

THE MEDIA

Who's Watching the Watchers?

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During my several years of service to this community, I have become aware of the need for a fairness doctrine with regard to the media, one which is given not only lip service, but teeth as well. Accountability, in exchange for the broad protection afforded the industry under the Constitution, is what the public deserves. After all, if democracy requires an informed public, then citizens have a right to expect not only facts but fairness in the reporting of those facts.

By *fairness* I do not mean *objectivity*. The notion that human beings—fraught with emotions and limited by their perceptions—can be objective is too much to ask. We can, however, call for balanced reporting and for ethical practices which require journalists to give equal voice to ideas both in and out of the mainstream. Anything less is censorship.

The notion of media as censor may at first seem strange, but it is true. Someone much wiser than I once

about the campaigns but were left to hunger for news from abroad. Had famine disappeared from Ethiopia? Was India gaining on its population problems? These things we were not allowed to know.

Understandably, some selection must take place. We could neither carry home nor read a *daily* containing detailed accounts of every event taking place on the planet. The point being made is that *what we know, when we know it and how much we know* is largely a matter of choice and because information has so much to do with the way we think about our world, we should know *who* is doing the choosing and *why*.

The *why*, fortunately, is easy. Choices are made in accordance with what will sell. The media, after all, is a collection of information industries dedicated to the purpose of making profit. They exist in a highly competitive environment where "cannibalism" is rampant, so much so that only 3% of the cities in the United States still have more than one daily paper, excluding *U.S. World Today*. Competition to dominate the air waves is equally fierce.

Little wonder then, that such a competitive environment is a breeding ground for questionable practices which, in turn, cry out for correction. Curtis MacDougal, in his book, *The Press and Its Problems* exposes the extent to which ethics may be breached in the drive to be first with a story.

Reporters may pose as detectives, coroner's assistants or other public or semipublic officials to gain access to places from which they would otherwise be barred, and to persuade news sources to talk. They may steal photographs, peek through windows, climb fire escapes to effect entrances into apartments, waylay servants, relatives

remarked that the media does not hold up a mirror to life; it does not unflinchingly reflect the world. Rather, it chooses from day-to-day events those issues it deems important and lets the rest go by. That decision to omit information is a form of censorship. During the recent presidential election, for example, we were given tedious details

and friends, and virtually besiege the dwelling of someone reluctant to be interviewed. (published, William C. Brown, Co. 1965, p. 338.)

Unfortunately, these excesses, by-products of the need to stay ahead, have become so intense that frequently what passes for news is merely novelty. Even the most trivial detail can make headlines. A few years ago, a banner reported that an audit of one government revealed a three dollar shortage in its petty cash. Frankly, when I read the story, I felt heartened. Given the hundreds-of-thousands of dollars the agency handles in any given year, a three dollar shortfall seemed *petty* indeed; yet the tone of the article was otherwise.

The industry has so vehemently opposed outside interference, and has so successfully identified its interests with the protections of the First Amendment, that even the courts seems powerless.

Closer to home, my own career in public life is dotted with examples of the media's fascination with trivial pursuit. More ink has been shed on my personal attributes, my preference for pink, or the fact that I once sat on the floor to avoid a pesky photographer, than on any good or ill I have done in my nine years of political office. Of course, my experience pales compared to that of candidates for national office.

There was much made in the news, for example, about the military record, or lack of it, of Senator Dan Quayle. Yet of the 203 representatives and senators who were of draft age during the Vietnam War, 126 did not serve. Of that 126, 30 joined the National Guard or Reserves.¹ Apparently, the path Senator Quayle took for military service was well trod by others; yet little was made of it.

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By downplaying or suppressing certain information, the media acts, not as guardians of the public's right to know, but as manipulators of public opinion.

1. David Heim, "The Power Network Goes Quayle Shooting," *The Christian Century*, Aug-Sept. 1988, p. 756.