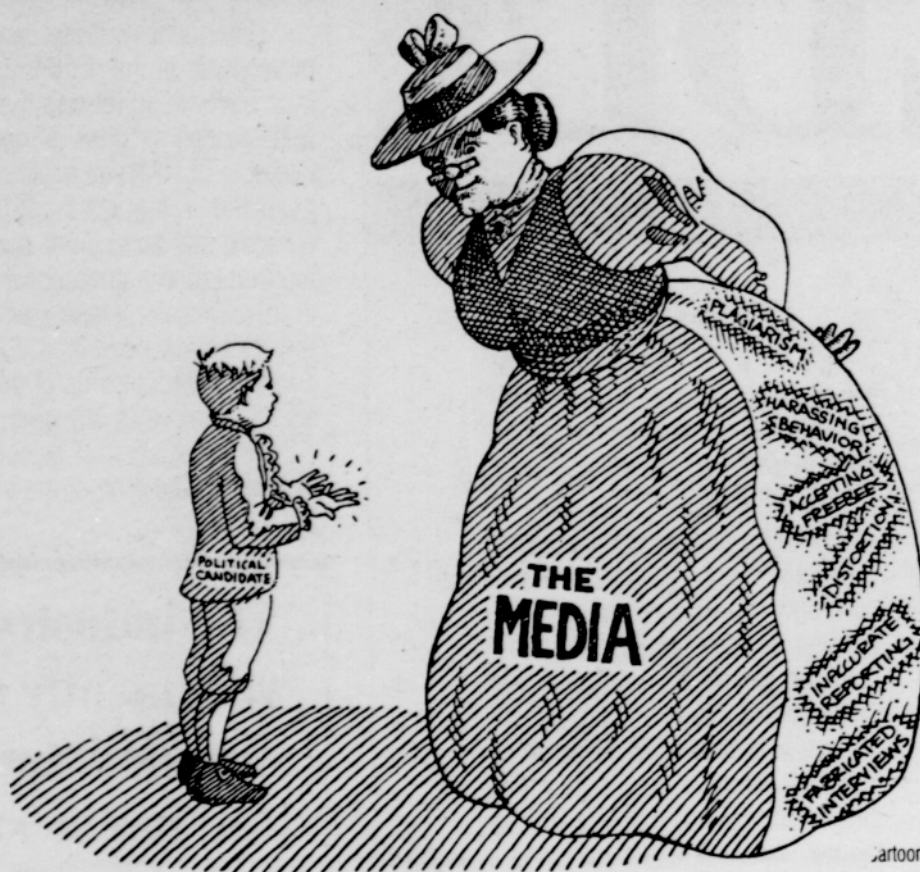


THE MEDIA:

Who's Watching the Watchers?



ARE YOUR HANDS CLEAN?

If partisan politics makes Quayle's treatment by the media acceptable to some, remember: Failure to publicize with equal weight the facts in the candidate's favor as well as those in his disfavor is not only a blatant assault upon one person's political aspirations, but is also an assault upon democracy as well. 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.

Certainly, I do not wish to diminish the media's genuine concern about the character of public officials. The subject is appropriate for it is important to know that those in whom we place our trust are worthy of the charge. My point here is twofold. First, that the "feeding frenzy" which has overtaken the industry, has led to some questionable practices; and second, that given the track record among journalists, which include violations running from plagiarism to false reports, we wonder what qualifies these reporters to be gatekeepers of public morality? And to whom, besides their editors, should they be accountable? After all, as one writer observes, "these men and women of the media have been elected by no one, and despite their protests to the contrary, are not reflective of the general population."¹

Despite this lack of franchise, however, these ARE the men and women who "both in print and on television, have assumed the power to set expectations according to their

intuitive response (s)..."² That they are aware of the ethical standards set forth by the Society of Professional Journalists and the American Society of Newspapers is of minimal comfort for, given the reality of the market place and its highly competitive nature, one wonders if such ideals can long survive in so hostile an environment.

The question is significant because there is little redress once a breach of ethics has occurred. 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. Laws, promoted by the industry make the burden of proof too great. A public figure, for example, must show that the media acted with reckless disregard of the truth or falsity of its statement, a standard so rigorous that it almost amounts to getting into someone's head to prove intent. Because of the difficulty of making such a case, few individuals are willing to risk the costs, the loss of privacy and the humiliation of being tried in the press before the courts have ruled.

We, the people, through the power invested in our Constitution, have given the media the greatest protection that can be afforded, believing that a free press is essential to our democratic way of life. But, given the concentration of that power in the hands of a few, largely nameless, faceless entrepreneurs, we must

consider whether or not this vast, unchecked industry could ever endanger the freedom we have charged them to protect. This brings us to our second question, "Who is making the choices that shape *what we know, when we know it and how much we know?*"

We must realize that a symbiotic relationship exists between the media and the power structure. By "power structure" I refer not only to those in government but to the corporate structure as well. The degree of interests these entities have in common is of concern to many observers, and should be to the public at large, for the quality of the information received is likely to be affected by these relationships. Robert Sahr, assistant political science professor at Oregon State University has recently written of the danger. He notes, for example, that reporters assigned to beats need access to information upon which their professional successes, if not their livelihoods, depend. To be cut off from these sources is to risk failure. In fact, a certain amount of nurturing of these sources is critical, so much so that, as Sahr points out, journalists are at least willing to give, "...the benefit of the doubt to those who are important sources and may be willing to criticize those who are not important sources."³

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That this symbiotic relationship between the media and the power structure exists, does not surprise us. What could be more predictable? Each player has something the other wants. For the media, the relationship means inside information, lucrative advertising, a chance to outdo or at least stay even with the competition. For those in political or corporate power, it may mean getting advance warning about something potentially dangerous, having a ready ear to mold public opinion or to promote a project. Regrettably, for the public, the effect of these relationships is that *what we know, when we know it and how much we know* is subject to influence.

What role, if any, influence played in the media's unqualified support for Portland's convention center makes an interesting question, for example. Certainly, many key leaders supported the measure. And certainly, there

1. Christopher Celests, "Inventing Reality: the Media Measures Character," *Reasonable Doubt*, Winter 1988, p. 4.)

2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

3. Shar, Robert, "News Media Locked into Established, Rigid Stucuture," Forum Section, *The Oregonian*, October 31, 1988, B7.