

A PRESS AGAINST THE WALL

EL ROTO



"TV NEWS REPORTS ARE VERY PARTICIPATIVE. THEY GIVE YOU THE NEWS AND YOU HAVE TO IMAGINE THE TRUTH."

BY LOLA GALÁN

The fight for survival has never been this desperate. First there was the financial crisis: the advertising drought that began in 2000 — which is finally showing signs of relenting, according to experts — and pitted the print media more bitterly than ever against television, radio and the Internet in the fight for advertisers. This drop in revenue has dealt a nearly mortal blow to newspapers, which were already struggling to survive in many countries.

And then came the ethical crisis: a series of recent scandals have cast doubts on the moral credibility of such behemoths as *The New York Times*, throwing many newspapers into a state of turmoil that is changing the way they look at themselves.

Spurred by these events — which included publication of a book accusing France's *Le Monde* of biased coverage — the Paris-based newspaper embarked upon a mission: to research the state of the world's press. The result is a special report, available on its website, and aptly named *Around the World in 80 Newspapers*.

The findings are bittersweet when it comes to circulation figures. Spain, Italy, Turkey and France rank among the lowest in terms of newspaper readership. Asia, on the other hand, is paradise for the printed word. Five Japanese dailies head the list of the 25 newspapers with the highest press runs in the world. *Yomiuri Shimbun* ranks number one with 14.2 million copies printed daily — a far cry from the paltry figures to be had in Spain, with a daily circulation of barely four million for the entire sector.

Even a prestigious paper like Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), despite all its influence on national politics, prints no more than 385,000 copies a day, a ridiculous figure compared with the four million boasted by some of the more popular German periodicals. And advertising revenues naturally follow suit.

"Our last weekly classified ads page carried 30 pages worth of advertising. Three years ago there were 200 pages," said Günther Nonnenmacher, newsroom chief at FAZ, to *Le Monde* researchers.

In the United Kingdom, the pressure to sell is such that stalwart mastheads like *The Times* and *The Guardian* were forced to completely restructure their front page to remain competitive. Meanwhile, both *The Independent* and *The Times* have launched tabloid-size versions to please commuters who were tired of dealing with the oversized dailies inside a packed train. *The Independent* has increased sales by 45,000 copies since it launched the new format.

The economic pressure has been compounded by the arrival in many countries of free papers. Sweden was the pioneer in 1995 with a publication called *Metro*, which is now sold in 15 European countries. *Metro* and its imitators rely solely on advertising revenues for survival, stretching the advertising pie even thinner.

But it's not all about numbers. The press is going through a real identity crisis, perhaps due to the fact that "today's media are a whole, they're like a river where we all bathe continually," according to U.S. sociologist Todd Gitlin. And it's difficult to see where the water is coming from. The influence of some media outlets over others has led to a sustained process of transformation whose ultimate goal is usually to win over new audiences. Information is transformed, interpreted, sometimes even touched up in order to prepare it for consumption by the hungry reader-spectator. Like the splendid tray laden with turkey and grapes that President George W. Bush effortlessly balanced before the cameras while visiting the troops stationed in Baghdad last Thanksgiving. It turned out it was all made of plastic, as the White House was forced to later acknowledge. As the famed media designer Roger Black once said, "you have to be visual and narrative," no matter what the medium.

In the midst of all these issues, *Le Monde* sought to answer the existential questions besetting the media: What is the press? Can societies — democratic or otherwise — do without serious media? Can we do without independent media when facing big powers?

The replies come from a wide range of papers around the world, and can be summed up the following way: "The press wants to maintain a certain notion of democracy and freedom in a new world marked by economic and technological change."

It would appear that Western-style democracies are the best breeding ground for the development of a free, independent press. But the war on Iraq provided a clear example of the low tolerance threshold for any kind of deviant opinion. The difficulties of going against the flow were evident in American and European media. To *Le Monde*, the conclusion to be drawn from this is that the press faces three major challenges in the third millennium.

The first challenge is ethical. Journalists are forced to work with a constantly changing medium that demands speed, thereby increasing the risk of leaving ethical concerns to one side. The second challenge is economic, as print media need to find new business models to make up for the extra competition posed by other sources of news and information. The third challenge is institutional and has to do with the power of the press, which often goes unsupervised by any kind of oversight body.

It's perhaps no coincidence that 2003 saw scandals like the Jayson Blair affair at *The New York Times* which began with a reporter being fired for making up information and ended with the unceremonious departure of the executive editor Howell Raines (replaced by the previously deposed Managing Editor Bill Keller, one-time reporter for *The Oregonian*). Meanwhile, the British Broadcasting Company was facing trouble of its own following the suicide of scientist David Kelly and the famous "sexed-up" dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Both events made it painfully clear that the prime matter used by the profession can be at times explosive.

Fortunately for the business, there isn't a uniform audience out there. Rich countries boast a host of different social sectors with different needs and interests. This explains the success of a firm like the Bloomberg financial news agency, created in 1981 by Michael Bloomberg, now the mayor of New York City. Bloomberg's annual turnover is currently \$2.6 billion, proof that quality news can work as a business.

The main thing to remember is that the journalist is beholden to one fundamental principle: truthfulness. This is the first of the nine commandments in the journalist's bible, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know & The Public Should Expect*, by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. Written in 2001, the book has already been translated into 11 languages.

The second commandment in the book states that the journalist must remain loyal to the citizens first. Beautiful words that are not always easy to apply.

Lola Galán wrote this article for the Spanish newspaper, *El País*, from which it has been reprinted. El Roto is the paper's editorial cartoonist. Thanks to John Nelson of Astoria for bringing a few copies home from his annual winter in Spain.

JUST THE FACTS

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

The pursuit of objectivity has always been a chimera, and too often a fabrication disguising parochial brainwashing. Objectivity at best is always questionable, acutely vulnerable to powerful and deceitful interests that are seldom in the public interest.

The staunch era of objectivity in reporting humanity's daily turbulence has never been entirely successful. The rules were that personality was to be left out of reporting the facts of events. Human minds, however, are not autonomic; they are colored with imagination and bias which is synonymous with angle of reference.

The pursuit of objectivity as the cornerstone of journalism was promulgated by such well-placed commentators as Walter Lippman in the early years of the 20th century. The bad old days of feckless and unsavory partisanship by the mainstream press were declared over and the era of 'history shot on the wing' (Gene Fowler's expression) was ushered in as the new infallible form of American journalism. Editorial commentary was separated from reporting in essence as well as in sections of newspapers and later on radio and television news broadcasts.

Objectivity in reportage is fine in theory as an ideal but human beings who record events are creatures of their cultures, classes and education, and their attempts at unbiased witness are shaped by conscious and/or subjective prejudices as well as by infused values.

The insidious aspect of objectivity is that inevitably the form is manipulated to disguise partisan ideas and perspectives by those who manage and rule society and dominate the major media.

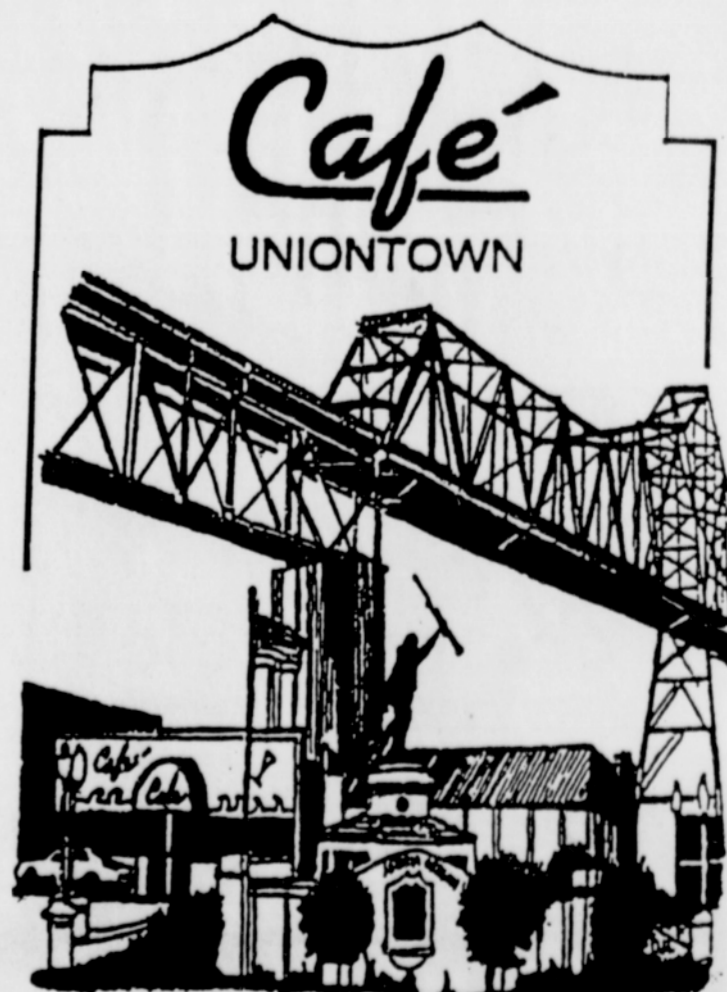
The partisan press is at least open about what it represents and the axes it grinds. A reader knows exactly where the editors and reporters of an advocacy publication (or broadcast media) stand. In the bad old days when the mainstream press was unabashedly partisan, readers were exposed to a vigorous variety of ideas and opinions. For all its renowned excesses, prejudice and hysteria, the partisan press was in thunderous opposition with itself while under the rubric of objectivity today's media cautiously imitates itself.

The concept of objectivity might be regarded as a conspiracy of projecting a status quo, which is a particular way of viewing things and is obviously a partisan operation, and disagreement with this agreed upon fiction is contrarily dismissed as naïve or as dangerous partisanship or advocacy (even as treason in this post 9/11 period) on the far-out fringes of American journalism. Yet it is the fringe that is vigorously redefining ideas, concepts and principles of contemporary journalism.

Journalism is bursting out in a variety of directions, some like infotainment and simulated events unfortunate, but other spinoffs act as stimulants to broaden the definition and scope of journalism — the most exciting and consequential is the Internet which is vehemently partisan in all of its spheres.

The central purpose is to inform — but that is not a passive occupation. The purpose of informing presumes a consequence, an action or reaction regarding the information that is disseminated.

The broadest definition of a reporter, therefore, is anyone who has something to report, regardless of whether they are schooled or employed in journalism.



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