

22. Deppa, *The Media and Disasters: Pan Am 103*, p. 29.
23. Alistair Cooke's "The Obscenity Business," in his *The Americans: Fifty Talks on Our Life and Times* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), identifies quite succinctly the kind of hypocritical interest often taken in such horrific events by the news media.
24. *Naked News: The Tabloid*, Channel 4 TV, 1995.
25. Paul Schwartzman, *Daily News* Political Correspondent, in *Naked News: The Tabloid*, Channel 4 TV, 1995.
26. See Snoddy, *The Good, The Bad and The Unacceptable*, p. 35. Unfortunately, even in contemporary journalism the practice has not disappeared altogether.
27. See Andrew Belsey and Ruth Chadwick, "Ethics as a Vehicle for Media Quality," *European Journal of Communication*, 10 (1995): 461-473.
28. However, the force of certain ethical demands may depend on special norms by virtue of features particular to journalism and the functions of the media.

## 2 News and the Fourth Estate

### INTRODUCTION

Naturally enough, we tend to presume that we know what news is. As the very term suggests it is surely constituted by new information, the reporting of fresh events, or the casting of new light upon old ones. Hence, presumably, the function of journalism is to report accurately and in a complete manner the truth concerning new events or insights. However, what makes the news is far from simple. If all new events were appropriately considered news and reported as such, then there would not be enough air time on television and radio for anything else, newspapers would be the size of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and anything of interest to us would be lost in a welter of information that we could not possibly process.

An apt analogy might be made to the cartographer's map in Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*: the cartographer's aim is to make the most faithful map of England possible.<sup>1</sup> But, in order to achieve his goal, the cartographer presumes he must represent every geographical detail, every highway, byway, and blade of grass. Consequently he ends up with a map that would literally cover the entire country and, no doubt, under which many people would suffocate. Obviously the map is useless: one can hardly fold it up and put it in one's pocket or tell, without actually going to the place, what the landscape ahead is like. In being so literal-minded the cartographer undercuts the very point and purpose of making a map in the first place. News, like maps, must necessarily be selective.

So not all new events can usefully be considered news; hence we need some idea as to what guides the process of selection. What enables us to distinguish

newsworthy events from merely new events? The point is not just that newspapers cannot store all the information in a user-friendly way. Imagine a Gibsonian "news" society of the future where we could access a news service listing every event in the world. Such a service would inform us less about the world than the papers we presently read. Infinite storage capacity with bulletins of standard-length summaries would hardly attain the minimum threshold required to be a news service of informative value and interest. The point of the news is to select, highlight, and treat appropriately what we ought to know about what is happening in our world.

### A SOCIOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

A popular sociological account of whether something constitutes news presumes that the issue is a purely classificatory matter, which depends on the conventions of presentation, narrative style, and whether the news institutions, programs, or editors consider a story news. Whether the story covered as news is any good or of much interest is a further distinct and unrelated question. The thought is that accounts that assess news in terms of the performance of a particular function conflate, falsely, the classificatory and evaluative senses of the term "news."<sup>2</sup> The virtues of such a distinction mean that we need not be overly narrow about what is considered to be news. According to this sociological account, Bill Clinton's commitment to affirmative action, a Zenith take-over bid, Heather Locklear's steamy sex secrets, Hollywood gossip, and Michael Jordan's foray into baseball are all thus considered news because the papers, radio, and television stations cover them as such, even though we might evaluate them negatively.

However, despite its virtues, such a sociological account can only prove deeply inadequate because it nimbly sidesteps the difficult questions concerning judgement and value that we must get clear about. In the first instance, who exactly counts in conferring the status of news upon a particular story? Organizations? Proprietors? Editors? Journalists? Proprietors need not have any intrinsic connection to or understanding of news and journalism. They may just be interested in owning a given paper or news network for profit maximization, power, or influence. Journalists may write up stories as news, and yet the story may still fail to qualify because editors refuse to take it or see the public interest involved. Perhaps editors are the key figures in the news-making process? Typically editors started out as journalists and thus have a fairly thorough grounding in the skills and understanding of a reporter's job. Moreover, and this is increasingly true in the world of corporate journalism, they have the power to reject, rewrite, and tailor the report's content and style. Yet even so, news editors or institutions cannot adequately be taken to be conferrers of news status. This is not merely because journalists often discover stories by themselves, independently of editorial direction, and will bring a story to the editor expecting them to recog-

nize it as news. More importantly it is because—as all journalists, editors, and the public at large recognize—big news stories can be and sometimes are missed by the press.

For example in the 1980s the activities of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) were hardly considered newsworthy.<sup>3</sup> Yet even in the early years of the Reagan administration it was becoming clear that something was seriously wrong. Sam Pierce, a New York lawyer appointed to head the agency, was flown all over the United States by various builders and bankers. Industry bodies facilitated trips abroad by various administration officials, including to Italy, and expenses bills were rocketing through the roof for trips to Europe. Unfortunately, contracts were awarded to those with the right political allegiances, bribery proliferated, and federal mortgage applications falsified. Despite evidence of a wide-scale problem, and the effect such corruption had on the weakest and most vulnerable in society, the HUD scandal was not deemed to be news. It was only in April 1989 that the story was considered newsworthy, because of the angle of human hypocrisy involved. James Watt had become well known for his denunciations of federal poverty programs and resultant subsidy handouts, influence-seeking punditry that inflated the cost and inefficiency of the programs. But he was among a group of consultants identified as seeking to cash in on various grants from one of the HUD's housing programs. Suddenly the HUD became big news overnight. But the real story, as it had been happening, had been and gone. For many years the federal programs had been manipulated by those in authority and subsumed for personal interest or advantage, and most of the key information had been released in audits five years previously.

Conversely, hard-news "exclusives" may turn out not to be worth the paper on which they are printed. For example, a recent *Sunday Times* exclusive reported that the one-time leader of the British Labour Party, Michael Foot, had in fact worked for the Russian KGB. But it rapidly turned out that the source's account was, at best, misdirected and that *The Sunday Times* had apparently misrepresented their own source's claims. The mere fact that Michael Foot had met various Russian emissaries was hardly news, given that most left-wing politicians had, during their political careers, been approached in this way. Subsequently *The Sunday Times* was obliged to retract and pay damages.<sup>4</sup>

The sociological account effectively defines news in terms of what is covered by the media as news. Yet papers or television sometimes miss big stories and, conversely, actually cover stories that turn out not to be news at all. This is not merely the trivial point that in the bulky sections of Sunday papers there are cookery, travel, and car sections that, marketing considerations aside, would normally not be considered news at all. Nor is it merely to point to the recent phenomenon of papers like *The Sunday Sport*, which "report" such stories as "Elvis Found on Mars." For these stories are not intended, nor taken by their readership, to constitute real news at all: they are a parody in news form of outlandish freak stories and tall tales. Rather, if we limit news to those stories

actually covered by the media and recognized as such by those within it, our understanding of news would be both too wide and too narrow. It falsely includes joke stories treated in news form and falsely excludes stories that it was a mistake not to cover. Unfortunately the latter kind of case is not as rare as many journalists would like to believe.

All these problems point to the fundamental misconception endemic to the sociological approach. For the account presupposes the institutional existence of journalists, media institutions, and the process of making news. But this is the very thing any account of the news ought to seek to explain: just why do we have the news media, and what exactly is their function? The sociological account puts the cart before the horse. How did the institutions of the media, newspapers, and journalists get going if not by building on a recognition of certain things as news in the first place? This is not to deny that evolving institutions and modes of communication shape and influence the nature of the news. After all, the demands of advertisers or the need for pictures to go with a story covered by television may have a strong determining influence on the shape and nature of news programming. But, without the primary recognition of something as news, the media institutions could not have got going and there would be nothing for the evolving institutions and modes of communication to have a modificatory influence on.

Our natural and fitting presumption is that what matters is what journalists discover. We talk of recognizing a news story rather than merely creating one. A journalist convinced that something is a news story will not try to convince others by saying that it has been written up as one or that the editor said it was. Rather, a good journalist will try to explain why it is newsworthy by attempting to show the news editor or doubter that something of crucial public or human interest is involved. He or she will try to show us how we should see the essential aspect of the story rather than appeal to institutional considerations. What is relevant is not the appearance of a story in newsprint or production by CNN and the BBC. This is precisely why it is only when we fail to recognize whether or why we are supposed to be interested in a news story that we tend to seek institutional-type explanations. Thus only when we think a news item is not really newsworthy do we start thinking about distorting institutional influences such as the possible demands made by advertisers. After all, we may watch the news and complain "that's not news," a complaint that makes no sense on the sociological account. Conversely, a story or event not covered by the media may be big news. We judge news stories, not confer news status on them. The value of news, and the implicit ethical commitments involved, cannot be explained by the sociological account: it leaves us unclear about the very thing it sets out to explain.

## THE FOURTH ESTATE AND THE IMPLICIT CONTRACT

We still require an understanding of the values that enable us to pick out what the salient news stories are. The traditional presumption is that the primary principle concerns what affects our lives as citizens: the media have a duty to inform us about events in the world that significantly affect our lives.

This traditional conception of the role of the news media generally underwrites the presumption that the press constitutes the fourth estate.<sup>5</sup> The three estates of the legislature, executive, and judiciary are all semiautonomous and official spheres of government. In a democratic state, we elect the legislature to legislate on the people's behalf. The law is enforced impartially by the executive, and the judiciary rule on how the law is to be applied and, moreover, whether the legislation is within the bounds of a constitutional liberal state. Democratic accountability is the primary means of ensuring that those in power cannot manipulate their position for their own self-interest at the expense of the public interest. As Winston Churchill once intimated, democratic government may be bad, but the alternatives are worse.<sup>6</sup>

Although the political arrangements of checks and balances aim to prevent the domination of one sphere of government on another, it remains possible for devious, powerful individuals and institutions within government to conspire in their own private interest. This is a perversion of the transparent functioning of government, the aim being to avoid accountability, in order to achieve private ends independently of legality and the public interest. But due to the complexity, size, and levels of government, the mechanisms, bodies, personnel, and interrelations involved in the democratic process are often far from transparent. As with any political state, the question arises, who keeps guard over the guardians? The question is particularly acute for liberal democratic societies because the fundamental presumption of a liberal state is that the arms of government are accountable to the people.<sup>7</sup> But there is no absolute guarantee, and the trappings of power and influence can often corrupt those in positions of authority. It is often possible for those in the political sphere to club together and to attempt to pervert the democratic process to further their own aims and goals.

This is where the notion of the press as an unofficial fourth estate comes in. Obviously we cannot all hope to get to grips with the opaque workings of government or hope to grasp the nuances of political maneuverings. But those who study the process itself on a day-to-day basis, comment on it, and relay reports to us through the news media are not only there to report to us the public workings of government but can hope to explain to us what the significance of certain events might be. Thus journalists reporting on the day's proceedings in Congress, parliament, the courts, or the behavior of the police are, in effect, watchdogs for the people over those who occupy positions of power and rule in our name for our benefit.

The fundamental point is not merely an empirical one about the kinds of corruption to which those who control the levers of power are open. After all, the

watchdog role of the press brings with it its own form of power to shape and influence events. Rather, it is to point up the implied contract between the citizens in a liberal state and the news media. The point of the press is to keep a watch on those in positions of power over us, in order to report what is actually happening and being done in our name. We need this information both to know what is happening and so that we can judge whether our representatives are doing their job, whether the right policies are being pursued, whether we should make representations to government against some policy, and whether true justice is being carried out.

It is important to realize that the implicit contract between citizens and the news media, as watchdogs, entails a normative conception of good journalism. We have a picture of what good journalism amounts to, on the basis of which we can evaluate and criticize news stories and journalistic practices. The normative picture of good journalism provided corresponds very closely to the traditional one: namely, that good journalism covers what we ought to know, construed in terms of events and policies that affect how we are governed and how our society is governed. The news media guard the public at large from any unwarranted or unwanted incursions by the state into people's freedom or rights. Hence the large degree of coverage given to governmental functions, announcements, elections, policy disputes, initiatives, and politicians' lives. Thus politics and the processes of government are considered a mainstay of good journalism and news coverage.

It also follows that the media's failure to pick up on or cover adequately stories that do have a significant relation to our lives and the way they are governed constitutes a journalistic failure. Of course, it only constitutes such a failure where the story could have been covered or reported on in the first place. If there was no evidence, public or private, concerning some imminent financial disaster then the failure to report on the possible collapse of Wall Street or Lloyds of London could hardly be considered a failure of the news media. But where there is mounting evidence, where sources are available, where events do suggest a given trend with possibly far-reaching implications for the savings or lives of many people, a failure to investigate and report a story constitutes a failure to fulfill the function of the news media and live up to the implied contract. Thus conceiving of the news media as the fourth estate, in contrast to the sociological account, explains both why we value it and what constitutes good and bad journalism.

Nonetheless, there might be worries about such an account. Conceiving of the news media as the fourth estate seems to entail the following: something is newsworthy if and only if the story bears a significant relation to our ability to function as citizens within society. The function is given by a critical analysis of the media's watchdog function in a liberal society. The ordering principle as articulated, that of public significance, also captures the traditional presumption of many journalists that mere entertainment cannot, properly speaking, qualify as

news. At best, an entertainment story may serve as a light-hearted leavening between the real news of significant events and disasters. Thus a story about Princess Diana and her children going white-water rafting in Aspen might be a therapeutic sweetener at the end of a bulletin cataloguing the latest serial killing, the day's proceedings of the O. J. Simpson trial, the disasters in Bosnia, or some current dispute between the president and the White House. But at best such a story is deemed parasitic upon "real" news.

But, the objection goes, there is something severely wrong with such a conclusion. For we are naturally interested in, and consider newsworthy, reports concerning the love lives of the rich and famous, from Pamela Anderson, Hugh Grant, and Madonna to Richard Gere and Cindy Crawford. Of course, we do not need to know about such things in order to function as citizens in society. But far from showing that such reports are not real news, this shows rather that the functionalist account of the news media, as the fourth estate, is far too narrow. Indeed, it seems to rest on a distorted understanding of the way the news media evolved. For, if anything, the news media evolved from entertaining, sensationalist scandal sheets and propaganda pamphlets that were far more speculative and loose with the truth than the news media are today.<sup>8</sup> Hence, someone might claim, *Entertainment Tonight* is a great news show providing gossip about the entertainment world, even though no one would ever claim that it provides an adequate representation of people and events that shape the way we are governed.

There is a certain force to this objection. The fundamental flaw in conceiving of the news media *solely* in terms of the fourth estate is that such an account is far too restrictive. We are interested in the juvenilia, interests, passions, and love lives of sports stars, soap stars, writers, actors, talk show hosts, lottery winners, everyday folk who win out against the odds, tales of adversity, glamor, and intrigue, quite apart from whether they have any effect on our public governance or not. Any account that rules out much of what we are interested in, and consequently much of what is included in the media as news, seems to be intuitively false. After all, the audience may not care so much for "significant" events as reports about Pamela Anderson's stormy marriage. Of course it matters as to whether what is reported about Pamela Anderson is true or not, given that the reader wants to find out about what is happening to her. But such information hardly fits in with or is "significant" in the grand scheme of things. Nonetheless, when a football player faces charges for murder, the news media may devote far more space to him than, say, to the Northern Ireland ceasefire or tragic events in Rwanda.

Of course, a hardcore political journalist might retort that we may well be interested in such things but that it is not the kind of thing we should term as news or be interested in hearing about. But then it looks as though an overly narrow evaluative commitment is used to define the category "news" in a way that is

inevitably partial. It is not that the presumption of public significance does not highlight a useful and valuable function. Rather it cannot and does not capture the nature of news as a whole.

Moreover, imagine if the news media agenda were wholly driven by the notion of the fourth estate. Presumably the news we would get would be akin to the higher-minded political coverage presented to us by worthy newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, or *The Washington Post* in the United States and *The Guardian* or *The Times* in the United Kingdom. The virtues of such papers accord well with the conception of the news media as the fourth estate, detailing and tracking political maneuverings in Washington and Westminster, detailing policy debates, political clashes, public affairs, and scandals. Yet such dull but worthy coverage would hardly be compelling, except to those preoccupied by politics, and we would feel that much of what we value in news had been lost.

Indeed, such news media coverage might effectively alienate us from the political process itself by detailing the minutiae of government in ways too abstract, complex, and tedious to compel our interest. It would tend toward a preoccupation with politics which would be self-defeating, fixating upon an endless litany of detailed facts about particular shifts in policy, endless speculation about political personalities or maneuverings, and the procession of ever more worthy but obscure experts on matters at hand that ordinary people often have no interest in or understanding of. If the sole fare of the news media is politics, and increasingly bears little relation to people's lives, then most people will switch off. This is not merely to say that the way politics is often covered is too obsessive, abstract, and full of jargon. For even if worthy political news were crystallized and conveyed in easily comprehensible ways, as it can and should be, there would still be a lack—a lack of human interest.

However, the objection can be met. Firstly, we should note that the objection does not show that the news media should not function as the fourth estate. After all, consider a news media that consisted solely of gossip, intrigues, and news about the lives of the rich and famous but entirely neglected the workings of government, politics, and public policy. We would, quite rightly, assume that the media was failing us. Thus we may criticize the initial reporting of the Gulf War and Vietnam, prior to and during the early stages of U.S. involvement at least, since it promoted a misconception of what the actual situations were, how they could best be combated, and what the just courses of action were.<sup>9</sup> A more extreme scenario is given in J. G. Ballard's short story, "The Secret History of World War 3."<sup>10</sup> The story effectively points up the absurdity of a news media dominated by prurient human interests at the expense of any understanding of the actual world. The story is narrated by an ordinary surgeon who is the only one among his friends and colleagues who remembers the onset and resolution, within minutes, of World War 3. The reason no one remembers is because the news media have become so focused on the mental and physical health of the

president, Ronald Reagan in for his historic third term, that no time and interest is shown in the potentially disastrous tensions between Russia and the United States. In Ballard's story the news media have clearly failed to report on issues and events that affect people as citizens and human beings in the most important of ways. Hence we criticize the news media when they fail to uncover stories, such as the saving and loans scandal, which are important in this way.<sup>11</sup> Quietism and trivialization are blameworthy traits precisely because they constitute a failure of the news media's most important function.

It is part of the very concept "news" that what is reported should be new and significant—significant insofar as such events may or do impinge on how we choose to lead our lives. Within a political state, especially a liberal, democratic state, this entails coverage of political stories and events. Historically it may be true that the news media evolved in relation to partisan polemics, the uncritical acceptance of official versions of events, and sensationalist scandal sheets. However, increasingly we have come to regard the news as our main source of information about events in the world which affect us. Hence we have come to expect journalists and news institutions to cover stories to inform us about the world. This is not to claim that, initially at least, many journalists, papers, and news organizations did so particularly well. Yet as we come to recognize the function of news, and the implicit contract between the news media and its public, we quite rightly come to expect journalists and the media to do a better job in covering the world fairly, accurately, and impartially. Thus we expect journalists not to make quotes up or doctor photographs to give a misleading impression. If journalism is in a better state than it ever was, which is disputable, this suggests only that the news media have come to recognize and carry out their socioculturally evolved function as the fourth estate.

However, what the objection does show is that to conceive of the news media *solely* in terms of the fourth estate is overly narrow and distorting. But it is quite compatible both to claim that one of its primary functions is to act as the fourth estate and to hold that the news media had also better cover stories of human interest. The virtue of such an account is that it both makes sense of our common-sense demand that the news media inform us about events in the world which affect us as citizens and recognizes our deeply human interest in stories about other individual human beings in times of stress, war, hunger, love, fame, death, starvation, abandonment, loss, and suffering. The successes, trials, and tribulations of others fascinate us because they help us to make sense of our own lives. For reports and stories about how people cope with their predicaments, how success was achieved through commitment, determination, or luck, may show us something about our human nature and common lot.

For example the Oklahoma bombing in April 1995 was obviously important in terms of the possible implications for terrorism in the United States. But, in human terms at least, that was not the main focus of the initial story: the main focus was on those killed and wounded, the rescue operation, and the apparently

pointless and random nature of the attack on ordinary, innocent people without warning. One of the images that defined the event was of a fireman emerging from the smoke carrying an infant child in his arms. Why was the image so powerful? Because in all its particularity it nonetheless symbolized the horrific nature of the event: the wanton annihilation of innocent life without purpose or explanation.

It is important to realize that such human interest is not, quite naturally, merely confined to momentous events such as the Oklahoma bombing, man-made disasters like the Exxon Valdez, or natural disasters such as drought or earthquakes. Just one look at even the most worthy of newspapers will show that we are, in fact, fascinated by what is often sneeringly derided as the trivia of human life: from how a hostage coped with the ordeal or why a star like Hugh Grant might go to a prostitute, to whether a football star will pull through for his team in the SuperBowl. We find such stories compelling, and, often despite the way such stories are sometimes covered, they certainly do not lack for interest. Even desperately worthy newspapers will cover the human interest stories, though often disingenuously. For example, in the Hugh Grant case, the news angle in the broadsheet papers focused on how the tabloid press covered the story. But there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to know about events that have a certain human interest, whether in terms of some grand catastrophe or something that touches upon the human condition or concerns the trivia of the royal, the rich, and the famous. If certain events that have no effect on us as citizens nonetheless speak to our natural human interest, then that constitutes good grounds for considering the event newsworthy.

#### NEWS, ENTERTAINMENT, AND INFORMED INTERESTS

However, considerations of human interest might be thought to lead to a much stronger conclusion—that the implicit contract between the news media and the public quite legitimately allows the news media to focus mainly on entertaining its audience. But we should be wary of presuming that the actual preferences of public audiences should wholly dictate the news agenda, for people's actual preferences may display a marked inclination toward what is entertaining in a way that may come apart from what would normally be considered newsworthy.<sup>12</sup>

Allowing actual audience preferences to dictate entirely the news services provided by the media would inevitably lead to bad journalism, for the drive to entertain would adversely affect not only the kind of stories covered but also the kind of coverage given to them. For example, the spin given to stories would be of an increasingly sensationalistic or voyeuristic bent. Hence even proper news stories might well be approached from an angle that plays upon a parasitic interest or appetite for violence, sex, and death even in the most banal cases.

Oprah Winfrey rushes to Oklahoma to ask people "how they really feel," political issues come to be simplified in terms of the clash of personalities, or ordinary people caught up in extreme events are misrepresented in order to fit certain stereotypes and news categories. Even in cases where reporters or media institutions possess no malice or conscious agenda, the spurious invention of detail or shift in tone would be driven by the desire to discover something interesting and distinctive in order to entertain. For example, in some cases, stories are sold on the basis of stereotypes that play on our fears and worries, such as racism, in a way that can be encapsulated in a single, sharp image, despite the fact that the reality does not conform to such a simple, clear picture.

The essential wrong here concerns how the motivation to entertain may distort news proper. A kernel of truth about certain events may be represented by alluding to key facts, but the emphasis given to the facts concerned—the tone of the report, the terms used, the images portrayed—can effectively misrepresent the truth of the matter, often to such a degree that the impression given is the very opposite of the truth. An example from the British press concerns the Taylor sisters, who were sent to jail in 1992 for the murder of Alison Shaughnessy. Michelle Taylor had had a long-standing affair with Alison's husband prior to and some time after the marriage. At the time of the trial the tabloid press used a wedding-video-still headed "Cheat's Kiss," showing Michelle kissing her former lover at his wedding. Moreover, some of the reports contained allusions to a diary full of hate and loathing for Alison. All of these features of tabloid journalism were used to conjure up the picture of a witchlike, jealous harridan of a mistress out to get an innocent bride. The misrepresentation was so great that Mr. Justice Butterfield said that "some of that coverage crossed the limit of fair and accurate reporting by a substantial margin."<sup>13</sup> Even where reports contain a few indisputable facts, the impression given may still be quite the opposite of what was true.

It is important to realize that such criticisms cannot be laid solely at the door of the journalists who actually cover the stories concerned. The increasing importance of the editorial process itself, and thus the power, influence, and autonomy of the editor, has a tendency to exacerbate the problem where news values are entertainment-led. For not only will journalists be sent back to rewrite stories where, though accurate and fair, the news angle is not considered spicy enough, but, increasingly, editors tend to rewrite reporters' stories, often without consultation, according to their construal of reader appeal. Stories downloaded on modems, night editors rushing for the early edition, all kinds of constraints conspire to exacerbate bad practice. Hence an editor who was never there, who has no idea, apart from the piece in front of him, about what actually happened, may rewrite a story to give it a more entertaining inflection and may thus invent quotes that vocalize what he presumes, on little or no evidence, the public would consider appropriate for the subject of the report to feel. Thus the piece may end up distorting the events entirely, especially given the naive public understanding that quotes are verbatim reports of someone's words. Such problems are, in fact,

much more endemic to the news process than the public naively presume, especially where an investigative story has been pursued for a long time and people start to lose track of the central chain of events: whether money was offered or demanded, a quote was verbatim or embellished, a statement was gossip or known fact, and so on.<sup>14</sup> The nature of the news process itself, where it is driven by the motivation to entertain, may thus distort even where the initial reporter's story may have been wholly accurate and fair. In the push to entertain, sensationalism tends to predominate over fact in order to speak to the audience's perceived preferences. True, pressure can be brought to bear for a retraction, which U.S. papers are much better at doing than those in the United Kingdom. But harm in such cases has already been done, and the ordinary person—even in a legal system where fees depend on results and the potential strength of a case—stands a far lesser chance of redress. Hence sensationalism is exacerbated in coverage of people otherwise unknown because the media presume they have far greater leeway in this respect.

Where the impetus to entertain in the news starts to take priority over considerations such as whether a story is truly accurate, whether the manner of coverage is warranted, or, indeed, whether it is even in the long-term interests of the news media, then not only is the result an inhuman, damaging disregard for the subjects of such speculation but the intended audience receive a wholly misleading impression of what has happened, one that plays to—because it is closely based on—their often uneducated prejudices about the way the world is.

Moreover the push to entertain distorts not just the shaping of the story and the editorial process but the way journalists are encouraged to behave in “discovering” news stories. Reporters are more likely to face pressure to intrude into the private lives of the rich and famous, to garner unique and compelling exclusives, even where there is no relation to matters of public harm or interest. Indeed, there seems to have been an increasing shift in the nature of news media coverage toward this kind of emphasis in the last decade or more. For example, in July 1995 *The Sunday Times* story about members of Parliament (M.P.s) taking cash for asking questions in parliament, a severe breach of parliamentary etiquette, was not merely a report about an activity that they had discovered going on, independently of their reporting. Rather, they set up a sting operation that offered M.P.s an opportunity it is not clear they would otherwise have had. They managed to entrap two Conservative M.P.s in this manner and then reported the story in terms of outrage at such political corruption. Yet, at the very least, there is no guarantee that without the set-up operation any M.P.s would have been involved in such malpractice in the first place. Moreover, the way the story was reported, at least initially, failed to mention important details about how the story came about and thus elided the *agent provocateur* activity of *The Sunday Times*' reporters, without which there may have been no story. From extreme cases concerning the creation of news or the hounding of the sick and dying to the

invention of stories based on mere rumour of events that never occurred, the motivation to entertain corrupts news media practice.

No doubt some may defend such behavior and media sensationalism on the grounds that that is the price to be paid for media freedom. It is usually pointed out that those who complain have a vested interest in so doing. After all, it would be much easier for politicians if their lives were not subjected to close public scrutiny. They would at least be in an easier position to misuse the levers of power for their own benefit or to indulge in the kinds of hypocrisy that betray a craving for power itself rather than a drive to wield influence for the benefit of the common good.

But this claim is disingenuous to say the least. It fails to recognize the obvious fact that much of the criticism is not coming from those with vested interests in protecting politicians but, on both sides of the Atlantic, from members of the ordinary public and from journalists themselves. The increasing distrust by the public of news media who construe news in terms of entertainment values is increasingly registered in public opinion polls and in the number of complaints made concerning the standards and reliability of the news, the way stories are covered, and the behavior of journalists, editors, and news organizations toward the subjects of the news stories.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, highly respected members of the news world are coming to realize that something is fundamentally wrong.<sup>16</sup> As Howard Kurtz, the respected press critic for *The Washington Post*, puts it: “Journalists have become part of a vast entertainment culture that seeks to amuse and titillate and shies away from the risks of old-style muck-raking, as media corporations have grown wary of abusing their influence or offending their audience.”<sup>17</sup>

The point is that media freedom to intrude into privacy and to speak freely against politicians, celebrities, and all-comers is granted by society on the grounds that it has a watchdog function to fulfill. Take away the function, or where the news media as a whole fails to fulfill that function, and it is not clear that the news media have any right to behave in such a manner nor indeed that the price is one worth paying. To keep watch over our custodians, to ensure that the politicians are governing in the public and not their private interest, the press may be thought of as possessing certain special privileges as our representatives, just as do politicians, which not every member of the public necessarily has. But intrusions into privacy for mere titillation, regardless of public interest, a casual disregard for standards of accuracy and fairness, often amounting to complete fabrication, and a desire to shock, outrage, and sometimes even offend, amount to a capitulation of the moral high ground that the news media must occupy if they are to possess any moral integrity as the fourth estate. As John Birt, the present director-general of the BBC said, “When Macaulay declared 160 years ago that ‘the gallery in which the reporters sit has become a fourth estate of the realm’, newspapers were emerging from two centuries of repressive laws, financial

corruption and political bribery. In today's fourth estate of the realm, reality often mocks the grandeur of the term."<sup>18</sup>

If a product is paid for and then turns out to be faulty, we normally have a right to demand our payment back: the contract was not fulfilled. If the cost of the implicit contract with the news media is granting warrant to intrude into private behavior in the name of the public interest, then where the media fails to act appropriately we have the right to withdraw the special privileges granted. The special license we afford the media is legitimated by an implicit contract; it is not a God-given right.

The nature of a news media driven by the end-goal of entertainment would inevitably be nonjudgmental. This kind of quietism naturally favors, viciously, the interests of the strong and powerful in society. The whole point of such a conception is to treat the audience's preferences for certain kinds of information as givens which are not themselves open to questioning. The point of the news media is conceived to be predetermined by these preferences. Hence, given the news media report on the preferred information and stories, the very possibility that the news media may fail to cover crucial issues is overlooked. But, of course, people may not have enough or adequate information on which to base their judgments of what they wish to know about. Indeed, how can they, unless reporters and journalists keep their eyes and ears peeled for information that may, potentially, be significant. Conversely, the public may want to know many things, but these might well involve unwarranted intrusion or be inappropriate and unjustified as news stories.

Part of the problem with the HUD scandal was not merely that journalists considered covering such governmental institutions to be tedious journalism but that they perceived the public to be wholly uninterested in such matters. But even if most people do not care about so-called minority issues, the issues nonetheless ought to be reported where events concern the construal of and application of justice in society. Hence in the 1950s, despite a lack of much public concern, the U.S. media rightly and in some cases gallantly covered the birth of the Civil Rights movement. Public lack of interest may arise not just from a lack of information but a failure to understand why such information might be important. Yet good journalism should not merely track audience interest but seek to show the public why they ought to be concerned about such matters, whether in terms of their own self-interest or in terms of human empathy, even though as a matter of fact they happen not to be.

So journalistic judgment is required to recognize what, ideally, people should know about: namely what, under conditions of adequate information, reasonable education, and given a reasonable amount of moral compassion, an audience would be interested in. Hence, even if an actual audience does not care about the HUD or a war in Bosnia, they should be told about such cases precisely because they ought to care about them. Thus news reports ought to highlight just why we

ought to care, whether on grounds of prudence or humanity, and should be assessed accordingly.

## GOOD NEWS AND INFORMED UNDERSTANDING

We have seen that news is an inherently evaluative term. For in identifying something as news we are effectively stating that this story possesses something of interest or value to us. In one sense this is to go beyond the traditional hard-news conception of journalism. Reporting is a value-laden method of enquiry which aims at obtaining information and knowledge about contemporary events in our world. This is not straightforwardly to assimilate news to forms of propaganda. For news, as distinct from propaganda, aims at truth via the impartial description of events. But we should recognize that impartiality does not entail value neutrality because reports seek the appropriate description of important events. Hence judgments as to whether something should figure in the news agenda, how it should be described and interpreted, are implicitly value-laden. Relative to this aim we evaluate news reports as good or bad. Good reporting aims at the truth via truth-promoting methods. Conversely, bad reporting is truth-indifferent.

Consider the infamous case of Janet Cooke, a reporter at *The Washington Post*. In 1980, 26-year-old Cooke wrote a story, for which she was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, about "Jimmy," an 8-year-old child who led his life on the streets.<sup>19</sup> But subsequently the prize was withdrawn and Cooke sacked because *The Washington Post* discovered, and to their credit publicly exposed, the fact that the child featured in the story did not exist.<sup>20</sup> Janet Cooke had intentionally made the character up for the sake of a sensational story and thus, presumably, a name for herself. Quite apart from the deceit of her editors and public, Cooke's intentionally fictitious story is bad journalism precisely because truth-promoting methods were abandoned and the truth was not sought. Moreover, it is important to realize that bad journalism does not necessarily arise from such intentions. Bad journalism can arise from sloppy methodology, a failure to check sources and quotes, or lack of critical judgment—things that Janet Cooke's editors may have been guilty of when approving her story despite nagging doubts about its veracity. The point is that both honesty and discipline, among other things, are required to be a good journalist. The value of truth must be respected in journalism, and this entails respect for certain values and principles required to arrive at it faithfully.

Hence the practice of fact- and source-checking by most magazines in the United States constitutes good practice, one that the media in the United Kingdom would do well to follow. Moreover, it follows that the correction of errors, with apologies where appropriate, is important. It is interesting to note the difference in practice here between the United States and the United Kingdom. The news media in the United States tend to correct errors, even the most trivial



of cases, quickly and appropriately. The correction is given space and prominence in the erroneous paper in proportion to the offense. If it is merely a name correction, then the correction takes up only a small column, but a major error is treated as such and often put on the front page. By contrast, the British press, if they do apologize for errors, tend to put the apology in a tiny box a few pages in. Similarly, the U.S. press took up the idea of ombudsmen or readers' representatives way before the British print media. Such a figure serves not merely to represent readers' interests and the public in matters of accuracy but also as a semiautonomous adjudicator in matters of offense, decency, the kind of news covered, and even as an outlet for journalists under editorial pressure to slant a story. Such good practice is in the long-term interests of the media, since the news media are more likely to be trusted if they are known to check their facts and apologize for errors. At least in this respect the U.S. press manifests a greater commitment in its public practice to fulfilling the obligations of the implicit contract.

Moreover, as we have seen, the value of a particular news story is not reducible to truth narrowly conceived: many stories may well be true but irrelevant or insignificant in relation to readers' interests and values. After all, what is news for one community may well not be news for another in this sense. Hence what constitutes a large proportion of the news for a broker on Wall Street may be completely irrelevant to a waitress in New York, a blue-collar worker in Detroit, or a potato farmer in Idaho. Hence it is crucial to bear in mind the ways in which particular stories are relevant to the interests and needs of audiences addressed. For example, President Clinton's renewal of a commitment to affirmative action would obviously be national news because it concerns a substantive policy interpretation over questions of fairness which would affect U.S. citizens and reveals commitment to a particular conception of justice. Many other news stories will inevitably be far more parochial. Hence certain news reports are considered significant because of varying concerns, cultural assumptions, beliefs, or values that many people in a region or particular culture share.

For example, in France it was common knowledge among journalists and politicians for many years that President Mitterand had a daughter from a long-standing relationship outside his marriage. No doubt in the United States and the United Kingdom such a fact, at least nowadays, would have been reported almost immediately it was known, with Mitterand exposed rather than protected by the press.<sup>21</sup> In part this reflects a rather different cultural attitude toward private affairs of the heart and their interrelation to politics and public affairs. In Britain and the United States the implicit presumption is that unethical behavior in private life may manifest a character flaw that may carry over into the performance of public duties. In France the implicit presumption appears to be that private and public lives are more radically separable in this regard. Hence, as with Bill Clinton and Gary Hart, such a story would merit major media coverage in the United States but was left uncovered in France for many years. But it is

consistent to hold that what qualifies as news in a particular community might well not be newsworthy elsewhere. Hence there is a distinction to be made between stories that address our more general sociocultural needs and interests and those that are more specific.

Still, our evaluative conception of news implies that reports had better be factually oriented, impartial, and relevant to our governance or human interests. So if political representatives were taking money for asking particular questions in Congress or claiming expenses for fictitious trips and activities, it should obviously be headline news, and the rationale we have outlined accounts for why this would be so. In the case of payments, we have politicians—elected to represent the interests of their constituents and enact legislation for the benefit of society—who are apparently acting in their own self-interest at the expense of those they were elected to serve. In the case of travel expenses, even though there is no apparent direct harm to constituents' interests, the fact that a political representative is prepared to lie for his own personal gain might suggest that he would be prepared to do the same in his role in public office. Hence it is important for people to know these facts so that they can judge whether or not the character concerned should remain in public office. The point is that such cases of corruption and malpractice, along with issues of public policy and legislation from abortion, welfare, business regulation, legal redress, and criminal justice, have a significant effect on who governs in our name and what is enacted on our behalf in shaping society. Thus shifts, changes, distortions, and corruption in public policy and personnel must constitute news.

Obviously, on this model, reporting must be factually accurate because people's judgments about what is happening, which provide the basis for their evaluation of what ought to be done, rely on accurate information. Similarly, news coverage had better be impartial in the sense that personal prejudices, bias, or vested interests had better not influence the way a particular story is covered. Otherwise we are far more likely to end up with a distorted and thus misleading impression of the way things really are. If the basis for a given judgment is false, then we are far more likely to make a mistaken judgment about what we think ought to be done. Hence speculation presented as fact is morally bankrupt because it misrepresents to the reader what is actually so and thus breaks with the implied contract between the news media and the public.

Indeed, as an unofficial estate of governance, journalists, the press, and news media had better be, in a significant sense, outsiders to the political process. For they should have no vested interests in keeping the workings of government opaque or conspiring to distort the political process. Thus, in principle, journalists should be free from the kind of temptations and influences to which those inside government might, by virtue of their position, be open. Of course, given that the press is in the position of the people's watchdog regarding government, journalists and the media are themselves, to the extent they perform their job properly, in a position of power. For, if taken as trustworthy, press reports about

government policies, maneuverings, and corruption obviously have a strong determining effect on how people understand politicians and their policies. But given such a position of influence the media themselves will be open to lobbying by politicians and vested interest groups and to pleas or bribes from the subjects of various stories, events, and investigations. No one expects that journalists will prove to be infallible or, necessarily, moral saints. However, as outsiders to the political process who do not directly have any hold on the levers of power, we should expect the press to be less susceptible to the kind of corruption politicians are open to: the perversion of justice in the name of the people.<sup>22</sup>

We have defended a broad conception of the naive view of journalism's proper function. The core function of news is to be informative about significant events and stories of human interest. Of course, what counts as significant is in one sense communally relative, and we should be careful to distinguish the kind of reporting appropriate to different news genres, from quick news bulletins to in-depth investigative journalism and documentaries right through to feature articles that are more partial, speculative, and evaluative. Hence the context of a claim makes a difference to its appropriateness. We all understand, rightly, that speculation has its proper place in feature articles but should not be constitutive of hard news bulletins.<sup>23</sup> But overarching all our own particular interests and the varying constraints of distinct news genres is the goal of promoting a greater sound understanding of significant events and human issues.

Given our account of news we can pick out certain minimal ethical constraints to which good journalists ought to adhere. For example, we can make sense of a journalist's duty to report events that it is in the public interest to know in order to function as citizens in society. Of course it might be thought that the advent of ever more versatile computer technology will ease editorial pressures and proprietorial control. Indeed the ability of ordinary people to capture news events that remain uncovered by major networks will certainly enhance the possibility of broadening out the news agenda. But such utopian aspirations should be tempered with the recognition that, in fact, the opportunities such technologies offer us still depend to a great part on the capacity for the news institutions to stand apart from major proprietorial control.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, independently of such questions, the need to exercise judgment regarding what is newsworthy and whether reports are truthful and impartial will never go away. Though technology may afford us many new opportunities, it is, in this sense, neutral.

Yet the minimal ethical constraints do not just concern factual accuracy, impartiality, source-checking, record-keeping, and ombudsmen but, just as importantly, entail a responsibility to set the context within which a news story occurs. For the public need to gain a sense of why an event is happening and what is significant about it. Hence we rightly criticize news programs that place too heavy an emphasis on striking images and soundbites at the expense of explanations concerning why or how an event occurred. A news service that consists entirely of bulletins and striking images and is entirely event-fixated is a pervers-

sion of good news practice because it manifests an inherent bias against understanding.

The news media's job is to cover stories that, under conditions of ideal information, reasonable education, and compassion, we would want to know about. It is this basis that provides the justification for conceiving of the press as the fourth estate. Moreover, it entails that journalists and the news media have a strict obligation to ensure that the stories they are reporting did in fact happen as they are represented. These are, minimally, the news media's ethical obligations, which they must live up to in order to fulfill their part of the implied contract. Good or ideal journalism would do more. The distinction between what is ethically obligatory and what is good, admirable, or ideal is quite a basic one. For example, we normally recognize that we are ethically obliged not to harm others. However, though this might be admirable, we do not normally consider ourselves to be ethically obliged to give away all our possessions to support those in need. The distinction applies similarly to journalism. To be ethically adequate, journalists must live up to the implied contract and report fairly and truthfully on events that are of importance for our lives. However, rather than merely react to and report on episodic events, good journalism also seeks out, uncovers, investigates, and explains fundamental or social shifts underlying episodic events. Thus good journalism not only reports on but also investigates and may even campaign for injustices to be righted. Take, for example, the reporting of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1950s.<sup>25</sup> Journalism that merely reported on the particular events as they happened would not be unethical in breaking an implied contract between the public and the news media. However, reporting on and campaigning against the underlying structural injustices and progress of the civil rights movement certainly constituted morally admirable journalism and ideal practice.

Thus the traditionalist conception of the media as the fourth estate actually gives us quite a substantive, discriminating, normative conception of the duties and ideals of the news media. Such a conception, and the ethical critique that it suggests of the state of the contemporary news media, accords with the intuitions of many practicing journalists and the public at large. Journalism that involves presenting speculation as fact, placing entertainment above significance, and proliferates sensationalism, voyeurism, and celebrity gossip constitutes an abrogation of the purpose of the news media. But we can only justify this judgment if we recognize what constitutes the right kind of news coverage and journalistic values required by the media to fulfill their obligations as the fourth estate to be an essential component of free and democratic government.

## NOTES

1. Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (London: Macmillan, 1893).
2. Gaye Tuchman, *Making News* (New York: Free Press, 1988), John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987), pp. 281–308, and Tom Koch, *The News as Myth* (New

York: Greenwood, 1990), are good examples of work that presumes that narrative form and institutional relations make something news.

3. Howard Kurtz, *Media Circus* (New York: Random House, 1994), pp. 37–52, details with insight the ins and outs of both the scandal itself and the failings of the news media.

4. *The Sunday Times*, 19 February 1995, broke the “story” as a full exclusive alleging Foot had been a KGB “agent of influence” at the peak of the Cold War. On 7 July 1995, *The Sunday Times* published a minimal page-two apology and paid substantial undisclosed damages to Michael Foot.

5. See Lucas A. Powe, Jr., *The Fourth Estate and the Constitution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1991).

6. “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Winston Churchill speech, *Hansard*, 11 November 1947, col. 206.

7. See, for example, John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1963), in which he stresses that citizens entrust political power only on condition that it will be exercised according to the public good. But those in power will be tempted to abuse their position. Thus, especially in his *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (New York: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1955), Locke emphasizes that the citizenry need to know the basis and workings of their government in order constantly to judge the actions of those to whom power has been entrusted, so that the people can exercise their own political power when that trust has been abused.

8. See Anthony Smith, *The Newspaper: An International History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).

9. See Marianne Fulton, “Changing Focus,” in *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America*, ed. Marianne Fulton (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1988), pp. 208–220, and Kevin Williams, “Something More Important than Truth: Ethical Issues in War Reporting,” in *Ethical Issues in Journalism and the Media*, ed. Andrew Belsey and Ruth Chadwick (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 154–170.

10. J. G. Ballard, “The Secret History of World War 3,” in *Best Short Stories 1989*, eds. Giles Gordon and David Hughes (London: Heinemann, 1989), pp. 1–12.

11. A similar story could be told about the 1980s savings and loan scandal, which only indirectly started to emerge in July 1989 through Charles Babcock’s reports in *The Washington Post*. See Kurtz, *Media Circus*, pp. 53–75.

12. See, for example, P. Clarke and E. Fredin, “Newspapers, Television and Political Reasoning,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 42 (1978): 143–160; and J. B. Lemert, *Criticizing the Media* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989).

13. *The Guardian*, Tuesday, 1 August, 1995, p. 3.

14. See Tom Goldstein, *The News at Any Cost* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), pp. 200–227.

15. A Gallup poll in 1991 conducted across six EEC countries revealed that public confidence in the press was lower than in most other social organizations, including the legal system and police. Indeed, only 14 percent of those surveyed expressed confidence in the British press. See Raymond Snoddy, *The Good, The Bad and The Unacceptable* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 11.

16. See, for example, Joan Deppa, *The Media and Disasters* (London: David Fulton, 1993), Mark Pedelty, *War Stories* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and Mort Rosenblum, *Who Stole The News?* (New York: John Wiley, 1993).

17. Kurtz, *Media Circus*, p. 5.

18. John Birt, The Fleming Memorial Lecture at the Royal Institution, April 1988, as

19. The story ran in *The Washington Post*, 28 September 1980, and was awarded the Pulitzer on 13 April 1981.

20. Bill Green, “Janet’s World,” *The Washington Post*, 19 April 1981, pp. A1, A12–A15.

21. I say nowadays because once upon a time such facts would not have been reported in either the United Kingdom or the United States. For example, the British prime minister Lloyd George was a well-known philanderer, but such things were never reported in the British press earlier this century, and John F. Kennedy’s promiscuity was of legendary proportions, yet the U.S. press at the time never passed comment upon it.

22. Thus, for example, we should have strong reservations about the kind of relationship that Ben Bradlee describes as existing between himself and John F. Kennedy in his *Conversations with Kennedy* (New York: Norton, 1975). Of course the bonds of friendship and the payoff in terms of information otherwise inaccessible to the journalist seem great, but there is something highly corruptive about the terms of the relationship laid down by Kennedy, including, for example, the requirement to submit stories first to the president for his personal approval.

23. Hence we also recognize that the New Journalism of the 1960s or George Orwell’s literary journalism is valuable in promoting our understanding of the kinds of people and events they are about while recognizing that, were they presented as hard news stories, they would be deeply flawed, since the form combines elements of fact and fiction and is not obviously directed toward truth in terms of facticity.

24. The increasing drive toward mergers in the media world, with, at the time of writing, Time Warner chasing Turner, Disney chasing ABC, Westinghouse after CBS, not to mention the global expansion of Rupert Murdoch’s media empire, suggests that the technology may be harnessed in favor of increasing media conglomerate control rather than decentralization.

25. See Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize* (New York: Viking Press, 1987).