he believed that journalists and news gatherers should have some form of licensing much as do professionals in health, law, and other fields. The idea behind such licensing would be to guarantee a minimum level of competence, thereby giving the citizen greater confidence in the reporting and editing of news. This suggestion of Dr. Menninger has not met with much acceptance. One reason is that such licensing would seem to further government involvement in the press. Licensing might be unconstitutional, but in any case it would clearly change the relations between the government and the press. This objection is perhaps not crucial, in that similar licensing and accrediting have

worked quite successfully in other professions, and human ingenuity might find mechanisms by which to make it work as far as the press is concerned.

On the other hand, a key aspect of press freedom in the United States is that anyone who has the money or who has a printing press, or now who has a Xerox machine, can start his own newspaper and sell it to the public for whatever price the public will pay. If journalists had to be licensed, this would restrict the ability of any citizen to start his own newspaper. The fact that this freedom has not applied to radio and television does not diminish its importance as far as the print press is concerned. It is unlikely that there would be such a vigorous underground press and press review movement in the United States if there were some controlling mechanism for the licensing of journalists. A proper licensing process might contain provisions for the entry of new or deviant members of the profession, but experience shows that existing members of a profession usually want to restrict entry to those who are like themselves.

One important part of the process of assuring press credibility is for the press to make prominent use of correction techniques to rectify misstatements or other forms of inaccuracy. Newspapers have traditionally found ways to print corrections when they have made mistakes. Unfortunately, these corrections often do not appear with the same prominence as the original mistake; the error is seldom fully rectified. It is suggested that newspapers are reluctant to print corrections because it casts doubt on their credibility. Just the reverse is probably true. *The Louisville Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times* have utilized prominent correction boxes for the last few years. More recently, a number of other papers including *The New York Times* have instituted similar practices. An editor of *The Louisville Courier-Journal* as quoted in *Time* magazine says, "It's hard to admit a mistake, but we're proud that we do it. And judging by the response, our readers trust us even more." On television, the use of correction techniques is far rarer than it is in newspapers. Seldom is an error ever admitted on a television program. In fact, there are no standard methods of doing so. The proper devices for making corrections on television programs need much exploration. Both television and the print press undoubtedly could, with good advantage, make much greater use of correction techniques than they now do.

One of the primary losses for the citizen has been a reduction in his ability to expose himself easily to multiple independent sources of news. It is possible, however, for single sources of news to make up for this deficit somewhat. Important stories, or stories in which there is likely to be a significant element of controversy, can be presented from more than one viewpoint. Two reporters can be assigned the same story, giving within a single newspaper or over a single television program two independent reports on the events involved. The viewer or reader can then make his own interpretation of any resulting discrepancies. While two reporters covering the same story are not quite the same as two independent sources of news covering the story, multiple reporting within a news source is sure to be a check on accuracy and credibility. In some cases, newspapers and television programs are already making strides in this direction, but this is another device that needs a great deal of development.

In addition to these internal procedures for assuring greater credibility of the press, greater use should probably be made of more formalized grievance procedures. The person or institution who thinks that he has been wronged by allegation, misstatement, or misquotation needs some formal avenue which promises to alleviate his grievance. One procedure which has been found successful by some newspapers is the appointment of an ombudsman — someone to act as a friend in court to those persons seeking alleviation of grievances. Unless there is a formally appointed person in this role, in many cases the citizen who wishes to make a complaint to a newspaper does not even know how to begin going about it. *The Washington Post*, among other newspapers, has utilized an ombudsman for the last few years, and the *Post's* experience with this idea is quite favorable.

Another process which can be utilized to greater advantage is the press council. Press councils in the United States are usually modeled on the British example. There, a national press council supported by the publishers has been constituted to act as a grievance mechanism and also as a guardian of press freedoms. Press councils have been relatively rare in the United States, but in recent years a number of councils have grown up in individual communities, and one year ago a statewide press council was started in Minnesota. The typical procedure for such councils is that they will only take up grievances if the individual or institution involved has already tried unsuccessfully to deal directly with the press and if the individual waives his right to legal remedy.

Should the person desire to take his case to the courts, the press council will refuse to act. Although press councils do not have legal sanctions to invoke, they have worked quite successfully by depending upon the public exposure of their findings and the cooperation and goodwill of publishers and broadcasters.

In the United States, the size and complexity of the country may prevent the strict adoption of the British press council model. However, there is much value in the British experience, and it is probable that greater adoption of the press council on the local, state, and national levels in the long run will serve the interest both of the individual citizen and of the press. Here again the citizen is more likely to have faith in the press if he knows there are procedures which provide the opportunity for rectifying errors. Without such procedures, the citizen may feel helpless in dealing with large and powerful bureaucracies and is much less likely to feel that they are operating in his interests.

The David of a citizen confronting the Goliath of a bureaucracy is one of the great dramas of our times. This drama is no less applicable to the press than it is to other corporate enterprises and government. At the time of the founding of the United States, the press, though important, had limited facilities. There were only 32 newspapers in the American colonies at the time of the Revolutionary War; and the total number of papers printed per week was probably no more than 40,000. These 32 newspapers with 40,000 weekly copies served a nation of 3 million people. Today, there are about 1,750 newspapers in the United States with some 65 million copies per day rolling off the presses. In addition, of course, we have the omnipresent television networks, news weeklies, and news magazines. This

Goliath of an industry now serves a population of 200 million. As society has grown more complex, the size and capability of the press have grown with it. The technical capacity of the press to inform and educate is keeping pace with need.

The conditions which have made it imperative for the press to grow in size and strength unfortunately have limited its accessibility for the average person. What is true for the individual citizen is also true for various interest groups who feel that they do not receive fair and equal treatment in the press. The issue of how to give individuals and groups greater access to the American press is going to be with us for a long time. In the case of broadcasting, the Federal Communications Commission has promulgated rules designed to give groups and individuals access to the broadcasting system when their interests have been attacked or when "fairness" dictates that alternate voices be heard. The nation's newspapers have not had to deal with this problem in the same way because there are no similar rules which apply to them. However, the trend of recent thinking on access in broadcasting is now being generalized by a few people to include newspapers.

Regardless of whether legal decisions increase the obligation of both the broadcaster and the newspaper to give citizens access, these institutions should do so in their own interest. The press, whether radio, television, or newspapers, operates in the public interest. It exists to educate and inform the public and depends for its existence on public goodwill. As the press becomes an ever more important instrument for the communication of ideas, it will also be ever more important for the citizen to have access to this great communications mechanism.

The idea that a citizen has a right to be heard through his newspaper or over his broadcasting station will seem completely alien to many who have been used to the tradition of private enterprise within the press. The press, however, is no more immune than any other institution in our society to the concept that organizations which operate in the public interest must find means for giving citizens access to them. The closer the press comes to monopoly conditions, the greater the pressure for citizen access will become.

Correction procedures, ombudsmen, and press councils all can be seen as means of increasing the accessibility of the press. How these techniques will be put into practice in radio, television, and in the newspapers remains to be determined. Implementation of these techniques would cause significant changes in the relationship between press and public, but it is difficult to foresee whether these changes would in themselves be sufficient to restore the citizen's faith in the press. Recognizing their ever greater dependence on the press, people are sure to increase their demands for credibility. As a result, the problems of credibility and access are going to be the center of great conflict and, hopefully, innovation and progress for years to come.