

# Best Practices for Newspaper Journalists

A handbook for reporters, editors, photographers and other newspaper professionals on how to be fair to the public.

By Robert J. Haiman

For The Freedom Forum's Free Press/Fair Press Project



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# Introduction

By Robert H. Giles, senior vice president, The Freedom Forum

What's fair? That's an old question for journalists; one that always has been hard to answer. In spite of the enormous changes in the techniques of gathering news and the technology used to distribute it, the question remains. What's fair?

What fairness means to newspaper journalists and what it means to newspaper readers differ significantly. The public defines fairness more broadly. Its expectations of fairness in the professional behavior of journalists and in the editing practices of their newspapers frame its opinion about the credibility of newspapers.

The public's specific, principal concerns about fairness are not what many journalists think they are.

The press is inclined to think public attitudes are influenced by such factors as diminishing interest in serious news; decline in respect for large institutions; commercialization of news; blurring of the line between journalism and entertainment; corporatization of the news media, and young people's fascination with the Internet. Moreover, the press tends to think the public is upset about a "liberal bias" in the news media rather than the full range of journalistic practices that the public defines as biased.

Each of these perceptions looms large and, consequently, it is convenient for the press to become resigned to them as contemporary realities about which little can be done.

But when The Freedom Forum met with members of the public in communities across the country and asked them to tell us what bothered them about the press, we heard a different story.

Readers spoke compellingly of their experiences with newspapers and their observations about the behavior of journalists. Their comments evoked a sense of belief in the press as an important institution in our democracy, but they were unsparing, as well, in documenting their concerns about basic journalistic practices that they see as being unfair:

- Newspapers get too much too wrong too often; they are not factually accurate often enough.
- Newspapers are unwilling to correct mistakes fully, candidly, prominently and promptly, and with grace.

- The press is biased — not with a liberal bias, but with a negative one. There is too much focus on what is wrong and what is in conflict, and not enough on reporting and explaining what is working and succeeding. There is too much focus on the “failures” of the system and not enough on the “victories” of life and the people who live in our communities.
- The public respects the professional and technical skills journalists bring to their craft, but fears that journalists don’t know enough. Specifically, they don’t have an authoritative understanding of the complicated world they have to explain to the public.
- Journalists are seen as being arrogant and elitist. Too often they convey an attitude that “we are better than you are.”
- Newspapers are too inclined to jump to conclusions too soon about where truth lies and are unwilling to challenge their initial take on stories.
- The press does not reflect the entire community fully and fairly. Specifically, the public is concerned that progress in coverage of minority communities is leveling off and — because there are not enough journalists of color on staff or in leadership positions — stories are not sufficiently attuned to cultural differences and nuances in an increasingly diverse society.

We think the problem of fairness in the nation’s newspapers is serious to the extent that it can threaten not only the future commercial viability of newspapers as trusted conveyors of news, but it also can influence the weakening public support for the First Amendment.

Yet the concerns we heard, both from newspaper readers and from public figures who have been the subject of news stories, led us to conclude that they can be corrected. It was this conviction that framed the purpose for a handbook of best practices for newspapers.

As Bob Haiman, the author of this handbook, discovered in his search for best practices, many newspapers have examined their journalistic practices and have devised effective solutions that embrace both the spirit of fairness and the values of good journalism. Many of these best practices are described in this handbook.

One additional discovery we made in talking with newspaper readers: The public is willing to listen, willing to give credit when it sees good or improved practices, and willing to change its mind when newspapers explain what they are trying to do and why.

Our purpose in putting this handbook of best practices in your hands is to encourage you to read it, talk about it and use it.

Our ultimate concern is for journalism that is both free and fair. With this handbook we hope to encourage practices that the public will see as being fair, thereby helping assure that our newspapers remain free.

# Executive summary

By Robert J. Haiman

## WHY THIS HANDBOOK?

This handbook of best practices from U.S. daily newspapers had its origins in a series of conversations with the public during 1998 and 1999. These discussions were central to a critical assessment of fairness in the news media by The Freedom Forum and are part of a project known as Free Press/Fair Press.

As we listened to ordinary citizens and newsmakers, we heard common themes about journalistic behavior in community after community. Together, they lent a clear focus to the depth of concerns about press performance.

While significant attention inside and outside of news organizations is being given to the problems of fairness, trust and credibility, citizen complaints about the press are not a recent development. As Lawrence T. McGill, director of research at The Freedom Forum, explains in an article on the history of public perception of the press (see page 63), there have been many cycles of disapproval since our nation was founded. Still, never before have so many journalists been willing to say aloud that they are worried about the direction of their craft and the decline of public support for their work.

This handbook of best practices is offered as a guide for newspaper journalists, for students and teachers of journalism, and for the publics they serve. It is intended to help those who would restore public trust by raising the standards for fairness in their newspapers.

This handbook is not a proposal to regulate the work of journalists.

It is not intended as rules for journalists.

It is not even a set of guidelines. Guidelines can imply precise boundaries and corridors inside which journalists should do their work. The history and traditions of journalism in the United States weigh against such restrictions.

Rather, the handbook is an examination of the concerns readers have expressed about newspapers and a list of best practices used in many of the nation's newspapers to address those criticisms.

This handbook of best practices is offered with three purposes in mind:

- That it will encourage reporters, photographers and editors to make fairness a routine part of the daily conversations in their newsrooms.

- That from the best practices will come the discovery of ways to correct journalistic practices that underlie deep public concerns about fairness.
- That the discussion of concerns and the best practices will help the public to understand more fully the role and responsibilities of a free and fair press.

We have a free press in the United States because of constitutional protection. We should have a fair press because of personal and professional commitment. The better we journalists are at making the press fair, and perceived as fair, the better chance we have of keeping it free.

## FREE PRESS/FAIR PRESS

The project known as Free Press/Fair Press was launched in January 1998 under the direction of Robert H. Giles, senior vice president of The Freedom Forum. Its purpose is to listen to significant public concerns about the way journalists do their jobs and to help journalists find effective ways to address these concerns while preserving long-honored journalistic ideals and practices.

The premise of our work is that public standards for the news media are higher than ever, and some journalists may not understand that. Conversely, the mainstream press has improved greatly, and the public may not be aware of that.

In this handbook we share what we learned in 18 months of listening as citizens talked about the newspapers they read. We are persuaded that if journalists listen more attentively to what readers are saying, they will recognize how best practices might address many concerns about fairness without undermining their professionalism or independence.

## THE FAIRNESS PROBLEM

Our meetings took place in San Francisco; Phoenix; Nashville, Tenn.; Portland, Ore.; and New London, Conn. We asked citizens and journalists alike to define fairness. No one had a sweeping definition or even one that fully expressed the concept of fairness. Typically, the responses drew on such familiar definitions as accuracy, balance, lack of bias. In fact, we discovered, readers have many definitions of fairness.

The roundtable participants were a diverse group of readers, but they did not comprise a statistically significant sample. We believe they represented generally held opinions about fairness and unfairness in the press for two reasons: The concerns raised by roundtable participants were consistent from city to city, and they were remarkably close to those expressed in several national opinion polls and surveys.

The concerns about fairness expressed by newspaper readers suggest that the subject is more complex than the definitions conveyed with such straightforward simplicity in the dictionary: “Impartial, equitable, consistent with logic or ethics, unprejudiced, free from favoritism, self-interest or bias, without preconceived opinions or judgments, marked by objective detachment from personal beliefs or feelings, just to all parties.”

When we reviewed the notes from our meetings with citizens, we concluded that the public has a much broader, richer and deeper definition of a fair press. This handbook draws on this full range of concerns in suggesting best practices to address them.

Fairness, credibility, believability, loss of trust and lack of connections with the communities our news organizations serve are more typically part of the journalistic con-

versation today. This is a useful dialogue in which The Freedom Forum is pleased to participate. Our contributions are the evidence of public belief that the press too often is not as fair as it can or should be and this collection of best practices that may help the press to be seen as more fair.

The citizens we listened to were specific in describing journalistic practices and journalistic behavior that they consider to be unfair. We will explore these concerns in detail throughout this handbook as the context for the best practices journalists might consider.

## LISTENING TO THE PUBLIC

Starting in early 1998, a team of Freedom Forum executives began a series of roundtables in cities across the country. We met with three different groups:

- Community leaders, including elected officials, business executives, civic leaders.
- Ordinary citizens drawn from a wide range of occupations as well as racial and ethnic groups.
- Journalists, including reporters, photographers, editors, news directors and publishers.

We held a roundtable with newspaper publishers in April 1998, prior to the annual meeting of the Newspaper Association of America in Dallas.

At the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Baltimore, a panel discussion with journalism deans and teachers explored what educators might do to respond to the problem.

In more informal settings throughout 1998 and 1999, the inquiry about fairness continued during conversations and interviews with journalists, community leaders and the general public.

At the beginning of each roundtable, participants were told The Freedom Forum was interested in learning how they got their news, what personal experiences they had with journalists or news organizations, what they thought about the news they read, viewed or heard, and what they thought about press performance. We encouraged them to share their concerns and experiences in the context of fairness as they defined it. Then, we let them talk.

## WHAT WE HEARD

We encountered several unexpected responses that helped provide a more accurate context in which to assess the concerns raised about how journalists do their jobs.

- A significant number of roundtable participants complimented their local newspapers, even as they voiced concerns about press performance. We did not encounter hard-core press haters but found many who were sorrowful about the predicament in which the press finds itself.
- Complaints about ideological or political bias in the news columns were heard only occasionally. The concern expressed most often was that editorial-page opinion has infiltrated the front page. Less often we heard such comments as “the paper is too liberal for me on abortion” or “the paper is too conservative on gun control.” Such observations seemed to say less about fairness than about the political leanings among the individuals around the table.

- A surprisingly large number of participants described a personal experience with the news media or first-hand knowledge of someone they knew who had been treated unfairly in a newspaper. This contrasts with the widely held perception that few ordinary citizens ever come into personal contact with the press during their lifetimes.
- Finally, and perhaps most important, was the discovery that the public defines fairness much more broadly than most journalists do. When asked for examples of unfairness, roundtable participants talked about inaccuracy, about reportorial incompetence, about failure to understand the basics of complex issues, about editors and reporters having preconceived notions of the story line, about inadequate space devoted to a story, about institutional reluctance to publish corrections, about unfairness due to what was not in the paper, about rudeness and lack of civility in the reporting process and about the tendency to publish rumors without ascertaining the facts and without attribution to a named source.

Such individual journalistic shortcomings as arrogance, sensationalism, prejudice, over-coverage of violence, and invasion of privacy are often taken together by the public as a singular demonstration that the press is not fair.

Some journalists might be tempted to dismiss these concerns as evidence that many people are naive or unsophisticated about the news media; that they simply don't understand; that they don't have the basic technical vocabulary of media criticism to articulate concerns intelligently.

We believe this would be a grave mistake. The public may not always have easy familiarity with the inside vocabulary used by journalists and scholars in criticizing media performance. But our interviews made it clear that people are very sure and specific about what the press does that upsets them, angers them and inclines them to consider the press to be unfair.

The public's tendency to group different kinds of journalistic faults under the general heading of "unfairness" persuaded us that fairness is a larger and more important part of the overall media credibility problem than many journalists may have thought. In fact, it is reasonable to conclude that if journalists can find a way to resolve the problems that the public defines as "unfairness," the credibility and trust of the news media will improve.

After nearly two years of listening to the public talk about fairness and unfairness in the news media and examining press performance based on public concerns, The Freedom Forum did not come up with any single answer or simple formula to remedy the problem.

The problems the press faces have been many years in the making. They result from changes and stresses in a highly competitive and complicated news and information system. There is misunderstanding between the public and the journalists about the role and responsibilities of a free and fair press. Not surprisingly, no simple solutions emerged to bridge that gap. One symbolic formula came out of the roundtable experience that could serve as a guide to journalists looking for a headline to express the kind of journalism that might persuade the public the press is listening to its concerns and trying hard to be fair:  $A + B + C + D + E = F$ . The formula, offered by Freedom Forum Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Charles L. Overby, means Accuracy plus Balance plus Completeness plus Detachment plus Ethics equal Fairness.

# How to use this book

We hope this handbook will stimulate conversation among journalists, journalism teachers and students who would like to better understand reader concerns about unfairness in the news media and to seek new ways to constructively and creatively bridge the gap between press and public.

- Read it, study it, think about it, challenge it.
- Share it with colleagues.
- Use it to generate discussion at brown-bag lunches, news staff meetings or staff retreats.
- Keep it handy in your desk and refer to it when faced with a fairness decision.
- Mark it up and add your own thoughts, ideas, notes and personal reminders about fairness.
- If you are in a professional position to do so, feel free to write about it and to quote from it; share your thoughts about it with the public. Invite public response.
- If you would like to know more about The Freedom Forum's Free Press/Fair Press project, get in touch with us at The Freedom Forum.



Newspapers are unfair when:

# They get the facts wrong

## How the public sees the problem

Although many journalists may think that spelling and grammar errors, wrong names, wrong titles, wrong addresses, wrong dates and other similar mistakes have relatively little to do with the press's credibility, the public sees it otherwise. In all of our roundtables, the frequency of errors was cited as a major reason why the public is increasingly skeptical of what it reads.

In the 1999 ASNE Credibility Study, a national random sample of readers had an identical result: Factual errors in news stories corrode the credibility of newspapers publishing the mistakes.

In a 1994 survey of Chicago-area readers by Northwestern University researchers David Nelson and Paul Wang, accuracy was found to be first among characteristics that most bothered readers about newspapers. In a Louis Harris & Associates survey commissioned in 1996 for the Center for Media and Public Affairs, only a bare majority of those surveyed agreed that the media “usually get the facts straight.” And, in a 1998 Media Studies Center national poll, 86% of respondents said they believed that stories “often” or “sometimes” contained factual errors.

## What the public says

“I couldn’t believe they got that wrong.” ... “Those two streets don’t even intersect. How could two cars collide there?” ... “He’s lived here for 40 years and they can’t even spell his name right?” ... “I see those kinds of mistakes in the paper almost every day.” ... “That’s not even the correct name of that hospital; I know because my sister works there.” ... “Don’t they have people to check that stuff?” ... “I knew that was wrong the minute I read it ... and if they got that wrong, it makes me wonder what else they get wrong.”

## Best practices to address the problem

Giving a higher priority to tracking errors, finding out how they occurred and taking steps to reduce and eliminate them begin with the top editor. Commitment of the senior leadership in the newsroom is essential in establishing that inaccuracy is a serious problem.

One of the most effective systems is at the *Chicago Tribune*, which has created a

# At least one-half to two-thirds of all errors in the newspaper were preventable.

major system to track and reduce errors. Editor Howard Tyner has been deeply involved in developing and directing the *Tribune* system. It may be the most organized and detailed at any newspaper. Among other things, it tracks every mistake, including typos, missing or extra words, even missing or extra spaces. An outside proofreading agency reads the newspaper line for line daily to find mistakes that may elude the staff or that are not called in by a source or reader.

For every mistake, a form is filled out answering such questions as: Who made this error? How did it occur? How did it come to our attention? Were deadlines a factor? How could it have been avoided? The form displays the error as it appeared, a corrected version, and a correction or clarification proposed for publication.

Tyner says his system demonstrates that at least one-half to two-thirds of all errors in the newspaper were preventable; most occurred through reporting or writing mistakes or were introduced during the editing process. The single largest factor in reporter-editor mistakes is what the *Tribune's* error policy manual calls “brainlock” — human error that could be prevented. When the policy first was announced, the staff was typically nervous about retribution. Newsroom anxiety diminished greatly as people understood that the purpose was not punitive but to make the paper more accurate. Still, routine monitoring of errors does identify repeat offenders who may require coaching to overcome the tendency to make mistakes in copy.

Tyner had an early hunch that one reason for errors could be that many reporters might have drifted away from the fundamentals. He required each reporter — entry-level reporters to Pulitzer Prize winners — to take a three-day refresher course on basic writing and reporting techniques. His editors put it together with a journalism professor. The communal training had the additional benefit of fostering a positive “we-are-all-in-this-together” spirit among the news staff.

A random sampling of the comments from reporters on *Tribune* error-tracking forms indicates a staff perhaps not wildly enthusiastic about the system but willingly working with it and seemingly learning from it:

“I knew this one was a bit tricky and I should have been more careful.” “We should have checked their version of the story with the other side.” “I should have [realized] that couldn't possibly be his area code, given his address.”

“I screwed up; working in a bureau away from my files, I relied on my memory, which turned out to be faulty.” “Not to make excuses, but insomnia caused me to get only four hours of sleep the night before .... and I was really fading when I wrote this story.” “I felt sure I had her name and title right but I should have gotten her business card.”

The preamble to the *Tribune's* “Accuracy Guidelines” makes clear how serious the paper is about trying to make the paper as accurate as is humanly possible:

“A newspaper's reputation rests on its accuracy. That means everyone who provides content for the paper not only by reporting and writing stories, but transferring statis-

tics to tables, creating graphics, editing copy, writing headlines, collecting caption material, or researching facts must take responsibility for the accuracy of that work. If you gathered the item or keyboarded the item or edited or manipulated the item in a layout, you are also responsible for maintaining its accuracy throughout the process.”

Tyner underscores the seriousness of errors by linking the problem directly to newspaper credibility in an increasingly competitive environment: “The slightest excuse is sufficient (for readers) to bail out. People get very angry when they see mistakes, especially mistakes that go uncorrected. It’s a credibility issue. If people are thinking about getting rid of you anyway, why serve up a big softball?”

The guideline’s memo reminds staff members of *Tribune* accuracy rules such as those requiring that reporters who put a phone number in a story must actually dial it to be sure it’s correct; that all math in a story must be checked three times or with a calculator; that all addresses given by sources must be checked in a city directory; and that *Tribune* news staffers are required to read the newspaper thoroughly every day, including reading word-for-word everything in the section for which they work and on the fronts of all other sections in the paper.

## In 1992 errors in the *Tribune* were running as high as 4.5 per page. In 1997 they were down to 2.5 per page.

This is a rigorous policy that is making a difference. In 1992 errors in the *Tribune* were running as high as 4.5 per page. In 1997 they were down to 2.5 per page. In 1992 the newspaper published 270 corrections and clarifications per quarter. In 1997 they were down to about 200 per quarter. In 1998 there was a further reduction to 134. In 1999 Tyner congratulated the staff of the Friday entertainment section, which had been the greatest source of errors because of the many listings it carried. It once had an error rate averaging 12.07 per page, but in the first quarter of 1999 that was reduced to 3.82 errors. That is important when what may seem a “minor” error in an entertainment section listing can send a reader to a movie theater at the wrong time, to a restaurant on a night when it is closed, or to a museum exhibition that doesn’t open for another week. Tyner says, “The good news is that there is marked improvement; the bad news is that there is still a long way to go.”

The *Tribune* system shows what can be done when a newspaper decides it is going to get deadly serious about increasing the accuracy of what it publishes. Every journalist should be concerned about this. Every editor should do something about it. No other complaint about newspaper unfairness is so susceptible to corrective action.

Mistakes do not happen only in copy. The *San Jose (Calif.) Mercury News* instituted a special program to check all graphics carefully after editors noticed a disproportionately high number of inaccuracies in charts, maps and other illustrations. Doing this right means checking not only the type in illustrations but also the proportions in pie charts, fever line illustrations and bar graphs to make sure they fairly represent what they are supposed to show.

One way for an editor to convey to the staff a high priority for accuracy is to build

accountability for being accurate into annual performance reviews. Evaluations based on written standards provide the editors with a forum for establishing the newspaper's journalistic values in a way that everyone can understand what is expected of them. From such written performance standards we can identify potential best practices. In the case of accuracy, these suggested best practices are drawn from the performance standards at *The Detroit News*:

## One way for an editor to convey to the staff a high priority for accuracy is to build accountability for being accurate into annual performance reviews.

“Spelling, stylebooks, typos: Copy is free of spelling errors and typos, even when submitted on deadline.

“Factually accurate information: Copy is factually accurate when submitted for editing. Statistics, research, quotes and narrative are accurate and are arranged in such a way as to convey an accurate context. An accurate context involves representing all sides of the story fairly and completely. Reporting draws on as many sources as may be necessary to accomplish this. It is the reporter's responsibility to assess the accuracy of information, the credibility of sources and to double-check information routinely, even under pressure of deadline. Editors are informed of any information not verified to the reporter's satisfaction.

“Verifying identities, addresses: The reporter verifies names and addresses, using such references as phone books, directories and electronic sources. The reporter checks the spelling of names and places. When questions arise, the reporter goes directly to the source, if possible, to verify information. When problems arise in verification, the reporter discusses this with editors.

“Calling errors to editor's attention: The reporter alerts an editor immediately when there are known or suspected errors in copy, regardless of the degree of severity. The staffer also alerts editors when there is any reason to believe any story in the newspaper contains an error, misrepresentation or inaccuracy.”

## Newspapers are unfair when:

# They refuse to admit errors

### How the public sees the problem

There is a broad feeling in the public that newspapers not only make too many mistakes, but that they also are unwilling to correct them fully and promptly. Television gets even more criticism for this, but newspaper people should take no comfort from that. During the roundtables we heard that a large percentage of the public is much more interested in corrections and clarifications than most newspapers apparently are, given the tiny portion of a daily newspaper's space devoted to correcting the mistakes of previous issues.

There also is a difference between what the public thinks about corrections and what many journalists think about them. Many journalists apparently believe that since they are writing the “first rough draft of history” and doing it under deadline pressure, it should be expected that some errors, misunderstandings and misinterpretations will occur; that historians eventually will sort it out, and that only the most egregious factual errors need to be corrected now. Other journalists worry that publishing a lot of corrections and clarifications will only further erode press credibility and might even give ammunition to the professional press haters.

But the public sees it quite another way. They say they understand that reporters have to work very hard and fast under pressure, and they acknowledge that is not a system likely to produce perfection. Many members of the public expressed considerable empathy for the workload and pressures that reporters face and the mental and emotional tolls that kind of life can exact. But they do not believe this should exempt the newspaper from cleaning up its messes promptly and fully.

Seeing as many errors as they do, the public would like to see many more corrections and clarifications. Not one member of the public in our roundtables said he or she thought seeing many more corrections would diminish the credibility of the newspaper. Most said it would make them less skeptical and the paper more believable. This is validated by national surveys in which up to 63% of people polled say that seeing corrections makes them feel better about the newspaper. A few people noted that well-regarded national publications, such as *The New York Times*, seem to publish more corrections than local papers, and they wondered aloud why that was so.

Roundtable participants noticed and expressed admiration for the local newspaper that published corrections on the front page, or prominently inside. When news-

papers — such as *The New York Times* and a few others — go out of their way not only to correct factual errors but also to clarify misunderstandings, mis-portrayals or missed nuances, that also is noticed and complimented.

Conversely, there is broad dislike — verging on contempt in some cities — for the way some newspapers handle corrections. Readers disdained the very short corrections that are favored by some newspapers and that seemingly are done with an eye to seeing in how few words they can be written. They said many corrections were so brief and terse they could barely figure them out. They preferred corrections that repeated the error — at least in summary — so they could remember what the original story had said and understand what was being corrected. The AP has a policy that corrections should begin, “The Associated Press erroneously reported ... .” The managing editor at *The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer* adds, “The correction should be clear to someone who did not read the original story that contained the error.” And several readers said they wished “the paper would have the grace and courtesy to say it was sorry” for making a mistake.

## Readers disdained the very short corrections that are favored by some newspapers.

Other readers said they had heard the top editor, speaking at a local civic club luncheon, say that the newspaper wanted to be right and that it welcomed calls about errors and requests for corrections. But when the readers attempted to do so they encountered a staff that seemed unaware of what the editor had been saying around town.

Several said they had tried to get corrections published and found it extremely difficult to even get to someone who would listen to them. They described a tortuous process of repeated telephone calls, being passed from person to person, being asked the same questions repeatedly, being told to call back, having to deal with a voice-mail system. Often, they said, it ended with a decision to just give up.

Some members of the public echoed the conclusion that it was not worth it to ask for a correction. One civil servant said he was stonewalled about a factual correction by the reporter and his supervisor on the telephone and in letters and was able to get a correction several months after the original article had appeared, but then only because he happened to meet the top editor and mentioned the situation.

Most surprisingly, several members of the public in one city said they feared that asking for a correction or clarification might even result in retribution from the reporter or from the newspaper generally. No one could cite a situation in which that actually had happened, but it was alarming that readers would believe it could.

The public is not alone in complaining that newspapers do a poor job on corrections; some journalists agree. In a 1999 *Columbia Journalism Review* study done by the research firm Public Agenda, 70% of 125 senior journalists polled said that most news organizations do a “poor” (20%) or only “fair” (50%) job of informing the public about errors. A remarkable 91% said they think newsrooms need more open and can-

did internal discussion of editorial mistakes and what to do about them. And four of 10 said they felt sure that many factual errors are never corrected because reporters and editors are eager to hide their mistakes.

At *The Kansas City (Mo.) Star* it has been made a “fireable offense” for a news staffer to conceal from his or her supervisor a legitimate request for a correction. On the other hand, at the *San Jose Mercury News* the policy is to “decriminalize the offense” so staffers will not be afraid to tell their bosses that they or a colleague had made a mistake that ought to be corrected.

*The New York Times* once published a correction noting that it had used a photograph of the sun to illustrate an article on the moon in an early edition of the paper. A few years later an APME survey asked managing editors what they would have done in that situation. Seventy-seven percent said they would have done the same thing – but only if the mistake had appeared in the full run; 19% said they wouldn’t have corrected such a mistake in their papers even if it had run for all editions. And only 53% said they would correct the mistake if it had appeared only in an early edition. What signal does that send to readers who receive one of the early editions, which often are delivered to areas outside the city core where the newspaper is trying to prospect for new customers? That the newspaper cares less about them than readers of the final edition?

#### What the public says

“You know they have to make more than two or three mistakes a day in a huge paper like that but that’s all they ever correct.” ... “My husband is a fireman, and when he made a mistake and got suspended for three days they put a story in the paper with his name and his picture and what his boss said about him; so when a reporter makes a mistake, why don’t they put his name and picture in the paper and what his boss said about him? Wouldn’t that be fair?” ... “There wasn’t any single fact wrong but the whole impression given was wrong.” ... “I tried to get a correction once and I got bucked around to so many people I finally gave up because I had to go to work.” ... “At our company we’ve given up on trying to get corrections because it’s not worth it; it’s better to just let the mistake die down on its own.” ... “I’d be afraid to ask for a correction because I have to live with that reporter.” ... “I know that they are human and make mistakes just like I do, but why aren’t they willing to admit it and say they’re sorry when they do?”

#### Best practices to address the problem

In addition to eliminating errors, one of the things newspapers could do that would most improve their credibility with readers is to start correcting mistakes promptly, fully and candidly. The public says it would give high marks to any newspaper with a corrections policy such as the following practices:

- Track errors; do not rely on readers or wait for them to call. Research shows that many readers who note errors do not want to be bothered, for a variety of reasons, with calling them in. But the mistakes are remembered and can add to the process of credibility erosion.
- Publish prompt corrections of all factual errors, mistakes and inaccuracies. Bewary of policies such as “we will correct significant errors”; that’s open to broad interpretation. Instead, lean toward a policy that will result in more rather than

fewer corrections and clarifications, such as “Our policy is to be right, and whenever we are wrong we will say so the next day.” In other words, this is one area in which it is important to set the bar lower, as the policy at *The Gazette* of Colorado Springs says: “The paper should be prepared to correct even little calendar mistakes that affect as few as five people.”

- Make the corrections detailed enough to be fully understandable, including repeating the error so the reader can be helped in remembering the original story. Corrections should inform, not mystify.
- Publish clarifications when all facts published may have been correct but the overall impression was misleading, or important details were omitted, or significant nuances were missed. *The New York Times* is a good example of this.
- Publish corrections prominently and in the same place every day. It is encouraging to readers when newspapers publish corrections as prominently as the error or publish them on the front page or on section fronts. Rick Rodriguez, executive editor of *The Sacramento (Calif.) Bee*, says he is considering a proposal to publish corrections twice; once on the page where the error occurred and again in the corrections column in a permanent position in the newspaper.
- Create a system that makes it easy for readers to report errors and ask for corrections, and publicize prominently in the newspaper the ways for readers to avail themselves of it. If the paper is making mistakes more frequently in one section of the paper, assign someone to address that problem. *The Sarasota (Fla.) Herald-Tribune* decided to focus on errors in agate listings. A new “listings czar” was appointed. News assistants who went a month without making a substantial error received a \$50 bonus — a short-term incentive to get staffers focused on accuracy. The bonus plan later was ended because of administrative problems. But the overall effort was a success in reducing errors in agate listings.
- Explain in each correction how the error occurred and/or who was responsible, if not by a person’s name then at least by job title or function. Use the error and the correction as a way to emphasize how serious the newspaper is about trying to publish a completely accurate report. Newspapers generally are quick to say “due to wrong information provided by the theater, or the funeral home,” but much less willing to say “due to an error by a reporter, or a copy editor.”
- Apologize for the mistake and say the newspaper is sorry.

The thought of a correction and clarification policy based on this list probably is enough to make more than a few editors wince. No newspaper we know of has a policy this rigorous. Many editors might deride it as overkill. Some newspaper lawyers might be made nervous by this level of candor. Many reporters and editors might protest that it would be unduly embarrassing and unfair to the news staff. But this is precisely the kind of practice that the public overwhelmingly says would persuade them the newspaper is trying hard to be fair and is worthy of increased trust and admiration.

Newspapers are unfair when:

# They won't name names

## How the public sees the problem

News people talk almost incessantly about the use of anonymous sources. Questions about the identity of sources arise daily in most newsrooms. For the public, the use of anonymous sources is a journalistic practice that came into sharper focus in the coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky story. This was borne out in The Freedom Forum's public-opinion research in which 70% of those surveyed disagreed that "using anonymous sources was an appropriate way for the media to report" on what was happening inside the grand jury room.

Freedom Forum roundtable participants rarely volunteered opinions about the use of anonymous sources; but once the subject was introduced, many said they had concerns about what they were seeing on TV or reading in newspapers. They saw it as an issue of fairness. They noted specifically and critically that so many of the allegations in Clinton-Lewinsky stories were not attributed.

The public distaste for anonymous sources was reflected in the American Society of Newspaper Editors' credibility study by Urban & Associates. In that survey, 77% of respondents said they were "somewhat" (49%) or "very" (28%) concerned about the credibility of a story that contained unidentified sources.

Asked what they would prefer if the press found it impossible to get anyone to confirm on the record the facts in a story, 45% said they would prefer that the story not run at all, 28% said the story should run with quotes from unidentified sources, and 23% said they were not concerned about unidentified sources.

Representatives of the general public seemed unfamiliar with the complicated lexicon journalists use in defining a range of practices on sourcing, such as off the record, not for attribution, background, deep background, the two-source rule. But they stated clearly their belief that allegations of wrongdoing from unnamed persons were unfair.

As journalists at our roundtables talked about sourcing, several said they were not completely clear on the guidelines in their newsrooms.

A few said that in the absence of carefully articulated standards, top editors typically made decisions as questions came up. One television reporter said, "Sometimes even if we could name the source we'd say it's anonymous because, you know, that makes it sound sexier."

Many editors have growing concerns about the lack of attribution in stories that are long narrative reconstructions of events, some of which may have taken place years earlier. The style can create a story that flows more smoothly, more like a novel than a news story. But the reader often does not know which events may have been witnessed by the reporter, which were reconstructed from interviews with participants, which were reconstructed from interviews with witnesses, and which may have been reconstructed without input from anyone who had firsthand knowledge. In a 1999 contest for one of journalism's top prizes, the fact that one of three finalists did a superior job of giving the reader a clear guidepost to distinguish what was firsthand reporting and what was reconstruction weighed heavily in the judges' decision.

### What the public says

"I've been speared by anonymous sources in the paper several times and it's the most helpless feeling, but what can you do?" ... "It's like a bullet that comes out of the woods and hits somebody in the back and you have no idea who shot it or why." ... "In courts they call it hearsay and it's not allowed because it's not fair, so why is it fair in a newspaper?" ... "If I don't know who said it, how do I know if it's true?"

### Best practices to address the problem

Best practices on identifying sources should be considered in the context of Washington and network journalists, because their behavior gives cues to journalists everywhere and influences public perceptions about what the public might read in the local newspaper. It has been argued that the journalism practiced by Washington reporters — both print and TV — is the most professional and best in the world. Those who make that point say that brilliant public-service reporting such as in the Watergate and Pentagon Papers stories would not have happened in any other world capital and could not have happened without reliance on unnamed sources.

But many editors of regional newspapers believe that the influence of Washington journalism on reporters outside the Beltway is not always a healthy one. They worry that less-experienced journalists, seeing Washington reporters use anonymous sources in what seems an almost casual way, may assume that what is acceptable for White House reporters also is acceptable for city council, village commission and high school sports reporters.

One could argue that Washington reporting might be better if anonymous sources were banned; that is not likely to happen because the practice is so embedded. But Washington reporters use anonymous sources according to an unwritten but intricate and broadly understood set of rules that usually — if not always — provides a structure and discipline to the system. It's not an immaculate system, but at least all of the players understand it. That system and its nuances, however, usually are not well understood or practiced at regional and smaller newspapers.

Over the years, several dailies have tried to implement policies to significantly reduce or even eliminate anonymous sources in stories. In the 1980s *Washington Post* Executive Editor Benjamin C. Bradlee banned using them for a short period. But, Bradlee now says, he had to admit defeat when *The New York Times* Washington bureau declined to follow suit, putting the *Post* at a severe disadvantage in a city where news organizations depend on anonymous tips, leaks and trial balloons.

# “We figured that if we refused to let unnamed people lie in the news columns, there would be a lot less lying in print.”

— John C. Quinn, formerly of *USA TODAY*

One of the most rigorous policies was adopted by the founding editors of *USA TODAY*. Former editor John C. Quinn says the idea of trying to publish a paper in which all sources were identified came up in one of the early planning sessions. It quickly was adopted and embedded as a newsroom policy when the new national daily newspaper began publishing in September 1982.

Quinn recalls that the founding group of editors was concerned that many political operatives, especially in Washington, were floating rumors and attacks that were untrue or misleading and were being protected by reporters who were willing to publish the information without attribution. “We figured,” Quinn says, “that if we refused to let unnamed people lie in the news columns, there would be a lot less lying in print.”

Three exceptions to the policy were allowed:

1. The story was of great significance and absolutely unavailable in any other way.
2. Another reputable news organization had already published it and it was in general circulation. In that case, it would be published with attribution to the news organization that had originally published it. (Editor’s note: Some people might regard this approach as a cop-out — as a way for a newspaper to publish unsourced material without breaching the anonymous-source policy for its own reporters.)
3. If one of *USA TODAY*’s most veteran and respected reporters developed the story, and it came from a highly trusted source with a history of honesty and reliability. In that case, if the reporter could convince the editor that the story was solid, then the reporter would be allowed to write it under his or her byline and state it as something “*USA TODAY* has learned.” This technique — used very rarely — put the onus squarely on the reporter, not on the source. And even in these cases no unattributed direct quotes were permitted; the reporter was required to “translate” or paraphrase what the unnamed source was saying and state it in his or her own words.

Moreover, in all three of the exceptions, no story based on any unnamed source could be published unless it was personally approved by one of the newspaper’s top editors.

How did it work? Very well, Quinn says: “It’s not just a matter of setting tough rules and high standards, it’s a matter of building it into the newsroom culture. Once people learn that very, very few unnamed source stories are ever going to get by the editors, they stop going after them. You get less lazy reporting and more diligent reporting. And if a good reporter is still willing to push hard, after you’ve made it clear that it’s his or her personal reputation and credibility that are on the line, well, then the reporter probably has a pretty good case for the story being true.”

But most of the time, says Quinn, reporters with “hot but anonymous scoops” were told to go back and try to persuade the source to speak on the record. Quinn tells a

story that illustrates how that worked:

A political reporter once called in with a story from a Republican Party meeting, based on an anonymous source, that President Reagan's daughter Maureen was to be named head of a political campaign committee. It would be a *USA TODAY* exclusive. The editor on duty thought the story was not significant enough to warrant breaking the rule. "Go back and get the source to say it on the record," the reporter was told. The reporter, less than optimistic, went back to the hotel lobby in search of the source and ran into Maureen Reagan herself. The reporter asked if the information was accurate. Reagan confirmed it and *USA TODAY* had the story on the record — and from the best possible source.

Incidents such as this, Quinn says, became part of the oral tradition and culture of the newsroom and helped win staff support for the tough policy.

The policy remains in place today. Current Editor Karen Jurgensen maintains that the paper carries fewer stories with unattributed information than any other national

**“Our first goal and expectation is to get all sources on the record.”**

— Karen Jurgensen, *USA TODAY*

newspaper. "Our first goal and expectation is to get all sources on the record," she says. "Reporters press sources to be identified and seek alternative sources if that fails. On significant stories, confirmation from more than one anonymous source is mandatory. Only when all avenues have been exhausted and the information is deemed to be significantly newsworthy do we consider using anonymous sources. Even then we avoid using 'sources said.' Instead a source must be identified as to his/her affiliation, or side in an issue, or motivation; for example, 'an attorney close to the defense.' Reporters are urged to get rigid documentation, the goal being to get sources who have had direct access to information, or who have seen a document or listened to a tape, or who were present at an event, or who are principals who were involved but who can't speak on the record."

And the original rule of having to get the story past a skeptical editor is still in place: No story based on unnamed sources may be published unless it is approved by the managing editor of the section in which it is going to appear and the senior editor in charge of the paper that day. Executive Editor Bob Dubill acknowledges that *USA TODAY* may have missed stories because a reporter could not get a second, corroborating anonymous source or a document confirming information obtained anonymously. But the newspaper remains committed to its high standards on sourcing.

The Associated Press, which provides news reports to virtually every daily newspaper in the United States, has a reputation for fairness and lack of bias that it guards vigilantly. The AP's rules on anonymous sources are among the most direct and rigorous of any publication or news agency and are worth consideration by all journalists interested in raising standards. They say, in part:

"AP wants news material to be on the record. We prefer not to use information provided under conditions of anonymity. Use of (such) material threatens our credibility with the reader.

“When we do use anonymously sourced material it must pass three tests:

1. The material must be information and not opinion, and not speculation, and it must be essential to the story.
2. The information is not available except under the conditions of anonymity imposed by the source.
3. The source must be in a position to have accurate information and we understand the source to be reliable. The reporter must ascertain from the source how he or she knows the material to be accurate.

“If the material meets the three conditions, we must provide attribution that establishes credibility. Be descriptive as possible: ‘according to top White House aides’ or ‘a key figure in the Republican House leadership.’ Simply quoting ‘a source’ is almost always prohibited. Indeed, do not use the word ‘source’ unless it is absolutely necessary. Example attributions instead might include ‘a participant in the meeting’ or ‘a company official with access to the documents’ or ‘a member of the presidential advisory board’ or ‘Republican congressional aides familiar with details of the intelligence briefing.’

“When appropriate, first paragraph attribution should read, ‘The Associated Press has learned’ to be followed in the second paragraph by specific attribution to the source. This construction should be used only for rock-solid information from reliable sources that is sure to be released publicly in the near future or in instances in which AP has obtained authoritative written documentation.

“AP routinely seeks and requires more than one source. In some cases one source will be sufficient, when that source is an authoritative figure who provides detail which makes it clear to us and to readers that the information is accurate. Even when the

## It is unreasonable to expect that anonymous sources are ever going to disappear completely.

lead material is based on information from an anonymous source, we always want to include on-the-record material in our copy; providing quotes on background, reaction, context, etc.”

In unveiling a new Gannett Principles of Ethical Conduct policy in June 1999, Senior Vice President for News Phil Currie said, “We are flatly stating that use of unnamed sources in published stories should be rare and only for important news.” Moreover, Currie said, the new policy is to hold editors as well as reporters accountable when unnamed sources are used. This means that the senior news executive who has to approve the story is responsible for confirming the source and reviewing the information being provided. That may require that editor to personally meet the source, “look him or her in the eye, and get a feel for the conviction of the source and the depth of knowledge.”

The public sees the growing use of unidentified sources as a basic fairness issue. The public is particularly upset when it thinks the press is providing cover so someone can make an anonymous personal attack on another individual. As such, the growing

use of unidentified sources is having a corrosive effect on the credibility of newspapers. In this critical environment, many editors have begun to tighten the rules for their staffs. Some practices that seem worthy of consideration are:

- No anonymous sources unless a top editor is convinced there is absolutely no other way to get the main thrust of the story into the newspaper.
- No anonymous sources unless a top editor is convinced every possible effort was made to get the source to go on the record.
- No anonymous sources unless the story is of major importance to the community or the country. Anonymous sourcing should be extraordinary, not routine.
- No re-publication of another organization's anonymously sourced story.
- No anonymously sourced stories unless there are at least two (one editor has suggested that some stories may even require three) sources who have firsthand knowledge.
- No anonymous sources who have been protected with a "no comment" quote elsewhere in the story or who have been deceptively identified. Journalists owe their loyalty to their readers, not to their sources. It is particularly devious to name a person in a story and say that he had "no comment," and then use elsewhere in the story something he said and attribute it to an anonymous source.
- No anonymous sources if what is being rendered is opinion, including personal attack, as opposed to specific facts that could be verified by another source.
- In those rare situations in which anonymous sources are quoted, every effort should be made to include information that will inform the reader of the sources' connection to the story, their possible motivations and any axes it would be reasonable to expect they might want to grind.

While the public is clear in its feeling that anonymous sourcing is basically unfair, few editors think the practice should be totally banned; so it is unreasonable to expect that anonymous sources are ever going to disappear completely from American newspapers. There are a significant number of situations where a newspaper can provide important information only by using anonymous sources. That makes it important for all newspapers to have thoughtful and specific guidelines for the use of anonymous sources. The policies at AP and *USA TODAY* have served these organizations well. Any organization that adopted similar guidelines and applied them, consistently and fairly, would go a long way toward earning increased credibility with its readers.

David Shaw, the media reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, explained in a first-person story in *CJR* how he handled attribution in his 37,000-word account of the newspaper's Staples Center experience. It is an example of a best practice in action.

"I was determined to avoid another contemporary blight on our profession — reconstructed dialogue, the journalistic tale in which direct quotes and verbatim conversations tumble upon the page as if from vintage Hemingway — except that the writer wasn't present for any of the conversations and didn't hear with his own ears any of the quotes. I decided to paraphrase, not quote, any conversation I didn't personally hear — and to attribute it as well. It would not be '(Editor Michael) Parks told (Publisher Kathryn) Downing...' but 'Parks says he told Downing...' That probably made several passages seem a bit stilted and it may have robbed the narrative of some of its impact, but it seemed the only honest, fair way to tell the story, and that — above all — was my objective."

Newspapers are unfair when:

# They have ignorant or incompetent reporters

## How the public sees the problem

Business, community and civic leaders say they and their organizations often are covered by reporters who simply do not know enough about the subjects they are trying to report on. Inability to report with authority was cited repeatedly as a problem on stories about technical subjects such as science, medicine and aviation as well as business, the economy and the law. Business executives, bankers, lawyers, city managers, elected officials, and even ministers and rabbis spoke convincingly that when reporters and their editors have a limited grasp of the topic, the story they produce is likely to be unfair.

In every city someone was eager to tell a story. Typical was the manager of a nuclear power plant who said that reporters sent to cover him and his plant knew so little basic science that he often had to “start at square one and explain what an atom is ... or what happens to water when it is superheated inside a closed vessel.” We also heard stories about reporters who did not know the difference between debt and equity, who did not know basic legal terminology used in a trial, and who had little idea of how manufacturing, wholesaling, distributing and retailing actually work and relate to each other.

## What the public says

“The reporters just come and go; by the time they learn something about us they are shifted to another beat.” ... “The stories she writes about us are so oversimplified and distorted we’d rather not have any coverage at all.” ... “I don’t expect him to be a doctor, but couldn’t they give us somebody who’d had at least one course in human biology?” ... “Surely there must be one business reporter who majored in economics instead of English?” ... “The sports reporters seem to be experts about sports; how come the business reporters aren’t experts about business?” ... “Too often, reporters haven’t bothered to do their homework; they’re unprepared and we’re spending all our time getting them up to speed on an issue.” ... “I know this stuff can get a little

complicated at times; but if he doesn't understand it, how can he make it understandable for his readers?"

### Best practices to address the problem

Only the biggest, richest newspapers can afford to have medical reporters who were educated as doctors or science reporters with doctorates in chemistry. Only a few others can assign to court coverage reporters who have law degrees. Moreover, newsroom tradition and practice is anchored in the belief that the strength of any reporting staff is in its bright generalists who are skilled observers, listeners and questioners. They may not have extensive education in the field they are covering, but a broad liberal education, coupled with sound journalistic skills, compensates for that. The concept is that good reporters may not know all the answers, but they know how to ask the right questions.

The comments of our roundtable participants suggest that two additional factors should be considered:

1. The world reporters are being asked to cover today is vastly more complicated than it was a decade or two past. Business, science, finance, the environment, urban development, health care, geriatrics, land use, technology and demographics are just some of the areas in which reporters have to be more knowledgeable.
2. While most journalism schools require students to take about 75% of their courses in the liberal arts and sciences, faculty advisers often fail to help students make the connection between a rigorous liberal arts emphasis and the knowledge required to cover complex news topics with authority.

**Editors should pay  
close attention to whether candidates  
have taken a concentration or second major  
in a subject that would help them establish  
a reporting specialty.**

Our suggested best practices begin with the hiring process. Editors should pay close attention to whether candidates have taken a concentration or second major in a subject that would help them establish a reporting specialty. Careful reading of the applicant's college transcript and close questioning about what was learned in addition to journalism skills can provide an understanding of what he or she actually knows, in addition to what he or she has been trained to do.

Small- and medium-size newspapers looking for reporters with special knowledge often turn to their own communities to hire someone with authoritative knowledge and then teach him or her basic journalistic skills.

Similarly, a standard of knowledge of news topics should weigh heavily in decisions

about which reporter to assign to the science beat or the environmental beat or the business desk, or which desk editor to assign supervision of specialized beats. Assigning editors and copy editors play a critical role in processing complex stories and should know as much or more than the reporters on specialized beats.

Publishers and corporate news executives must recognize that additional training (and re-training) to polish journalistic skills, and education to acquire additional knowledge, are not luxuries or budget frills, but essential investments in building reader trust.

Reporters, assigning editors and copy editors should be expected to continue to learn throughout their careers. It is important to understand the difference between training and education. Professional training programs in journalistic skills and practices are offered at institutions such as the American Press Institute (API), the Poynter Institute, and the Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education. These programs enable journalists to improve their ability to report, write and edit as well as learn about newspaper design, new technology and management skills.

The need for continuing education in academic subjects in the news is less widely recognized by newspaper management. Reporters, copy editors and assigning editors, particularly, should be encouraged to develop special knowledge in fields such as economics, science, the social sciences and law. These topics are in the news every day, and the ability to report with authority on the complex stories that involve them becomes more and more critical.

## While journalists need additional training to improve skills, they also need additional education to deepen knowledge.

The Nieman fellowships at Harvard and the Knight fellowships at Stanford and Michigan and the Bagehot program for business reporters at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism enable journalists to spend a full academic year developing a specialty.

Some of the programs that offer education in news content have established partnerships with universities that provide facilities, faculty and an academic environment for teaching journalists. The Foundation for American Communications (FACS) has established a science institute at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena and a high technology institute for journalists at Stanford University. It offers a broad array of programs from a day to a week designed to increase expertise in such subjects as science, health, geriatrics, nuclear power, business, the environment, land use and risk assessment. The Knight Foundation Program in Specialized Journalism is located at the University of Maryland, and a second one opened in 2000 for West Coast journalists at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. The National Press Foundation in Washington offers regular two-day seminars to help reporters and editors better understand complex subjects.

The Poynter Institute once focused almost entirely on teaching journalistic skills but now is responding to the need for new programs centered on special knowledge. In 2000 Poynter added a new seminar on covering nonprofit organizations to teach reporters to understand a sector that is growing rapidly as the country seeks more ways to address major social problems with other than government programs. Other new programs include seminars on the dynamics of race, the intricacies of the digital age, the challenge of maintaining safe drinking water, and the value differences between journalists and business executives.

All this underscores a growing belief that while journalists need additional training to improve skills, they also need additional education to deepen knowledge.

There are opportunities even closer to home. A university or community college nearby offers many courses that would help reporters, copy editors and supervising editors expand their knowledge of topics in the news or develop expertise in specialized subjects. These institutions welcome part-time and evening students who want to register for a single course.

## A regular series of brown-bag lunches with local experts can help a staff build baseline knowledge on a variety of topics.

In-house training at the newspaper can range from a structured course with text or visual learning aids to brown-bag discussions over the noon hour. In these settings, people from the community with authoritative knowledge can help reporters and editors develop a fuller understanding of issues in the news. For example, the politics of a new sports stadium or gambling casino might be apparent, but the economics of such projects are complex, and a full understanding is essential for comprehensive and fair coverage. There are people in every community who can help the newspaper build a base of solid, authoritative coverage.

FACS and API have tailored programs for individual newspapers.

A regular series of brown-bag lunches with local experts can help a staff build baseline knowledge on a variety of topics. For example, an air controller on how the local airport manages air traffic; a school system security supervisor; a paramedic who could help the staff understand the different training and levels of authority of certified paramedics and certified EMTs; a local disaster official who could explain preparedness plans for storms, floods, fire and terrorist activity. We all recognize major spot news stories that would have been handled more competently and fairly if the staff had known more when the news broke.

Another important learning tool for journalists is the Internet. There are many sources of information on the Web that can enhance a reporter's tool kit. One of the most comprehensive is FACSNET.org. This resource for journalists provides an extensive databank to help them expand the quality of their reporting. It includes background on issues, lists of sources and other Web sites, all tailored to assist reporters on

deadline. The National Press Foundation's Web site at [natpress.org](http://natpress.org) has similar resources.

The newspaper's ability to be seen as fair by sources can be enhanced through the practice of reading back to sources copy on highly technical subjects or even showing stories or parts of stories to sources to be sure the reporter has it exactly right. The purpose is to ensure that the facts are correct and the technological or scientific explanations are accurate. Sources should not be invited to edit the angle, context or tone of the story. Respected reporters who deal with complicated subjects say this is a technique that has benefited them many times.

Tom French, a reporter for the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times* who specializes in reporting on complex subjects, often reads sections of his stories to sources. At times, he has given them copy to critique for factual error or misunderstanding or greater clarity.

Chip Scanlan, who directs the writing program at the Poynter Institute, recalls that he once had to write on deadline a major story for the *Providence (R.I.) Journal* on a surgeon's difficult and complicated reconstruction of a man's shattered arm. "I didn't know one bone from another, so it made sense to read what I wrote to the surgeon to make sure I had it right."

**“If I’m quoting  
someone, I want them to pick up the paper  
in the morning and say, ‘Yeah, that is exactly  
how I feel about it.’”**

— Pete Carey, *San Jose Mercury News*

Veteran *San Jose Mercury News* reporters Pete Carey and Mike Antonucci have been reading stories or parts of stories back to sources for years “in the interest of getting it right.” Says Carey: “If I’m quoting someone, I want them to pick up the paper in the morning and say, ‘Yeah, that is exactly how I feel about it.’” The *Mercury News* acknowledges that its Silicon Valley readers probably are the most technologically sophisticated in the world and that the paper has a special obligation to be precise in reporting the intricate and complicated details of the computer and venture capital worlds. But the paper also agrees with a non-technical public office holder who once complained, “I don’t know how you’re going to get away from us thinking of you folks as biased unless you give us a chance to take a look at what you’re going to write, and then give us a chance to argue with that.” The paper not only welcomes corrections of technical errors in copy but even will allow a source — under some circumstances — to revise a quote.

Under Editor Jerry Ceppos (now a Knight Ridder vice president for news), the *Mercury News* developed a set of guidelines on reading copy back to sources:

1. Whether to read back portions or all of a story is a matter of journalistic technique and is best left to the professional judgment of the individual reporter.
2. Reading back an entire story is not a common practice but it's neither discouraged nor frowned upon at the *Mercury News*. When writing about science, technology and other highly technical subjects, it is almost always a good idea to

read at least the technical parts to an expert.

3. Reading quotes back has to be handled carefully; while a worthwhile practice for fairness and accuracy, it can result in sources trying to improve quotes by doctoring them. If the quote is to be changed, it should be a fresh statement of the person's opinion, not a cosmetic altering to make a person look better. Nor should it be an opportunity for a scientist to insert jargon into a story or for a public official to decide to suddenly go off the record.
4. Statements made in public forums, speeches or public utterances by politicians or business leaders, etc., should not be read back or revised.
5. The reporter should make it clear that ultimate control of the story remains with the reporter and not with the source or subject of the story.
6. Sources should be cautioned that the story may undergo further editing and changes.
7. There are times when a person may be allowed to withdraw a comment. This applies, for example to naive subjects who may realize, upon hearing their words, that they have said something that could get them fired, divorced, sued or whatever. We do not afford this opportunity, however, to sources or subjects who are experienced at dealing with the press.

The *Mercury News* still is refining the guidelines, which it considers a work in progress. The guidelines were developed with broad staff participation and a fair bit of spirited argument. For example, the guidelines currently contain a sentence that says, "Copies of complete stories should not be given out in advance," although Ceppos says he's not sure he agrees that should be a blanket prohibition. A few reporters still worry that reading stories or portions back to politicians gives them a chance to spin or retract in ways that serve them more than they serve readers.

## It is possible to read back to sources and subjects — in order to be certain that the paper is going to get it exactly right — and still maintain control.

Others remain uncomfortable with a practice that is counter to what they've been taught for all of their professional careers. One says, "Reading back copy to a source would have been a firing offense at the last paper I worked for!" But Political Editor Phil Trounstine counters, "Most of us were taught that reading back cedes control, but this has clearly evolved over time." The fact, Trounstine says, is that it is possible to read back to sources and subjects — in order to be certain that the paper is going to get it exactly right — and still maintain control.

Old habits in the news business die hard, and some journalists may argue that reading back copy before publication is looking for trouble, or worse. But the *Mercury News* is setting an example for all news organizations that believe getting it right should take precedence over virtually every other consideration, because it is a crucial component of fairness and credibility.

Newspapers are unfair when:

# They prey on the weak

## How the public sees the problem

The public believes the press too often takes unfair advantage of people who are suddenly and unexpectedly thrust into the news and who are not prepared to deal with questioning by reporters. The perception that this is unfair often is influenced by what is seen on television, rather than from personal experience. Participants in The Freedom Forum roundtables expressed strong feelings of sympathy for people caught in this predicament and strong disapproval of the journalistic practices that draw attention to them.

The public understands that individuals who have never encountered the press, who have never talked to a reporter or who are struggling with a tragic event are at a decided disadvantage when journalists assault them with questions.

The public also disapproves of newspaper photographers and television camera crews who “catch” private citizens in moments of grief and shock. Roundtable participants characterized spot news photography as often unnecessarily invasive, insensitive and unfair.

That powerful images of sorrow or tragedy are newsworthy and are captured openly, utilizing traditional photojournalism practices, does not persuade those who believe people in such circumstances are entitled to a zone of privacy from the press. The public sympathizes strongly with victims of tragedy who sometimes seem to be re-victimized by their encounters with reporters and photographers at a moment when they are most vulnerable.

The gap between the thinking of the public and the press was reinforced by their reactions to a proposal in *Brill's Content* magazine. Following the plane crash that killed John F. Kennedy Jr., many thought the photo coverage of his sister, Caroline Kennedy, and her three children was intrusive. The magazine asked news organizations and representatives of the public to respond to the following guideline urging press restraint:

“To protect the privacy of grieving families, our news organization(s) will not publish photographs or show current video images of family members who have lost a loved one within one week following the death of that loved one, nor will we post reporters or photographers outside their home, at the funeral home, or in other places where we can accost them for interviews or photographs without their permission.”

The public overwhelmingly supported the guideline. The press rejected it. *Columbia Journalism Review*, commenting on the reactions, suggested that in newsrooms, deliberations on such coverage would “at least take a bit longer, and go a bit deeper, next time around.”

Ric Nesbitt, a Texan whose 16-year-old daughter was murdered, described how it feels to the 1997 convention of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association: “Most victims and their families are average citizens — ill-prepared to deal with any of the variety of demands suddenly made upon them. At a time when their coping skills are at their lowest, society somehow expects that we be at our best. The media is inextricably involved in this.”

## The public feels strongly that children deserve special treatment from the press.

A woman whose daughter was murdered on her 19th birthday said: “Our lives became a nightmare. Our yard, our street and neighborhood were suddenly covered with reporters and cameras at all hours for several days. A neighbor told us she had seen a writer actually putting our trash bag in his car and speeding away. They put our family finances in the paper, which was totally irrelevant in the murder of our daughter.”

Brenda O’Quin, whose son was killed at 17, is a leader of the Fort Worth chapter of Parents of Murdered Children, a national support organization. She makes a plea for editors to think more about the coverage of tragedy, and to plan for it, and for better training of reporters:

“Send your most compassionate reporters to the homes of the victims. It’s not always what they (reporters) say, it’s how they say it. We’re extremely sensitive and I realize that we often over-react to things, but if your reporters knew in advance a few things not to say and not to do, then they would be more comfortable, too. And you wouldn’t be sending someone out who’s going to come back with things you can’t or don’t want to use. The training is really a key here.”

Bob Steele, who directs ethics programs at the Poynter Institute, seconds the recommendation for more training: “In times of crisis, we demand the best from the people on the front lines of the story. The cops. The paramedics, doctors and nurses. The teachers. We should expect no less from the people telling these stories, the journalists.” Steele worries that in the adrenaline rush of covering a breaking story of a tragedy, reporters may go on a kind of unthinking automatic pilot, especially if they have not had previous training. That training should include teaching reporters to ask themselves such questions as: What do I know? What do I need to know? What are my ethical concerns? What organization or professional guidelines should I be considering? Who are the stakeholders — those who will be affected by my decision? What if the roles were reversed; how would I feel? What are the possible consequences of what I’m about to do? What are my alternatives? Can I fully justify my thinking and my decision? To my colleagues? To all of the stakeholders? To the public?”

The public feels strongly that children deserve special treatment from the press. Roundtable participants were almost unanimous in saying that children, especially young children, should not be interviewed about serious subjects or when they may be traumatized without parental permission.

Experts at the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families at the University of Maryland agree. The center's Spring 1999 newsletter reads: "Stories about children need to be treated with kid gloves. Their consent to an interview may not mean the same thing as an adult's and they may not fully understand the implications of talking to a reporter. Journalists who write about kids have an obligation to do everything they can — despite deadlines and storytelling pressures — to make sure children and their parents are informed about the potential consequences of a story."

## “With kids, the overriding value should be ‘do no harm.’”

— David Boeyink, Indiana University

Deborah Potter, director of the News Lab, part of Columbia University's Project for Excellence in Journalism, agrees: "Children want to please, they are hard-wired to please adults. The questions you ask (yourself) about minimizing harm need to be asked twice with kids. You have to be very clear about what you are asking and bend over backwards to tell them they don't have to talk to you."

Indiana University journalism professor David Boeyink sums it up by saying, "Journalism normally lets the moral value of truth-telling take prominence over everything else. But with kids, the overriding value should be 'do no harm.'"

What the public is asking of news organizations is greater sensitivity in the coverage of stories about personal tragedy. The public also is willing to give credit to news organizations that explain why some unpleasant stories need to be told and pictured, even if they seem invasive and embarrassing. Such explanations, one roundtable participant said, are helpful because "I had never really thought about it like that before."

The public's deep concern about the process by which news is gathered is influenced by its judgments on whether the news is presented with fairness. In the coverage of tragedy, the process and the presentation flow together; the visual parts of the story — newspaper photographs or television videotape — convey to the audience important clues about how the journalists behaved in gathering the news, which helps the public conclude whether the story was fair.

Jay Rosen, a scholar of press performance at New York University, told journalism educators at a Freedom Forum panel: "We need to distinguish between procedural fairness and fairness in performance. Journalists focus on procedural fairness; they defend themselves by saying they followed all of the rules. But the public is more concerned with a fair outcome. For example, in the Richard Jewell case all of the reporters could tell us the rules they were following which made him a legitimate news story, but most Americans would say that what Jewell went through was downright unfair."

## What the public says

“His child had just been pulled out of the lake and he was screaming and the media was all over him.” ... “Her skirt was way up and they kept taking pictures; even if they don’t publish them it’s not right to treat people that way.” ... “It’s just not ethical to pounce on people when their defenses are down” ... “I don’t think they should interview young kids like that without their parent’s permission.” ... “We’re not politicians so we don’t know how to talk when reporters start firing questions at us.”

## Best practices to address the problem

There are few best practices that apply in every situation when reporting on people who are not media savvy. Many newspapers have a standing instruction to reporters and particularly to photographers to get everything they can on the street; once back in the office, the editors will lead the discussion about what actually gets in the paper. While this is intended to ensure that the powerful quote and compelling photograph are not missed, it can mislead reporters and photographers about standards of behavior and values to which top managers would like staff to adhere. Even if it is difficult to put a practice in writing, staffers should never be unclear about what the boss thinks is appropriate.

Top editors should routinely initiate discussions with the staff on the values that are important to the newspaper. This should be a two-way conversation, with top editors explaining how to handle sensitive reporting and photographic situations and staff members raising “yes, but what if... ” scenarios. These conversations should be held regularly, both during the calm when big stories are not breaking and also shortly after incidents about which troubling questions have been raised or criticisms voiced.

Case studies that force staffers to think hard about situations in which their training as journalists may come into conflict with their instincts as sympathetic human beings are effective ways to engage the issue. Some news organizations turn to professional facilitators with training in teaching people how to ask themselves what ethicists call “good questions.”

Such training sessions have their challenging and uncomfortable moments, but the evidence is that the training enables journalists to make better decisions under pressure.

# The news staff should consider whether it is fair to behave differently when questioning ordinary citizens.

As a best practice, the news staff should consider whether it is fair to behave differently when questioning ordinary citizens unaccustomed to being interviewed than with people experienced and knowledgeable about the press. One editor has tried to clarify his policy by telling the staff, “The mayor, the police chief, the people who run the big companies in town ... they deal with us all of the time and they are all big boys and girls who can take care of themselves. But let’s not treat somebody’s old Uncle Harry or Aunt Millie the same way we treat the pols and the pros. Wouldn’t you appre-

# Citizens thrust into the news by crisis or tragedy deserve different treatment than politicians.

ciate that kind of sensitivity if they were your aunt and uncle?”

Beyond developing general empathy for ordinary citizens who may be naive about the press, there are several specific best practices that should be considered by newspapers looking to improve their performance in this area:

- Sensitivity can be learned. Newsrooms should hold training sessions that will teach staff members how to ask the kinds of good questions suggested by the experts.
- Citizens thrust into the news by crisis or tragedy deserve different treatment than politicians, executives or others who are sophisticated about dealing with the media. They also are entitled to a level of privacy greater than that afforded public figures. The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics urges journalists to “recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention.”
- Children are more vulnerable than adults and deserve special treatment. The same is true for immigrants and others who may speak only limited English and thus be at an additional disadvantage when being interviewed. Sandra Mims Rowe, editor of *The Oregonian* in Portland, says her newspaper goes to extra lengths when it has a problematic quote or a picture involving a child. She says, “We’ll go to the trouble of describing the scene to a family member or even taking a picture to their home so they can see it and express their views to us ... and we always discuss the potential harm of publishing vs. the newsworthiness or potential benefit of publishing.”
- In dealing with people who may be naive about the press, it often is permissible and even a best practice to grant them a privilege reporters almost never afford public figures: the right to change substantially or even withdraw a quote. The guidelines of the *San Jose Mercury News* spell that out by saying, “Naive subjects may realize they have said something that could get them fired, or divorced, or sued, or whatever. We may want to let them withdraw that comment.” David Bailey, managing editor of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* in Little Rock, tells of a time when his newspaper was reporting a story about the sources and effects of lead poisoning in children. “After initially agreeing to allow us to identify her children by name, and after we’d spent hundreds of dollars to test her children and their property, one parent had a change of heart. We honored that request and that story has not been published.”
- Al Tompkins, a former TV news director who now teaches at the Poynter Institute, has developed a special interest in the subject of journalists dealing with juveniles, which is particularly relevant in the light of criticism which followed coverage of school shooting tragedies such as those in Littleton, Colo., Paducah, Ky., Springfield, Ore., and Jonesboro, Ark. He suggests asking such

questions as: “How mature is this juvenile? What is his/her understanding or ability to understand how this interview might be perceived? How aware is he/she of the possible ramifications? What motivation does this juvenile have for cooperating in this interview? How much does he/she know firsthand? Do others, adults, have the same information? How could I corroborate the juvenile’s information? How clearly have I identified myself? Does he know he’s talking to a reporter? Could I include a parent or guardian in the decision to interview? Is it possible to have a parent or guardian present for the interview?”

The Poynter Institute’s Bob Steele also has developed additional guidelines that suggest best practices for dealing with coverage of the full range of school shooting and terrorist or hostage-taking incidents. They include:

- Be extremely cautious not to compromise the secrecy of police officials’ planning and execution. Do not report information obtained from police frequency scanners.
- Always assume that the gunmen, terrorists or hostage-takers have access to the reporting.
- Fight the urge to become a player in any standoff. Journalists should become personally involved only as a last resort and then only with the explicit approval of top news management and the consultation of trained hostage negotiators on the scene. Strongly resist the temptation to telephone a gunman or hostage taker.
- Be forthright with the public about why certain information is being withheld if security reasons are involved. Some newspapers will publish an explanation, such as “*The News* is not publishing the stepfather’s name in order to protect the identity of the girl.” But many readers want more information. Diane McFarlin, publisher of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, says newspapers should publish a more detailed explanation of why a fact or a name or a photograph is being omitted.
- Finally, exercise care when interviewing freed hostages, rescued victims or families or friends. Do not interfere with the efforts of medical personnel, parents who are being rejoined with their released children, or grief counselors.

Additional guidelines for dealing with victims of tragedy have been developed at Michigan State University’s Victims and the Media Program, founded in 1991 by professors Bill Cote and Frank Ochberg. Bonnie Bucqueroux, coordinator, and Sue Carter, a past director of the program, offered some best practice suggestions in an article in the December 1999 issue of *Quill*.

- When approaching victims of violence or catastrophe or their survivors, remember to switch out of investigative reporter mode.
- Don’t be afraid to open the conversation with “I’m sorry for your loss” or “I’m sorry for what happened to you.”
- In cases of death, celebrate the life. Inform the family that an interview will allow your article to go beyond the facts on the official record provided by police or hospitals.
- Remember that victims of violence, and other survivors, often feel guilty. It does not violate your oath of objectivity, for example, to assure a rape victim that it was not her fault.
- Tell their side of the story. There are times when victims want to put their ver-

sion on the record (the warning light wasn't flashing, the attacker threatened to kill her if she called police, etc.) Many victims complain that initial articles contained glaring errors that they were not given the opportunity to correct .

- Make sure the family has been fully notified. Even when you have assurances that notification of serious injury or death has taken place, remember that in these days of fractured families you might inadvertently be the bearer of this news to someone who has not yet been told.
- Discuss the ground rules. Make sure that victims know you are there as a reporter, not their friend, but that your goal is to help them tell their stories.
- Be wary when doing anniversary and update stories. It's a mistake to assume that victims do not suffer pain 10, 20 or even 50 years after an incident. The anniversary itself often stirs up troubling feelings, so be prepared when asking for and conducting an interview.
- Be wary of unsolved crime stories. Try to make it policy never to run a story about an unsolved crime without notifying the victim or family. Particularly in the case of murder, surviving family members will feel blindsided when they are not warned that a story will appear about a new suspect or as part of a feature on unsolved crimes.
- Remember that being considerate does not mean the journalist is suspending all disbelief. A "victim," who was ultimately discovered to have murdered her own children, reminds us that reporters must always retain their professional skepticism. The challenge is not to let skepticism become cynicism, which can translate into a lack of compassion and concern. The wisest course is to extend the benefit of doubt to a victim until or unless proved otherwise.

If journalists could find ways to develop all of these skills and sensitivities, they would go a long way toward addressing and eliminating the public's criticism that they

## Victims and rescue workers are likely to receive counseling for the trauma they suffer; most journalists are not.

are invasive of privacy, unfair to citizens who are naive about the press, unconcerned about the feelings of the people they cover, and thoughtless about victims of tragedy, children and other vulnerable people.

Editors should be aware that the list of "victims" of violence and tragedy sometimes may include the journalists who cover it. The Michigan State program's researchers have discovered that journalists often can be traumatized by the violence they cover. They note that three groups of people are most likely to be affected in the aftermath of a violent incident: the victims, the rescue workers and the journalists. Victims and rescue workers are likely to receive counseling for the trauma they suffer; most journalists are not. Even when journalists were not firsthand witnesses to violence, they can feel its effects and suffer emotional damage sustained by hearing victims' accounts. So editors and managers may wish to consider counseling for journalists who have been exposed to this kind of trauma to help them deal with the stress.



Newspapers are unfair when:

# They concentrate on bad news

## How the public sees the problem

The concern that the press focuses too much on what is wrong, violent and bizarre and that it never prints “good news” may be the longest-running complaint of the public. The public consistently asks why there is not more “good” or “positive” news in the paper. Journalists respond that news is not the story of all the airplanes that landed safely yesterday but of the one that did not. Editors contend there is lots of “good news” in the paper each day, but public recall seems to draw on “bad news.”

Participants in our roundtables offered examples to support their perception that it is difficult to get significant coverage of “positive” news. They said this was so especially when it was connected to the performance of public institutions such as local government and education.

A school superintendent said he could not get newspaper and TV reporters to report on significant improvements in test scores by a student body of 600, nearly 40% of which spoke English as a second language.

A city manager said he and his staff had created a new form for the annual budget that would enable citizens to see more easily how their tax dollars were allocated. When the day came to unveil it, newspaper and TV reporters showed up. To accommodate reporters who were pressed for time, he and his staff had prepared and rehearsed a crisp, 30-minute presentation. But five minutes into the presentation a TV reporter raised his hand and said, “This is all very interesting, sir, but could we just get a sound bite outside now because the truck has to be on the other side of town in 15 minutes?”

The city manager was bitter in asking rhetorically, “How could they possibly do that? The entire staff worked nearly a year so the taxpayers could understand what we plan to do with their millions and they want to handle it in 45 seconds! I’ve given up on television as a means of communicating serious information to the city; they are hopeless!”

When we told that story later to a group of print journalists, several newspaper reporters smirked. But they stopped smiling when we told the rest of the story: After

the TV reporters got their sound bite, a newspaper reporter told the city manager, “The good news is that I don’t have to rush off and I can stay for your entire presentation and some Q and A. But the bad news is that the desk wants me to hold my story to 25 inches.”

“I suppose that was better than 45 seconds,” the city manager said, “but there is no way he could do a fair story on the entire annual budget in 25 inches!”

A medical researcher and leading immunization expert complained that the press seems to have little interest in the good news from his field — the overwhelming scientific evidence that modern vaccines are extremely safe and that childhood inoculation programs are saving tens of thousands of lives annually. Instead, he sees an eagerness to publicize the sensational arguments of a few parents who have developed a following on the Internet for their claims that their children were made ill or died as the result of inoculation.

Other roundtable participants told similar stories about their frustration in getting fair coverage of legitimate positive accomplishments, both in the public and private sectors, and the problems of dealing with reporters who seemed interested only in aberrations and sensational exceptions to the norm.

## “Scandal has a thousand stringers, but good news can’t even find the editor’s phone number.”

— William Raspberry, *The Washington Post*

Their complaints are endorsed by many highly respected journalists who also think that the press over-emphasizes negative news. As she neared the end of her stint as ombudsman of *The Washington Post*, Geneva Overholser said she was persuaded that many of the unhappy readers she was hearing from were upset not so much by feelings that the press has a “liberal” bias but that it has a “negative” bias. She offered her *Post* newsroom colleagues this advice: “Digging investigative work is one of journalism’s proudest genres. But presenting an accurate picture means showing the courage and joy and victory that surrounds us, too. Avoid framing everything as conflict, letting ‘wedge’ issues drive the report. Emphasize substance over process. Don’t exaggerate problems and pathologies. Behave as a citizen and a journalist: Report, write and edit as if you care about where you live.”

*Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry seconds the charge that focusing on the negative is bad journalism and is disheartening readers and distancing them from their newspapers: “Of course our readers need to know what has gone wrong. But we also need to get our newsrooms interested in reporting on what works. Editors will have to re-think our mindless focus on conflict as the overriding news value.” Raspberry said in a 1999 lecture at Duke University, “Scandal has a thousand stringers, but good news can’t even find the editor’s phone number. If journalists has been around 2000 years ago, someone has said, we would have covered the crucifixion and missed Christianity.”

As one editor sums it up: “Most of the world is populated by decent people trying

to do the best they can. Writing about them, done right, is not puffery. It is in-depth examination of institutions or programs or people who are doing their jobs correctly. It is examining taxation and spending to see what is justified, needed and worthy — not just to find waste.”

### **What the public says**

“When a newspaper decides to allocate only a column or so to next year’s multi-million dollar budget, lots of things that are truly important are going to be left out or so shortened that what results is distortion, and distortion is unfairness.” ... “I see the process of being reported on as being in a dark room and the reporters ‘flash’ here and then they ‘flash’ over there; they need to get a bigger picture of what’s going on beyond those little illuminations.” ... “We weren’t looking for puff; this was a legitimate story of significant educational progress, but nobody was interested because it wasn’t about gangs, drugs or violence.” ... “Eccentric behavior among students occurs 2% of the time and normal behavior is 98%, but the reporting is the opposite of that.” ... “I’ll take my lumps when we (a police department) deserve them; but why isn’t it also news when cops do the right thing?”

### **Best practices to address the problem**

Some editors are beginning to realize it’s time to stop responding defensively to reader complaints about the lack of “good news.” They are finding ways to tell compelling stories about success, achievement, discovery and victory, as reflected in such headlines as: “Gun expulsions down 31 percent in schools”; “Infant AIDS drops 67 percent 1992-97”; “School violence down 10 percent”; “More people working than ever before”; “Home ownership at record levels”; “Private charity gifts up.”; “More athletes graduating”; “Welfare reform creating some success stories”; “Africa making headway despite crises.”

Editors are giving a better balance to both “positive” and “negative” news in the overall report by finding an interesting story line or trend that typically has been dismissed. One of the most effective ways to do so is by insisting that legitimate stories about success and about systems and institutions that are working well get a fair shot at good play along with revelations of corruption and wrongdoing, about which readers also need to know. Reporters are natural skeptics, and they are also close observers of how newsroom trends may affect their careers. So an editor who begins to push for more positive stories also will have to make sure that they get good play; otherwise, the effort to get the reporting staff to shift gears will quickly run out of gas.

There are other management imperatives for editors who want to implement William Raspberry’s call to “re-think the mindless focus on conflict.” When Deborah Howell took over as chief of the Washington bureau of Newhouse Newspapers and wanted to redirect the staff’s focus, she shifted more than a third of her reporters to new beat assignments with new names. One of them she called “Doing Good.”

The reporter assigned to the “Doing Good” beat soon was producing stories on such subjects as a woman in Seattle who was determined to save trees, and an organization that had mounted a serious national campaign to protect feral cats. These were not light features but serious stories exploring what moves some individuals to passionately devote their lives to civic causes.

One of the best “Doing Good” stories was published after the disastrous river flooding and fires that destroyed parts of downtown Grand Forks, N.D. The national reporting on this story told of the grim aftermath that the residents faced as they struggled to rebuild. But the Newhouse bureau focused on the scores of relief agencies and hundreds of workers who were slowly but steadily helping to improve the lives of the flood victims. It reported on what efforts worked best, analyzed why they worked, and explained why some others were less effective.

One of the coverage areas that most upsets the public is crime. Crime stories appeal to many deep-seated human emotions and fears, and there is no question that they are read. But readers increasingly are aware that something is wrong with the way the press is reporting crime and violence.

Their uneasiness is supported by the facts, which are that violent crime — especially juvenile crime and violence — has been dropping steadily since 1993. Overall violent crime declined more than 5% in 1999 and juvenile crime declined a whopping 11%. Juvenile homicides actually have declined 58% since 1994. And yet one-third of Americans believes that crimes by adults are on the increase and two-thirds believe that juvenile crime is on the increase.

How could this be if the press was doing a fair and balanced job of reporting? It couldn't, says Vincent Schiraldi, director of the Washington-based Justice Policy

## Readers increasingly are aware that something is wrong with the way the press is reporting crime and violence.

Institute. The problem, Schiraldi says, is that the news media — particularly television but also newspapers — are overly focused on reporting the few, relatively rare dramatic incidents, such as school shootings, and are missing the full story. Saturation coverage of the acts of a few violent kids, he says, is distorting and skewing the nation's understanding of crime: “Yes, 13 kids were killed at Columbine. But, by comparison, every two days 11 children die at home at the hands of their parents or guardians.”

Failure by the press to put crime in context, Schiraldi says, is leading to a public that is misinformed about crime in the community and nationally, profoundly misguided about levels of teenaged violence, and being made irrationally afraid of being victimized by crime.

One newspaper that revamped its coverage in 1999 and put crime into meaningful context for its readers was *The Oregonian*. The changes include these best practices:

- Appoint a “crime team” headed by a top editor.
- Choose the reporting team from among top newsroom veterans; no more entry-level “cop reporters.”
- Build expertise among the team members. (Two of the eight reporters on *The Oregonian* team have traditional beats — night police and law-enforcement/violence. But the other six cover such beats as family crime, ranging from juvenile justice to domestic abuse to crimes against the elderly; the impact of crime, which focuses on victims and the prison system; white-collar crime; and neigh-

borhood crime. Two of the reporters cover legal affairs, following up not just on individual court cases but broader issues such as sentencing trends.)

- React less; initiate more. Cover the breaking news of individual events but look more for the significant trends. Put stories in context (“Was this the first murder of the year or the 40th?”). Change the reflex that once put almost any sensational crime on the front of the metro section regardless of its impact on the community. The overall incidence of murders and who is committing them is likely to be a front-page story. A single murder unrelated to any trend is likely to be played inside.
- Reach deeper into the community for sources. The team discovered that readers were very interested in being informed about such things as traffic safety or bicycle thefts, which often can fall below the threshold of how newsrooms define news.

Crime team leader Susan Gage says that as a result of the changes, the newspaper’s crime reporting is much broader and richer, the public is better served in fully understanding the local crime problem, and both readers and reporters are responding positively. Covering a community’s crime levels in full context doesn’t necessarily make it “good news,” but it certainly can blunt the charge that only the most sensational and negative news of violence gets reported.

*The Oregonian’s* effort is a good example of what a large regional metro paper can do to address the problem. *The Daily Citizen* of Searcy, Ark., circulation 7,000, showed what can be done by a paper with a much smaller staff to address the complaint of police officers that the press too often focuses on the misbehavior of law enforcement officers and too rarely on their heroics and good work. The paper published a 14-page section called “Behind the Badge” that highlighted individual officers from area police departments. It included action photos, biographical sketches of 75 officers, stories about community policing, interviews with spouses, and even quotes from elementary school children on their thoughts about police and the law.

“Connectedness” has become one of the buzzwords of the national effort to restore credibility. One way to connect with a public that says it feels distanced from its

“Newspapers simply  
must do a better job of explaining to the public  
what they do and why they do it.”

— Charles L. Overby, The Freedom Forum

newspapers is to explain to the public what the newspaper does and why. In The Freedom Forum roundtables, many members of the public who were critical of something that had been published expressed a willingness to change their minds when they were told why the newspaper had decided to publish it. Many journalists believe that such explanations are self-aggrandizing, and newspapers traditionally have shied away from doing much of it. But many editors now believe, as Freedom Forum Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Charles L. Overby says, “Newspapers simply

must do a better job of explaining to the public what they do and why they do it.” A good example is *The Arizona Republic’s* daily column on Page Two, aimed at demystifying the newspaper.

Many of the public’s complaints are as much about the processes of the press as they are about what is published. And many of the complaints come because the public has little idea of how a newspaper is assembled, is mystified by the process and thus suspects it. One way to demystify the process is to explain it clearly, on the same day that a controversial story or photo appears in the paper. These explanations might include such things as:

- Why we published this story.
- Why we published this photo.
- Why we published these words, or these names.
- Why we withheld this photo, these words, or these names.

Better still, publish the explanation about why the newspaper did what it did, ask for readers to comment on it by letter, telephone, fax or e-mail, and then publish the readers’ reactions. The likely results: Better public understanding of how the newspaper makes decisions, increased dialogue with readers, more connectedness with the community.

Newspapers are unfair when:

# They lack diversity

## How the public sees the problem

The American press has come a long way in the last 30 years in an effort to create newspapers that reflect their communities more fully and fairly. And minority representation on news staffs, while still well below minority representation in the national population, has come from almost zero to nearly 12%. But the public believes there is much more work to be done in both employment and content.

In all of our roundtables, both community leaders and ordinary citizens expressed strong feelings about gaps in coverage of race, gender, age, ethnicity, economic and social class, and sexual orientation. Members of racial minority groups took the lead in many of these conversations. They were outspoken and pointed as they expressed their concerns. But many white participants also gave voice to the belief that the local newspaper was not always a model of diversity, sensitivity and fairness to members of minority groups.

In several cities, older members of minority groups acknowledged that the newspaper — along with life in general — had greatly changed for the better from the time of their childhood. But there also was a fear expressed that progress in race relations and in newspaper coverage of minority community issues might be leveling off as journalists lost enthusiasm for the effort.

In every city, complaints were heard that the newspaper's coverage of minorities — while improved — still was sporadic and marked by large gaps. Many of the complaints were similar to ones that have been voiced for years:

- That the newspaper was sending reporters into black and Hispanic communities mostly to cover crime, violence, poverty or drugs.
- That positive developments and improvement efforts in minority communities rarely were covered.
- That some stories about minority communities — even if reported by minority staff members — read as if they had been assigned and edited by white editors who were not attuned to cultural differences and nuances.
- That minority journalists, even when hired and promoted, were pressured — sometimes subtly, perhaps subconsciously — to conform to dated newsroom standards that hampered them in suggesting or assigning stories outside traditional white awareness and sensitivities. Some minority journalists alluded to the

squeeze they felt between their desires and impulses to raise the awareness levels of their mostly white colleagues, and their fears that speaking out candidly might damage their career aspirations. Many said they did not receive the mentoring and coaching they believed were warranted, and that this was directly related to the poor retention level of minority staffers.

- That the newspaper still was “anointing” minority community leaders who were not necessarily regarded as leaders by the people who lived in that community or who were not empowered to speak for that community. One black participant in a roundtable said: “You have got to stop looking for two or three people to speak for the black community; it can’t be done any more than two or three people can speak for the entire white community. And, beside, too often you get the wrong ones, anyway.”

While feature sections were acknowledged to routinely run stories and pictures that featured minorities, there remains a perception of discrimination in play elsewhere in the newspaper. One black man said, “I like that they now run picture stories of black kids playing on summer vacation as well as picture stories of white kids playing on summer vacation. But where is the story that quotes a black doctor on some medical (advance) that has nothing to do with race?”

Minority participants also seemed acutely aware of the numbers of minority journalists on the staff of the local newspaper and the positions they held. Some expressed concern that their newspaper seemed “satisfied” once it had a few minority reporters in each department. Others noted that while the reporting staff was more diverse than in the past, there still were too few minorities and women in positions of authority. Still others noted that while a few minorities and women had been promoted to the first rung of the management ladder, it still was almost entirely white and male above that rung.

Professional women in the groups seemed to be more satisfied with coverage of their lives than in years past, although some homemakers complained about coverage that seemed patronizing to them. One woman in Nashville said, “They report on the women who have chosen to work in business and their time-management and day-care problems, but what about those of us who have chosen to stay home and concentrate on our family life and kids? All they seem to want from us is our recipes.”

Gay participants in several cities complained of an almost total absence of coverage of gay culture, events and interests. One man in Portland, who said he had been in a committed, monogamous relationship with his partner for 14 years, said: “I see some coverage of the more flamboyant gay lifestyles, but I don’t see my life reflected in the paper. We go to church, plant gardens and have Thanksgiving dinners, too.”

### What the public says

“I admit that there has been progress but I worry that it is leveling off.” ... “We mostly see reporters in our (Hispanic) community when there is crime or violence to report.” ... “Reading the coverage of higher education you’d hardly know there was a very good black college in this town, too.” ... “They’re still not paying enough attention to the way the police treat people of color.” ... “White people have no idea of the fear a black man feels when his car is stopped by a policeman.” ... “Most of the people on welfare in this county are white, but you wouldn’t know that from reading the

paper.” ... “The most important institutions in the (black) community are the churches and we can’t get the white editors to understand that.” ... “There is still a lot of racism in America and white Americans can’t see it.” ... “The harassment (of women) hasn’t gone away but it’s more subtle now.” ... “Not all Asian-American students are science or math majors, you know, but we have to live with that stereotype.” ... “They’re mostly good liberals down there (at the newspaper) and they try, but they are still pretty touchy about gay stories.” ... “I read the paper every day but I don’t see many people in it who look like me.”

### Best practices to address the problem

Surely most newspapers are aware of what has to be done, and many are succeeding in their efforts to become more diverse. But the criticisms of the public only underscore the extent to which the problems lingering from the country’s sad and complex racial history are embedded in every institution of society. The newspapers attacking the problem most effectively are following a carefully defined strategy of best practices:

- Increase minority hiring levels until percentages of minority staffers equal the percentages of minority populations in the market and/or the country. But, as one editor who has been successful at this says, “Don’t be a slave to the precise population numbers; if you are having problems this year hiring enough black reporters for your too-white staff, hire more Hispanic and Asian-Americans.” Keep precise books, because, “what gets measured, gets done.”
- Train and prepare, and then promote minorities and white women to positions of authority.

## Insist that all hires and promotions be made from diverse pools of qualified candidates and watch that word “qualified!”

- Insist that all hires and promotions be made from diverse pools of qualified candidates and watch that word “qualified!” The term “qualified” carries a potential charge and must be used carefully; many minorities and white women believe that it has been used in the past to discriminate. A successful strategy is for the top editor to insist that no hires or promotions may be made until a final pool of candidates that is both diverse and qualified is assembled. Once that pool is assembled, an affirmative selection can be made from it. Many editors who have been successful in diversifying their staffs say that they no longer use the terms “fully” qualified or “the best” qualified since differences in qualification are highly subjective and difficult to quantify, anyway. As one said, “If everyone in the pool is qualified, that’s it; anyone chosen from that pool has to be, per se, qualified to do the job.” Moreover, another said, if you believe that having a diverse staff is essential to covering the news fully and fairly, then the fact of

diversity itself is an important qualification to be considered. And remember that potential is one aspect of qualification.

- Make diversity hiring and promotion goals part of the annual MBO or bonus programs of all managers who have hiring and promotion authority.
- Establish regular diversity and sensitivity training programs for all staff members. Make attendance mandatory. Top editors should make clear at these sessions the high priority they give to diversity and explain why it is a key goal of the organization in hiring, promotion, coverage and business strategy. It never hurts to ask publishers and CEOs to attend as a way of underscoring the company's commitment. And, as one vice president/news of a group said, "Some publishers could benefit from taking part in the conversation."
- Recognize that retention of journalists of color is critical to building a stable staff that can report on diversity effectively. Retention is improved by having editors of color who can become mentors and role models. Moreover, white editors should be exposed to educational programs that enable them to better understand cultural differences and to recognize how they can betray their deep commitment to diversity through naivete, subtle nuances in tones of conversation and body language, and lack of sensitivity about the different lifestyles journalists of color bring into the workplace.
- Require all reporters to have "rainbow Rolodexes," which include a diverse list of individuals who can speak with authority on any topic in the news. And monitor the newspaper to make sure that the diversity of the source lists is reflected in who is being quoted.
- Get reporters and photographers — and editors — regularly out of the office and into minority communities for orientation and education. The fact is that most white journalists, as other white professionals, are likely to live in predominantly white neighborhoods and are likely to be unfamiliar with predominantly minority neighborhoods and communities or what is going on in them.
- Set up "listening posts" at places where minority community members often gather and use them to learn about issues and concerns. Some stories may result, but the key goal is to use these visits to listen and learn.
- Invite the input of minority news staff members — and those from other departments of the newspaper as well — on coverage and story ideas. Seek guidance from a broad representation in the minority communities on planning public meetings, including the creation of lists of people to meet and listen to. Gregory Favre, vice president/news of McClatchy Newspapers, tells of how *The Sacramento Bee* brought in a Japanese-American reader to look over an anniversary story about World War II to be sure that it did not contain any inadvertent or subconscious stereotyping of Japan or the Japanese people.
- Acknowledge that there are diverse opinions in minority communities — what some have called the "diversity of diversity" — and embrace this fact in all of your actions on behalf of diversity. Beyond race and gender, keep in mind that economic class diversity also broadens a newsroom's perspective. Most journalists — certainly most white journalists — come out of the middle class; relatively few have the perspective of having been reared in families on welfare or having received food stamps.

- Use intern programs as a tool to connect with potential minority hires. Many newspapers that have a strong track record in diversifying their news staffs have intern programs with a high percentage of minority participation.
- Ensure that recruiting efforts spread the widest possible net: attend minority job fairs; establish continuing relationships with historically black colleges and others with significant percentages of minority students; scour the pages of alternative publications that target minority groups. Do not limit campus visits to journalism schools; look also for potential hires in departments of education, business, the sciences and the liberal arts. To aid in this, put advance notices or ads announcing pending recruiting trips in the university newspaper, not just on the journalism school bulletin board. Develop faculty contacts in schools and departments other than journalism; set up a network of professors willing to scout talent for you in other schools and departments of the university. And don't forget about high schools: look for strong potential talent among students there and be willing to award scholarships to fund their college education in journalism.
- Establish regular content audits of the paper to ensure that it is inclusive and reflects the full diversity of the community. Outside experts can help create a diversity audit system and guide staff members in implementing it. But as the APME/ASNE "Time Out For Diversity" program demonstrated, the real value comes when news staffers are fully involved in auditing coverage instead of merely being given reports of audits done by outsiders. Make your audits very specific; be wary of general reviews and readings that can result in only marginally useful conclusions, such as, "Well, we seem to be doing better. I saw quite a few black and female faces in that 30 days' worth of papers." Do target audits: the business section; quotes from lawyers or doctors; faces and names in the real estate/homes section; group photos of crowds at sporting events or shopping malls; stories about where high school seniors plan to attend college; features about families planning for upcoming holidays. Do not shy away from mathematical counts. Only in this way can you be sure you are developing accurate

## Invite citizens from minority groups to the office to talk about coverage.

information that will help the news staff identify problem areas that need attention. Be wary of counts that do not differentiate among sections; overall counts can be inflated and distorted, for example, by the number of stories and pictures of black athletes in the sports section.

- Invite citizens from minority groups to the office to talk about coverage. Better yet, hold those meetings in communities where it may be more convenient for the residents to attend. Consider adding some minority community members as resources to the staff team doing the audit. Several newspapers now are inviting

readers to attend the daily news meeting to offer reactions and comments on proposed and budgeted stories and to join in the discussion about story play.

- Remember that the rapidly diversifying demographic profile of the country is itself an important subject worthy of continuing coverage. Diversity is not just a good internal program; it's also a good story.

The commitment of editors and news staffs to do the right thing is evident at many newspapers across the country. Many are effectively pursuing the actions and goals we are suggesting as best practices. But the road of racial history in America is a long one, and those who walk it in search of fairness and equity — including journalists — are

## Until the lives of all citizens are fully and fairly represented in the staffs and content of all newspapers, the American press has made a promise it has not yet kept.

always subject to fatigue. And we must never allow ourselves to forget that until the lives of all citizens are fully and fairly represented in the staffs and content of all newspapers, the American press has made a promise it has not yet kept.

Finally, remember that publishing a newspaper that is reported and edited by a diverse staff and that fully reflects the community it serves is more than a moral obligation; it also is a strategic business imperative. There may be no other business that has a future so inextricably entwined with the changing demographics of the country. As the population becomes more diverse, only those newspapers that reflect the lives of all citizens are likely to attract them as readers. And only those newspapers that consistently attract new readers have a good chance to survive and prosper in the years ahead.

Newspapers are unfair when:

# They allow editorial bias in news stories

## How the public sees the problem

The most powerful concern about bias we encountered in our roundtables was the perception that news organizations had a “negative” bias. A school superintendent complained about the “normalization of radical behavior” because it was so often prominently covered — that is, reporters too often seemed to seek out the most extreme views and ignored the broad middle, where most opinion resides and where decisions typically are made. An environmental leader said, “Bad behavior is rewarded because what gets reported is the most outrageous statement made.” For every reader who thought the press was guilty of showing a political or ideological bias in the news columns, there were many more who complained about what they called “negative” bias.

It was noted that if 100 citizens attend a municipal government meeting and 95 agree with the position taken by the city council but five protest loudly and dramatically, the news story the next morning is likely to focus on the negative angle of the protesters, instead of the positive news that the vast majority of citizens who attended think their council is doing the right thing for the city.

As she ended her term as ombudsman of *The Washington Post*, Geneva Overholser also spoke about what she called “negative bias.” She said that although the *Post* is regarded as liberal and Democratic in a city known for its political polarization, most of the complaints she received were about “negativity, not liberal ideology.” Her parting advice on this to her colleagues was, “Don’t exaggerate problems and dwell so much on pathologies.”

One of the surprises of the roundtables was that complaints about editorial or political bias in news sections were so few. When we asked for examples of unfairness, only about 25 to 30% of the responses had to do with complaints that the newspaper’s editorial positions were reflected in the news columns.

But that is still a significant number, even when considering the breadth of the public definition of bias in news stories. Readers say they sometimes have difficulty separating what they read on the editorial page from what they read on the news pages.

When pushed for examples, readers who said they had complaints about bias in the news actually cited editorials or op-ed page pieces or news analysis articles in the news columns. Still, there was persuasive evidence that some newspapers have problems in keeping opinion on the editorial page and out of news stories.

Not all of the opinion that readers found in news stories reflected the newspaper's editorial voice. Examples offered told of reporters expressing opinions in news stories that were in conflict with the policy of the editorial page, but which were opinions nonetheless. Some of these examples were from columns and news analysis and not news stories. This may reflect a practice at some newspapers of giving columnists more leeway to express personal opinions on news events. When these columns of opinion appear in news sections or on section fronts, readers can be confused, as one reader put it, about "what is supposed to be factual news and what is their editorial opinion."

## “There simply is too much opinion being expressed by print journalists on television talk shows.”

— Ken Bode, Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University

Respected TV journalist Jim Lehrer has written that the most serious reason for the news media's credibility problem is the blurring of the lines among the three basic types of serious journalism: straight reporting, analysis and opinion. Once, Lehrer says, each was a very separate function: "This is what happened, this is what it means, and this is what I or we think about it." Each was done by a separate group of people, and the reader or viewer knew the difference. No more, he says, and the public is confused. Television probably is a greater offender, although not without the influence of newspaper journalists who work all week as straight-news reporters and then appear on the Sunday morning television talk shows to express opinions they would never put in their newspaper stories.

Ken Bode, a former network journalist who later became the dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, and who now teaches there, agrees and says flatly: "There simply is too much opinion being expressed by print journalists on television talk shows." Bode says political reporters — print and broadcast — should not both cover issues and then give their opinions of those issues on TV shows that are, he says, little more than "verbal food fights." The problem that results, Bode says, is that readers and viewers can never be quite sure which character is reporting the news story they are reading or viewing: the factual reporter or the opinionated talk-show participant.

The perception of a liberal bias in the press was not as pronounced in our roundtables as it is in some scientific surveys. In the ASNE credibility survey by Urban & Associates, 47% of newspaper readers said they thought their local paper was more politically liberal than they were, while 34% said they thought the paper was more conservative. Moreover, 56% said that newspapers "make biased decisions about what to publish." More than three-quarters of readers (78%) thought there was bias in the

media (42% in TV, 23% in newspapers and 17% in magazines), but there was little agreement about what constitutes bias. Thirty percent said bias was not being open-minded about facts, 29% said it was having an agenda and shaping news to fit it, and 29% said it was showing favoritism to particular social or political groups.

A 1996 study by the Roper Center for The Freedom Forum found that 61% of Washington-based reporters said their politics fell left of center, and only 9% described themselves as right of center. Roundtable participants who mentioned the study seemed to accept its findings that most national media reporters were more likely to be liberal than conservative in their personal beliefs and opinions.

Presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin thinks some of what is called bias in political reporting may actually be a narrative line that becomes a shortcut to describing public officials. She used the example of the media's characterization of former President Gerald Ford as clumsy. Ford took a well-covered tumble exiting an airplane and another on a ski slope, and his golf ball once struck a spectator. Each incident was appropriately reported by the press. But repeated characterizations of Ford as clumsy and uncoordinated were not fair, inasmuch as he was an All-American football player and arguably the best natural athlete ever to inhabit the White House. Goodwin thinks this is less an anti-Republican bias than a slick and easy shorthand reportorial technique. In this case, it became a metaphor for Ford: If he said or did something that was deemed politically awkward, reference would be made to his previous physical mishaps. The reporters may think they are being clever, but readers are likely to see it as biased and unfair.

**61% of Washington-based reporters said their politics fell left of center, and only 9% described themselves as right of center.**

In the broader context of public concerns about bias, questions were raised about reporters' ability to cover fairly issues and people with whom they strongly disagreed. Even reporters trying to be fair can, perhaps unconsciously, select language that may strike many in the public as biased. For example, terms such as "far-right" and "ultra-conservative" are more commonly used to describe very conservative Republicans than "far-left" and "ultra-liberal" are used to describe very liberal Democrats.

Readers at our roundtables said they saw the personal bias of reporters reflected in how they characterized activists on either side of such contentious issues as abortion, race, affirmative action, feminism, welfare reform, gun control, business, the military, spirituality and the place of religion in civil society. Several said they thought that this bias might have been unconscious and that the reporters might not even be aware it was showing. But they said it was detectable, nonetheless.

In two of the roundtable cities, public participants noted that when a major investigative project was running in the news sections and was being supported heavily by

the editorial page, the combination gave the impression of an intensive “campaign” or “crusade,” which left readers wondering about fairness.

Roundtable participants also said they believed that even when journalists were trying to be fair, news copy and selection sometimes could be influenced by “outsiders,” including advertisers. That finding was borne out by the ASNE/Urban & Associates research, which found that 78% of the public believe that “powerful people” have the influence to put stories into the paper or keep them out, and 50% believe it some people or groups get “a special break.”

While there was a time in the history of the U.S. press when advertisers and others had undue influence at some newspapers, most experts would agree that today this is rarely the case. But if the public believes otherwise it may be yet another situation that requires newspapers to do a better job of explaining the extent to which they now are armored by policies and practices that prohibit outside influence.

### What the public says

“In six years of public life I’ve gotten disillusioned with the media.” ... “Eccentric behavior occurs 2% of the time and normal behavior 98% of the time but reporting is the opposite of that.” ... “Their bias is to tear people down, not build them up.” ... “It seems like they are always looking for the worst things to play up.” ... “She should not be assigned to cover stories about abortion because her bias against the pro-life side is so strong; it comes out in every story” ... “They have a right to their opinions on the editorial page, but how come the billboard industry can never get a fair break in the news section?” ... “They cover our kind of church as if they think we are all crazy snake handlers.” ... “If it’s fair to describe Jerry Falwell as an ultra-conservative minister, why isn’t it fair to describe Jesse Jackson as an ultra-liberal minister?” ... “You don’t have to read the editorial page to know where they stand.” ... “I could tell the story was not going to come out fair by the way the reporter was asking questions on TV.” ... “There may come a time when a judge makes a ruling that cuts back on our First Amendment rights; when that day comes I will both cry and cheer at the same time.”

### Best practices to address the problem

Newspapers will never be able to completely rid themselves of complaints about bias. Some readers so strongly disagree with editorial policy that nothing the most scrupulously fair news department does will be enough. Other complaints come from people who do not want a fair and balanced news report, but one that advocates their point of view. As long as newspapers exercise a public-service obligation to expose corruption, incompetence and injustice so the public can take remedial action, they will find critics among people who like things just the way they are.

Here are best practices that may help a newspaper ensure its news report is not tainted by bias, either editorial or personal:

- Journalists should guard against letting personal connections unwittingly subvert their intent to be fair. Former *Boston Globe* editor Tom Winship wrote in the Spring/Summer 1998 *Media Studies Journal* about how he almost got caught with the wrong headline on John F. Kennedy’s close presidential victory in 1960. He had ordered a “Kennedy Wins Big” banner early in the evening when the returns didn’t really warrant it, and then went off to join friends at a Kennedy

team victory party. Later in the evening, as the returns tightened, Winship deleted the word “big” but the headline still had Kennedy winning. Kennedy finally pulled out a very late, very close victory the next morning, but Winship does not spare himself for what could have been a terribly embarrassing mistake. It happened, Winship said, because he had allowed himself to get “too preoccupied by Kennedy’s four-year campaign and too close to the Kennedy gang.”

- Journalists should be consciously aware that — because they are human — they have ideological leanings and should consciously take steps to “fence them off from their reporting,” as columnist Nat Hentoff advises. “Fairness,” Hentoff says, “means you get the facts, all of them if you can, especially when they surprise you into re-evaluating what you thought the story was going to be about when you began.” Hentoff is critical of his own writing about President Clinton. He says he got so angry, disgusted and caught up in writing critically about some of the things he thought President Clinton had done wrong that he never wrote favorably about anything he thought Clinton had done right. “My disgust at his rampant violations of the Constitution,” Hentoff says, “thoroughly undermined my commitment to fairness.” BBC correspondent Fergal Keane puts it this way: “It is perfectly legitimate to have personal feelings. But we must be rigorous in ensuring that they do not consciously — or subconsciously — affect our handling of stories.” Former *Miami Herald* publisher David Lawrence has cautions for reporters on being sure their copy does not get biased by the personal sympathies many of them have for the disadvantaged and powerless. “The real test is not compassion for the downtrodden — most of them have that — but whether journalists can be sensitive and thoughtful and fair to those with whom they disagree; to those they instinctively might dislike,” he says.
- A reporter covering an issue about which he or she has strong personal feelings should take regular “temperature checks” to be sure all sides are treated fairly. When in the slightest doubt about being fair, the reporter might share both the concern and the copy with a colleague or editor: “Look, I happen to think that one of these two candidates is a real turkey, but I want to be fair to both of them; would you give this a read and tell me if you see any problems?”

## Discussions about reporters keeping personal biases out of their news stories sometimes get hung up on the use of the word “objective.”

There also is a place for these “temperature checks” during the reporting process. Ask yourself, “Am I sure I’m asking both of these opposing candidates equally challenging questions?” Copy editors, many of whom have close social friends on the reporting staff and who may know of their friends’ personal inclinations, should be aware of that when editing copy. To safeguard a colleague against unwittingly letting bias show in a story is a valuable professional favor, not a disservice.

Discussions about reporters keeping personal biases out of their news stories sometimes get hung up on the use of the word “objective.” Critics contend that reporters should be objective. Journalists say that is an unrealistic standard. More to the point is this distinction made in a publication of the Committee of Concerned Journalists: “When the concept of objectivity in the media originally evolved, it did not imply that journalists were free of bias. It called, rather, for a consistent method of testing information — a transparent approach to evidence — precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work. It is the method that is objective, not the journalist.”

One of the public’s complaints about bias is directed at stories that go beyond reporting what someone said to include the reporter’s opinion about the motives of the public

## The Kaiser-Wiggins Rule: One clean shot at the facts of what happened before all of the motive-seekers and opiners descend on the story.

official, politician or business executive in taking an action that is the subject of the story.

The public’s concern that this is not fair can be understood in the context of the “Kaiser-Wiggins Rule,” a fairness guideline at *The Washington Post*. The rule is named in part for former managing editor Robert Kaiser, who was concerned that reporters were beginning too many stories with gratuitous clauses that rendered opinion on the news that followed.

In describing the rule, Kaiser recalled the view of longtime *Post* editor J. Russell Wiggins, who believed strongly that the public deserves “at least one clean shot” at a first-day news story — the facts only, devoid of any analysis or opinion — before the journalistic community started dissecting the event and the people involved looking for any microscopic evidence of motives. At a time when the public feels strongly that too much news is over-analyzed and over-commented-upon — including by journalists on talk shows — it almost certainly would applaud a newspaper that adopted the Kaiser-Wiggins Rule: One clean shot at the facts of what happened before all of the motive-seekers and opiners descend on the story.

The informal banter of reporters and editors inside a newsroom is one of the enjoyable aspects of membership in a group closely bound by shared interests, craft and purpose. The repartee can be fast and wickedly funny. It’s all part of the fun of newspapering, but sometimes this kind of banter can be too much of a good thing. Warning lights go on in good newsrooms when the conversation of reporters and editors starts getting tintured with such lines as, “Oh, no, I’ve got to go cover another one of dumb-dumb’s boring luncheon speeches!”; or, “When we get finished with this series, these clowns won’t know what hit ’em!”; or, “They are guilty as sin and I’m going to nail them!” That kind of language is dangerous because it can be introduced as evidence of the reporter’s mindset if the paper ever gets sued over the story. More importantly, it can be difficult for a reporter to give voice to such harshly critical

thoughts and feelings, and then try to maintain an open-minded attitude and approach of fairness.

Addressing the public's belief that news coverage is "too negative" is a challenge for journalists. They see their responsibility as being the watchdog that helps enlighten the community about how the public and private sectors are performing. The reality is that some readers do not want their local newspaper to tell them about social problems or about corrupt or incompetent public officials. The negative reaction to investigative stories is reinforced by the perception that a reporter has ambushed a public official or that the motive is to embarrass him or her — what has become known as "gotcha journalism."

Journalists perform an important role when they inform the community about serious problems. This fulfills a self-described responsibility to hold up a mirror to society. But that is only part of the job. The public considers the reporting of achievement and success, whether by an individual or an institution, to be an essential part of the newspaper's role, as well. Such stories are seen as conveying a sense of balance and fairness in coverage.

- As a best practice, editors should make clear to beat reporters that they expect a rich and variegated report on community news, both "good" and "bad." Beat reporters, for example, should understand that their assignments carry the responsibility to deliver a complete report, not solely a litany of controversy and failed performance. Special assignments should be made not just to investigate tips of wrongdoing, but also to find out what is going well, how problems are being effectively addressed, how challenges are being met.
- When critical stories are published, a fuller picture results if the main story describing the problem is accompanied by sidebars that detail how things might be going well in other aspects of the agency or in similar programs.
- As a best practice, editors should reinforce their requests for a more fully rounded report with decisions on play and presentation that reflect balance. The message will have little impact on reporters if they see that stories about failure, corruption and incompetence continue to dominate Page One. The public is aware of the full range of activity in the community and how the newspaper reflects it. They appreciate the watchdog role of the press, but they also know that much of life is made up of good people trying to do the right things. They want their newspaper to reflect this.
- Finally, editors must not shrink from blunt conversations with writers when there is even the slightest whiff of unfairness. This can require courage, particularly when the writer is a high-profile reporter or columnist, says journalist and author William Rentschler. It also applies to junior reporters, he says: "To permit a green medic to perform delicate brain surgery could be akin to murder. Yet a green reporter's slant can kill a good bill, stall a vital program, elevate a dolt or blacken undeservedly a reputation." Rentschler says the responsibility of a good editor is to "exercise to the utmost his or her discretion, discrimination, influence — and, if necessary, veto power — to produce ultimately a fair and balanced product."

If every editor assumed and exercised that responsibility, public complaints about bias and lack of fairness almost certainly would decline.



Newspapers are unfair when:

# They can't admit that sometimes there's no story

## How the public sees the problem

Several of the elected and appointed office holders in our roundtables expressed frustration with reporters who seem absolutely convinced — at the very beginning of the reporting process and long before all of the bases had been touched — that their story is going to be a blockbuster. They said they often felt that reporters had their minds fully made up by the time they approached key figures to get their versions of events.

A city manager with a reputation as both a competent professional and a straight shooter with the press said, “The hardest thing to do is to persuade a reporter that there simply is no big story here.” He said he was fully aware that politicians and others caught in embarrassing situations often resort to protesting that there is no story. But he went on to say, “You know, sometimes there *is* no story, despite the tip the reporter has gotten.” And once a reporter thinks he is on a hot trail, he added, it seems virtually impossible, no matter how many facts you have to present, to get him off it.

Arnold Rosenfeld, as he retired in 1999 as editor in chief of Cox Newspapers, wrote a column in which he urged, “Every editor ought to be ‘covered’ once in a while just to see how hard it is to shake a reporter from a preconceived thesis.”

Other roundtable participants said reporters often seem to “fall in love” with their stories. Reporters become convinced the story line emerging from their investigation is the only one. And even the emergence of new facts or different dimensions or a broader context fails to enable them to open their minds to the possibility that the story has changed or that there may be no story at all.

Several participants in the journalists’ roundtables tended to agree, acknowledging that if a reporter is not careful, enthusiasm for the chase can turn into too much enthusiasm for the story, sometimes well before all of the reporting has been done. A few journalists acknowledged privately that pressure from editors to produce a story can sometimes push a reporter to write the story before it is ready, when more reporting might reveal a picture that is closer to reality. Others complained of pressure from

assigning editors who had fixed views of what “the” story was, even though the reporting was developing a different picture. One journalist said, “I’ve worked for a few editors who would never dream of doctoring a story — but they were willing to try to doctor a reporter.”

Despite its criticisms and its concerns about fairness, the public strongly supports an investigative role for newspapers, especially about the conduct of the public’s business. In a 1996 Louis Harris and Associates’ survey, 75% of 3,000 respondents said it was “very important” for the news media to “hold public officials accountable,” and 67% said it was “very important” to “protect the public from abuses of power.” The only press roles that drew higher support were “providing news and information about important local events” (82%) and “providing news and information about America and the world” (79%).

The public’s perception is that as reporters and editors discuss story assignments, they typically have a preconceived notion of the story line and the sources to be interviewed. This means that instead of taking a fresh look at the topic and casting a wide net for sources who can talk about it authoritatively, the story is framed based on what is known or suspected, or how the reporter thinks about what is known or suspected. Such an early decision by reporter and editor about the story line means the sources to be interviewed will be those most likely to drive the story toward the expected outcome. In other words, the sources will be those who “fit” his or her conception of the story.

## The public’s perception is that ... reporters and editors ... have a preconceived notion of the story line.

This can lead to a problem that media scholars and critics call the problem of “bad framing.” Steven Smith, former editor of *The Gazette* in Colorado Springs, defines the “frame” of a story as “the context or narrative theme through which the story is told.” He cautions that a framing decision is based on values and perspective, not facts. So — depending on the values and perspective a reporter brings to a particular story — the story could turn out differently from one written on the same subject by a reporter with different values and perspectives on that subject.

In a 1999 study, the Committee of Concerned Journalists looked at published stories and tried to analyze how they had been framed. Were they framed as a horse race? Around conflict? Consensus? A historical trend? Explanation of policy? How things work? Discontent? The same set of facts, depending on the frame into which they are put by the reporter, can result in very different stories. Moreover, once a reporter has framed a story in his or her head, facts that conflict with the frame, or that don’t fit its premise, can be discarded. Geneva Overholser, as she ended her term as *The Washington Post’s* ombudsman, decried the fact that so many stories are framed as conflict. Rich Opel, editor of the *Austin (Texas) American-Statesman*, notes that too often stories about proposed business or residential construction projects seem to get framed solely as “environmentalists vs. developers.”

During the 1999 Unity convention in Seattle, a panel discussed recent coverage of the Buffalo Soldiers, the little-known Army Cavalry troop of black soldiers who exhibited great courage and bravery in protecting Western settlers from hostile Indians. The Buffalo Soldiers got little recognition or news coverage until many years later. Several black journalists attending the panel expressed pride and satisfaction that recognition of heroism in battle finally had come to the Buffalo Soldiers. There was a general feeling of “justice finally was done.” But a Native American journalist shook the room by asking, “How can you possibly celebrate a group of men who systematically murdered and butchered Native Americans?” It was a poignant moment that demonstrated how the framing of a story can be influenced by the perspective and values one brings to it.

In the earliest years of civil rights demonstrations in the South, the news of lunch counter sit-ins was reported in many newspapers as a police story in which “Negroes” were arrested for disorderly conduct. Framing the sit-ins this way led editors to assign young police reporters to cover the demonstrations. When editors began to recognize the sit-ins as part of a major event in American history, they framed the story differently and assigned the best and often most senior members of the staff to the coverage.

In 1972, the Watergate burglary during the Nixon administration originally was framed as a “two-bit break-in” of Democratic Party headquarters, and the assignment went to two young reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

### **What the public says**

“The hardest thing in the world to do is to persuade a reporter that sometimes there simply is no big story here.” ... “By the time they come to see me, their minds are made up; all they want me from is a quote about why we did it.” ... “I once asked a reporter if he was sure he was being fair and he just stared at me blankly.” ... “They get this idea, and they frame the story in a certain way in their heads, and then there is nothing that can shake them off it.” ... “As a law enforcement officer, I know that half of my job is to get the bad guy, but the other half is to develop information that clears the innocent; don’t investigative reporters look at it like that, too?”

### **Best practices to address the problem**

Sometimes, despite the best of intentions, fairness can get trampled in the rush to expose wrongdoing. A reporter can get so wrapped up in tips about wrongdoing he or she can forget that a tip is only a tip. It has to be checked out thoroughly. But the checking process is best begun with the mindset that the tip is just as likely to be wrong as it is right.

Reporters should work on developing “fairness skills.” The responsibility to take the lead falls to the editors. They should talk about fairness often, both in organized staff meetings and in informal conversations with staff members.

One editor said that increasingly he was reminding his desk editors that it was their job to “be skeptical” about stories, to question reporters closely and to be especially wary at any hint that a reporter’s enthusiasm might be running ahead of the facts. Another says editors need to be constantly saying to reporters, “Prove it to me.” Still another says that when sensitive stories are finished, they should be reviewed again “sentence by sentence” with questions such as: “Where did you get this?” “How do you know

this?” Reid MacCluggage, editor of *The Day* in New London, Conn., says, “We need to develop a whole new editing skill, which I call the ability to ‘prosecute’ a story.”

At one respected newspaper, a high-level editor is always kept completely out of the loop while the story is being reported and edited. He brings a “fresh eye” to the story when it’s presented for publication. The fairness guidelines of the *San Jose Mercury News* caution that while “factual errors usually are unintentional, the framing of a story is intentional. It results from an affirmative decision by a reporter or editor to cast a story in a particular way. So when a story is factually correct but goes wrong because it was mis-framed, a different correction protocol has to be observed, one that may require a complete re-analysis and evaluation including going back to the original framing decision.”

In framing a story, reporters and their assigning editors must be sure they have not concluded too soon about the nature of the story or its likely outcome. It is important that they ask themselves such questions as, “Are we sure we know now what this story

## Reporters and their assigning editors must be sure they have not concluded too soon about the nature of the story or its likely outcome.

really is all about? How can we look at this tip or this story idea in the most full and open way? If we look at this story idea in different ways, if we were to frame it another way, what lists of possible sources might we consider using?” Going through this exercise is not a guarantee of perfection. But it is a guarantee that assumptions and preconceptions will be challenged in useful ways. It could armor the newspaper against the mistake of publishing what some have called “a story, but not *the* story.” And even if the story ends up approximately where the reporter and editor originally thought, it’s likely to be enriched in context and to capture additional important nuances because of the broader and deeper list of sources interviewed.

In conversations with journalists, we asked how often the professional and ethical obligation to be fair came up in news staff meetings or in informal newsroom conversations. The answer, with few exceptions, was almost never. Several journalists said they recalled hearing caveats against bias during conversations about stories on minority groups or women, or instructions to be “balanced” in stories about controversial political races. Many recalled frequent warnings about libel and privacy laws, and regular questions from editors about whether they were sure they had something “right.”

But they could not recall any general newsroom conversations about fairness, nor could they recall ever having been asked by an editor if they were sure they were being fair to all parties in a story. Some journalists even reflected a sense of discomfort at the ideas of being asked to discuss fairness in a public forum. Such discussions, led by the top editors, not only reinforce the newspaper’s journalistic values but give everyone a clear roadmap of what is expected.

Some journalists might scoff that reminding reporters to “remember to be fair” is like telling doctors to “remember to cure the disease and not hurt the patient” or

telling accountants to “remember to add the column of numbers correctly.” But many members of the public are convinced that some reporters would benefit from such a reminder.



# The history of public perception that the press is unfair

By Lawrence T. McGill, director of research  
The Freedom Forum

In February 1997, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press released the results of a national survey under the damning headline — “Press ‘Unfair, Inaccurate and Pushy.’” Among other things, the study found that 67% of respondents felt that “in presenting news on political and social issues, news organizations tend to favor one side rather than dealing fairly with all sides.” It stated further that this negative view of the press had worsened by 14 percentage points since 1985.

Such findings are indeed alarming. But in the larger sweep of history, are such findings unprecedented? How have the public’s views on press fairness changed over the course of the 20th century? Before we attempt to answer such questions, two constraints should be kept in mind.

First, because the field of public opinion research is still relatively young, we can’t say with any precision how the public felt about the press prior to the 1930s. Nationally representative public opinion polls did not come into existence until the Crossley, Gallup and Roper organizations developed national networks of in-person interviewers in the 1930s. (National telephone surveys did not become a viable option until the 1970s, when telephones finally penetrated 90% of U.S. households.) So any assessment of general public opinion about the press prior to the 1930s is an educated guess at best.

Second, the answer to this question depends on what is meant by “fairness.” When it comes to fairness, there are all sorts of questions that can (and have) been asked. And the answers obtained by pollsters depend in no small measure upon the kinds of questions asked.

Most commonly, questions about fairness have been asked in relation to the coverage of political and social issues. In this context, fairness means impartiality, in the sense of providing balanced and unbiased reporting.

Of course, fairness means more to the public than impartiality (as the Media Studies Center’s 1998-99 roundtables revealed), and pollsters have periodically examined other dimensions of fairness as well. Among them are the press’s propensity for covering “negative” news, inaccuracy in reporting, and the ethics of journalists in general.

It is not possible in a short essay to treat adequately all of these dimensions of press

fairness in their full historical sweep. Because the data are most complete on the topic of press fairness of political coverage, this essay focuses exclusively on that particular dimension of fairness.

## PRESS 'FAIRNESS' BEFORE THE 1930s

Before 1900, press fairness was not even an issue. As late as the 1930s, the partisan roots of most newspapers were still very much in evidence. And who would expect a largely partisan press to be fair?

By most accounts, such professional values as fairness, objectivity and balance did not become press priorities until the early part of the 20th century. The reasons for this transformation are beyond the scope of this essay, but the signs of change in the practice of journalism were everywhere:

- The first journalism degree program in the country was established at the University of Illinois in 1904, followed by the University of Missouri program in 1908.
- The National Press Club was founded in Washington, D.C., in 1908. Sigma Delta Chi (known today as the Society of Professional Journalists) was founded in Indiana in 1909.
- According to journalism historian William David Sloan, the “straightforward, neutral, fact-based” reporting style of The Associated Press after 1900 was exerting a powerful standardizing influence on its member papers across the country.
- The American Society of Newspaper Editors published a journalistic code of ethics in 1923.

Each of these events signaled an increasing consensus in the press that such professional values as objectivity and fairness were of central importance to the practice of journalism. But if the earliest polls about the press are any indication, such values had yet to take hold very firmly by the 1930s.

## EARLIEST SURVEYS BRING BAD NEWS FOR THE PRESS

In the first nationally representative survey ever to ask the public a question about the press, the press received an unexpected piece of bad news. In late 1935, the editors of *Fortune* magazine turned the attention of their newly instituted quarterly poll (then just six months old) to the question of whether the public felt bankers, a group thought to be held in low esteem during the Depression, were “abusing their power.” To provide context, they asked the public not only how they felt about bankers, but also how they felt about newspapers, radio, the “pulpit” and veterans.

As the *Fortune* editors put it when they reported the results in their January 1936 issue, “... for its curiosity about the bankers, *Fortune* received a rebuff for journalism, as these returns show.” The returns did indeed constitute a rebuff for journalism, as 42% said the press abused its power, compared to 38% for bankers, 26% for the pulpit, 23% for veterans and 22% for radio.

These results so intrigued *Fortune's* editors that in 1939 they developed the first comprehensive questionnaire ever to focus entirely on public attitudes toward the

press. What is most striking about the results of that survey is how little they differ in many respects from public attitudes toward the press today. The public expressed concerns about accuracy (e.g., 30% felt that headlines were usually misleading), favoritism (e.g., 63% felt that newspapers “soft-pedaled” news that was unfavorable to friends of the publisher), and more to the point, fairness.

Fairness was asked about in several contexts. As one might expect given the assumption of a partisan press, the public said politicians were the least likely to receive fair treatment by the press. Fifty percent of the survey’s 5,000 respondents felt that newspapers did not “furnish fair and unprejudiced news about politics and politicians.” *Fortune’s* commentary on this result reveals a lot about how the press was regarded in those days: “There is a touch of ingenuousness about [this] question. Asking a good many people if the press is fair to politicians is like asking if the newspapers supported their candidate.”

The survey also asked whether newspapers furnished fair and unprejudiced news about “labor and labor leaders” (34% said it was unfair), “business and businessmen” (28% unfair), foreign affairs (21% unfair), and “religious and racial problems” (17% unfair). In all cases, substantially more people felt that newspapers covered each of these areas fairly than felt newspapers covered politics fairly.

This pattern of seeing the press as generally fair in most areas of coverage, with the exception of politics, is typical. In a 1937 Gallup poll, 66% characterized the press as generally “fair,” while just 47% characterized the newspapers as “fair in their treatment of political news.” Some 60 years later, a 1998 Media Studies Center survey found 62% of the population considered the “news media” fair in general, while a 1999 Pew Research Center survey found only 31% who said “news organizations are careful that their reporting is not politically biased.”

## PERCEPTIONS OF PRESS FAIRNESS DURING AND AFTER THE ROOSEVELT ERA

Given the history of the American press and its partisan roots, perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising that the public has always expressed skepticism regarding the press’s ability to cover politics fairly. But those who think public skepticism about press fairness has deepened over the years also have a valid point. It just depends on the point of comparison. If today’s survey results are compared with those of the 1930s or 1960s, little difference is found between public attitudes now and then. But if today’s results are compared with those of the 1950s or 1980s, it certainly appears that public attitudes have grown more unfavorable.

In the 1930s, public skepticism about the press’s ability to cover politics fairly was very high. It reached a peak in the spring of 1939 when 61% said newspapers were unfair in their treatment of political news. That’s not much different from the result obtained by the Pew Research Center in 1997 when 67% said news organizations tend to favor one side in their reporting on political and social issues.

The 1939 survey results were obtained at a time when President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s relations with the press had deteriorated to perhaps their lowest point. Never beloved by the largely Republican-oriented press of his day, Roosevelt saw the level of his editorial support decline precipitously throughout his first two terms. At

the time of his first election in 1932, he received 57% of the popular vote, while garnering the editorial support of 41% of U.S. daily newspapers. In 1936, he was re-elected by the largest popular majority in history to that time, with 60% of the vote. But his newspaper support dropped to 37%. By 1940, when Roosevelt received 55% of the vote, he was supported by just 25% of daily newspapers.

The public, which by and large continued to support Roosevelt, could not help but notice the press's disdain for the president, which was anything but hidden. Roosevelt himself added fuel to the fire whenever he could, saying repeatedly that 85% of the nation's press opposed him. So it's not surprising that the 1939 public would so overwhelmingly characterize the press as unfair in its treatment of political news.

Interestingly, the public made a clear distinction between the fairness of the still-young medium of radio and that of newspapers. In the same 1939 survey, 62% of respondents characterized radio's treatment of political news as fair, twice as many as considered newspapers fair (29%). It's quite likely that Roosevelt's highly effective use of radio through his "fireside chats" contributed to this result.

But public perceptions of press fairness improved substantially over the next 20 years. As early as November 1940, the percentage of people saying the press was unfair in its treatment of campaign news and issues had dropped to 40%. It dropped further to 35% in 1946 and reached a low of just 26% during 1957.

It's not hard to imagine what might have driven such a change. By late 1940, the nation's concerns were turning toward international issues. The New Deal had largely played itself out, and the press no longer felt compelled to devote daily ink to complaints about Roosevelt's domestic policies. By 1946, Roosevelt was gone and America was directing its energies to picking up the pieces after the war. And in 1957, a popular Republican occupied the presidency.

It may also be the case that the American press had begun to do a better job of living up to its professed standards of objectivity and fairness. After all, when the 1939 survey was taken, not that much time had passed since such standards were adopted. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that the public's perception of press fairness regarding politics was at its best during the mid-1950s. It would not be until the middle of the Reagan administration in 1985 that perceptions of the press would again be as positive as they were during the Eisenhower era.

## **INCREASING CONCERN ABOUT PRESS FAIRNESS IN THE 1960S**

By the 1964 presidential campaign, public concerns about press fairness had returned to pre-World War II levels. In November 1964, a Gallup poll found that 48% of the public believed that newspapers tended to "favor one political party or another." (Was it just a coincidence that a Democrat — Lyndon Johnson — once again occupied the Oval Office?)

Just as radio had been viewed as a much fairer medium than newspapers a generation earlier, television news in 1964 was also seen as much fairer in its political coverage than newspapers. Three out of five respondents in November 1964 (61%) characterized network television news as politically impartial, nearly twice as many as found

newspapers fair (34%).

That perception would be short-lived, however. More than anything else, what seems to have precipitated this change in public opinion about television was TV's coverage of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Oddly, when pollster George Gallup first charged that TV had covered the convention unfairly (at a communications symposium in September 1968), he produced nary a number to support his contention. Rather, he simply stated that he "sensed the public's distaste for too much conflict and controversy. The zeal of network reporters on the convention floors just recently, trying to report — and some believe even trying to stir up — controversy, left a bad taste in the mouths of many reviewers."

Nevertheless, numbers supporting this assertion soon were forthcoming. In August 1969, pollster Louis Harris found a third of the country holding the belief that TV news coverage is "sometimes unfair and slanted," up from the 17% who felt that TV news programs tended to "favor one political party or another" back in 1964. Although this was still substantially lower than the number of people who felt that newspapers were "sometimes unfair and slanted" (which Harris characterized as a "majority"), it does indicate that perceptions of TV news were beginning to change.

The reputation of TV news with respect to "fairness" received its most damaging blow at the end of 1969, a blow from which it has not recovered to this day. Angered by recent news coverage of Vietnam, then-Vice President Spiro Agnew delivered a stinging series of speeches beginning in November 1969 attacking the "liberal establishment press," with particular emphasis on television.

Apparently, his words touched a nerve. (They were widely heard, as well — a November 1970 *Newsweek* poll found that four out of five people had heard of the vice president's criticism of the press.) A Gallup poll taken one month after Agnew's first speech found more people holding the belief that the TV networks "tend to favor one side in presenting news dealing with political and social issues" than who said they "deal fairly with all sides."

Among the findings reported from this study was the fact that "Republicans and Independents were more inclined to charge unfairness by the news media than were Democrats." The irony of this result was not lost on the editors of the newsletter of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, who noted in January 1970 that it was "only a few years back [that the Democrats had] whistled the nation with cries of a 'one-party press.'"

## **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF NEWSPAPERS BECOME LINKED TO PERCEPTIONS OF TV NEWS**

Now Republicans had their own medium to complain about. And over the course of the next three decades, criticism of press fairness came more and more to connote criticism of television news (or of the "news media" in general) than criticism of newspapers.

But the criticisms leveled originally at TV news (e.g., liberal bias) came very quickly to be associated with newspapers as well. As early as November 1970, for example, a *Newsweek* poll found the public almost equally likely to see a slight liberal bias in both newspapers and TV news. This was despite the fact that three previous decades of pub-

lic-opinion polling had never before yielded such a result for newspapers.

Today, studies that attempt to compare public perceptions of newspaper fairness and TV news fairness usually find no significant differences between the two. The results of a 1997 Newseum study are typical in this regard. On a 5-point scale representing fairness (with 1 indicating “completely biased” and 5 indicating “completely fair”), the average rating for network TV news was 3.03, while the rating for “your local newspaper” was 3.02. That’s an astonishing lack of differentiation between the two media.

In other words, just as newspapers finally appear to have solved one “rub-off” problem — namely, ink rub-off — they now face a different kind of rub-off problem in that the public’s assumptions about television journalism are typically thought to hold for other forms of journalism as well.

## WHY THE NEWS ABOUT PRESS FAIRNESS MAY NOT BE AS BAD AS IT SEEMS

As noted at the outset, recent public-opinion findings on press fairness do not paint a rosy picture. But two points need to be made about the wording of poll questions before reaching any final conclusions.

First, questions about specific mainstream news organizations are much more likely to elicit positive responses from the public than are questions about “news organizations” or “the news media” in general. For example, during 1996 the Media Studies Center asked a national sample of voters to rate the “fairness” of presidential campaign coverage on a number of different news outlets. Among other results, CNN was viewed as “fair” by 76% of the respondents who had an opinion about CNN, the network newscasts were viewed as “fair” by 63% of those who had an opinion about the newscasts, and so forth.

On the face of it, it is hard to reconcile such findings with others suggesting that two-thirds of the country think news organizations (in general) don’t treat all sides of social and political issues fairly (Pew Research Center, 1997). What exactly is the public trying to tell us with such seemingly contradictory results?

Consider the difference between the two types of question. Questions referring to specific news organizations ask people something they know about firsthand. For example, when people are asked about CNN, they can describe what they think of CNN because they’ve watched it themselves. If people are asked about their local newspaper, they can describe what they think about it because they’ve read it themselves.

But questions about “news organizations in general” ask people about something they know about only secondhand, either through conversations with others about “the media” or, ironically, through news reports about “the media.” If people are basing their responses to such questions on what they’ve seen or heard in the news about “the media,” is it any wonder that the answers to such questions would tend to be more negative?

The upshot of all this is that answers to questions about news organizations in general may be telling us more about how the news media are being portrayed in the media than about what the public actually feels about news organizations. In other

words, the public's views on media fairness might not be as bad as the results of some studies seem to suggest. So it might not be a bad idea for the news media to take stock of just how they are portraying the industry to the public.

Secondly, questions that ask about “press fairness in general” typically generate more positive findings than do questions that focus on specific areas of coverage. In other words, the public's concerns about press fairness appear to apply more to the coverage of some areas (e.g., politics) than to others.

The fact that coverage of politics appears to raise public concerns about fairness more than coverage of other areas is noteworthy. Although it should not encourage the press to be any less vigilant about applying the rules of fairness to covering politics, when it comes to politics, sometimes fairness is in the eye of the beholder.

That said, it is still true that more people perceive the press to be unfair in its coverage of politics at some times than at others. So real changes in public opinion about press fairness do occur. But it's safe to say that not everyone who charges the press with unfairness is assessing the press with the same kind of objectivity they demand of the press itself.

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# Fairness and the First Amendment

By Kenneth A. Paulson, executive director and senior vice president  
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A newspaper executive attending a First Amendment seminar recently had some constructive criticism for the speakers.

They did a good job of outlining First Amendment rights, he noted, but why was so little attention paid to First Amendment responsibilities?

As it turns out, the audience member didn't miss a thing.

There are no First Amendment responsibilities. The press doesn't have to be fair in order to be free.

That doesn't sound quite right, does it?

After all, so many of our societal privileges are tied to specific conditions. We have the right to drive but can lose that right if we don't drive responsibly. We have the right to vote but can lose that right if we commit a serious crime.

Yet that's not how the First Amendment works. It's designed to protect minority viewpoints against government intervention. These rights have to stand on their own without government intervention or approval.

We don't have to earn the right to pray. Or assemble. Or speak out. Or petition the government for change.

And news organizations don't have to earn the right to exercise their free-press rights. For better or worse, these are constitutional rights without constitutional responsibilities.

That doesn't mean that news media unfairness will always go unpunished. But it does mean that press freedom is not conditioned upon fair and balanced reporting.

In "Rights Vs. Responsibilities: The Supreme Court and the Media," author Elizabeth Blanks Hindman reviewed the high court's disposition of free-press cases and observed:

"Over time, a dominant view of the place media freedom and responsibility hold in U.S. society became clear. Apparent in nearly every case, that view is that media freedom is very important to the functioning of U.S. democracy. . . . Media freedom is protected not because of its own intrinsic value, but because it has a larger purpose. The opinions studied showed that, despite the apparently absolute language of the First Amendment, media freedom is a means, not an end. And because of that, the media can be, and often are, held accountable for their actions and to their purposes."

As Hindman points out, the news media face some limits. Libel, obscenity and criminal acts committed in the act of news gathering are among punishable acts. But the overriding societal value of a free press provides extraordinary protection to news media.

So what does that mean for a free press exploring the concept of a fair press?

It means that journalists have great latitude in writing and reporting, a gift given to them by our nation's first citizens, who insisted on a free press (and a Bill of Rights) before they would support ratification of the Constitution.

It means that the press has the freedom to be unfair, and that courts will step in only when the societal damage done far outweighs the powerful policy argument for keeping their hands off.

Of course, the knowledge that biased reporting can be conducted with relative impunity shouldn't comfort the news media.

While the U.S. Supreme Court has fairly consistently described freedom of the press as being pivotal to our democracy, it appears that the American public is not so sure.

## 53% of Americans said they believed the press has too much freedom.

In a 1999 survey sponsored by the First Amendment Center, 53% of Americans said they believed the press has too much freedom.

That opinion came from a public whose ancestors insisted on the right to press freedom. The pendulum swings both ways.

There's a case to be made that while the press has no constitutional duty to be fair, there is a societal obligation to do so. The press is like no other industry in American society. Its importance is acknowledged in the Constitution and its liberty is part of our nation's foundation. Doesn't the press have a duty to live up to its special role in our democracy?

Thomas Jefferson thought so.

Jefferson was a lifelong advocate of freedom of the press, even when his friends and colleagues in public office were unfairly attacked by newspapers. He noted: "Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost. To the sacrifice of time, labor, fortune, a public servant must count upon adding that of peace of mind and even reputation."

Yet that faith in a free press was tempered over the decades by what he regarded as grossly unfair reporting.

"It is a melancholy truth that a suppression of the press could not more completely deprive the nations of its benefits, than is done by such abandoned prostitution to falsehood," he wrote.

In "Constitutional Thought of Thomas Jefferson," David Mayer concluded that those sentiments and others suggested that reporting abuses would be most destruc-

tive to the publications themselves.

“Jefferson’s concern about libels was not for loss of popular confidence in the government, but rather for loss of popular confidence in the newspapers themselves,” Mayer noted.

In other words, an unfair press threatens a free press.

Once again, Jefferson was ahead of his time.

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The Freedom Forum, based in Arlington, Va., is a nonpartisan, international foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people. The foundation focuses on four main priorities: the Newseum, First Amendment issues, newsroom diversity and world press freedom.

The Freedom Forum funds two independent affiliates — the Newseum, the interactive museum of news in Arlington; and the First Amendment Center, with offices at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., and in New York City and Arlington. Other operating offices are in San Francisco, Cocoa Beach, Fla., Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, Johannesburg and London.

The Freedom Forum was established in 1991 under the direction of Founder Allen H. Neuharth as successor to a foundation started in 1935 by newspaper publisher Frank E. Gannett. The Freedom Forum is not affiliated with Gannett Co., does not solicit or accept financial contributions, and does not accept unsolicited funding requests. Its work is supported by income from an endowment now worth more than \$1 billion in diversified assets.



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