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MEDIA SENSITIVITY TO THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE

An Unfinished Academic Agenda

JOAN DEPPA



THE SCENE: Hendricks Chapel at Syracuse University, 21 December 1988. Following a memorial service, two students sob in each other's arms, racked with grief over the tragic loss of friends and classmates in the terrible crash of Pan Am Flight 103. A radio reporter stands behind them, thrusting a microphone forward to capture the sounds of their grief. When a faculty member steps in front of him and asks him to move back, the reporter reacts angrily. "I'm just doing my job," he protests. "I wasn't intruding."

Regardless of his claim, his initial actions were hardly a display of human sensitivity. But for the reporter, the sobs of the students were more than an understandable exhibition of grief. He was in a competitive situation created in our society by the kind of media system we have developed. The students' grief and sobs were an element of what, by some definitions, makes a good news report. The reporter understood full well that a story portraying genuine and deep human emotion would be far more appealing to an audience than one dryly reporting the facts. Yet, to his credit, he did step back, even if reluctantly. He did not approach the couple again until, emotion temporarily spent, they began to dry their eyes and prepared to leave the chapel. Unfortunately, some reporters probably would have ignored the faculty member's request and pressed on. Fortunately, the majority would have honored the request.

The incident illustrates the conflict between professional and commercial interests and the deeply sensitive forces that intrude when tragedy strikes in a media-saturated society. To what extent should private grief and personal expressions of emotion be used to fill the pages, screens, or airwaves of our mass media? What are the guidelines, standards, and indicators of acceptability? From what bodies of accumulated wisdom in our society can those guidelines be drawn? These are the kinds of issues and the kind of media behavior that I will look at briefly in this essay. My purpose is to point to the pressing need for entire universities—all of the disciplines—to instruct students not just about writing, editing, or producing a story that will be a media success, but about discovering the guidelines to sensitive and ethical behavior that they will need as they carry out professional activities.

Although ethical issues are raised and discussed in journalism classes, the approach tends to be pragmatic rather than deeply philosophical. That,

I argue, is as it should be. The philosophy should come from a broad understanding of humanity, derived largely from what we call the liberal arts, so that when new ethical issues arise in this ever-changing world, future communicators have some basis for making decisions. The ethical foundation of journalism should be no different than that of law or medicine or any other profession, even though the specific problems that arise may vary. But academics can and, I will argue, should act in other ways that influence the role mass media play in society and the way they play it. They should not restrict their contacts to future communicators in the classroom.

THE ISSUE OF journalistic sensitivity was brought to our doorstep with the bombing of Flight 103. The violent destruction of those thirty-five young lives from Syracuse thrust the campus community and the victims' families into the harsh glare that now accompanies major news events. In fairness to the scores of journalists who came to campus that terrible evening and the days that followed, it has to be said that most behaved with more circumspection and compassion than the radio reporter. But there were others who, for whatever reasons, showed more concern for the display of grief, camera angles, or that really dramatic quote; and their pursuit of "the big story" left more than a few students, faculty, and members of the community with a distaste for the whole process.

Some media professionals have expressed second thoughts about the lack of sensitivity shown in the coverage; in fact, members of the local media approached the campus chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists and asked that it sponsor a forum to discuss such issues. A panel of news professionals explained how they made their decisions in the wake of the crash, then listened as students gave their perspectives on the media coverage. It was an intense evening. Journalists disagreed among themselves on some issues; most were surprised to hear how aggressive some news people had been in pursuit of the story. A student from a sorority told how one reporter threw stones at a window in an effort to contact some of the grieving residents.

For the faculty of the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, the forum highlighted the pressing need for guidelines for the coverage of such events. The Research Group of the school has begun a series of research projects that we hope will develop these guidelines, as well as address a number of related issues, such as the role the media play in helping their audience during the grieving process.

The issues we are studying are not simple. Take the case of releasing names of victims. When Pan Am unexpectedly provided one Syracuse television station with a list of Syracuse University students who were confirmed as having been on the flight, it flashed their names on the screen. That was within hours of the crash, and members of the station sensed that Pan Am had slipped up. The executive producer of news knew that the information was coming too early for all of the next of kin to have been notified. But her news director told her to broadcast it. Although only a few relatives of the victims lived in the station's range, the names flashed

into the consciousness of scores of students who had stopped studying to watch the tragic story unfold on their television screens.

Normal news practice, in my experience, has been that reporters avoid being the bearers of the worst of all possible news: the death of a loved one. If a journalist senses that someone does not know of the tragedy, the practice is to hold back information until it can come from an official source. Although only a few relatives might have heard the terrible news, the entire campus community, especially a large number of students, was transfixed by this disaster.

My professional horror at broadcasting the list of names has since been called into question by listening to some of the student volunteers who have taken part in focus groups on the media coverage. They saw the list in a different light; they had been fearing the worst, and it let them begin to grieve in earnest. But an interview with a person in one of those focus groups also confirmed the havoc that terrible news relayed directly can cause: a young woman who had been studying hard for exams and hence avoiding the media received a phone call from a reporter asking about her roommate. When it became clear that the young woman was confused by the call, the reporter told her what had happened and then waited for her reaction. Talking about the conversation was difficult for her even five months after the crash.

Another example of insensitivity came with the decision by television station after television station to show footage of a mother at Kennedy Airport who had just received the news. She was writhing on the floor, screaming, "my baby, my baby!" in a state of extreme emotional trauma. One broadcaster, writing about her decision to show the film, justified it by saying,

I think that scene of the woman at JFK told more about the tragedy of Flight 103 in 20 seconds than anything a journalist could write. I would hope that whoever placed that bomb on Pan Am 103 would look at the pain of that woman and question whether the ends justify the means.¹

1. Karen Frankola, "Pain behind the Camera," *Newsweek*, 6 February 1989, 9.

The likelihood of any terrorist looking at that footage and deciding to bomb no more is unrealistic at best, and a false rationalization at worst. That grief was private; just because it happened in a public place does not make it less personal. There was enough grieving to show how terrible the loss was without stripping that mother of her dignity. Unless camera people learn when to look away, they may force people with very human reactions into public poses, thereby changing the reality that television and photojournalism so fervently pursue.

YET IT REMAINS that we live in a media society; newspapers, radio, and television are central to our social lives. There is no question that media are pervasive—and at times intrusive. At the same time, however, they play a positive, even irreplaceable, role in our increasingly complex, ever-changing society. The same television lights that glared in the tear-stained young faces at Hendricks Chapel helped connect

the campus to the Syracuse community, to the nation, to the scene of the tragedy in Lockerbie, Scotland, to the whole world. The reporters around the globe who covered the different aspects of the story served as an international network of intelligence gatherers and transmitters, trying to ask the questions to which we all wanted answers: Was there a chance that anyone survived? Was it a safety problem linked to the age of the airplane? Was it a bomb? Could the victims' bodies be found? What kind of security precautions had been taken? Why, if the U.S. government and the airline had been alerted that terrorists would try to place a bomb aboard a Pan Am flight originating in Frankfurt, wasn't all baggage x-rayed? How easy is it, now that airlines and airports have had time to tighten procedures, to breach security?

Recognizing the pervasive nature of the media is one thing; coping with it and helping the professionals in the various media do their job better is quite another. Those, I will argue here, are tasks for members of the academy, and because of their special responsibilities in the development and dissemination of knowledge, those are tasks that they are particularly qualified to carry out. The difficulty of coping with the phenomenon of media attention can be seen even more clearly in Lockerbie than in Syracuse. During a recent visit to Scotland, I learned that the news media focus on that small community was so great that satellite receivers covered one of its few parking lots and that local officials were called upon to do live interviews with stations as far away as Tasmania. Unlike our students, who could leave campus and escape the scrutiny of cameras and reporters, the people of Lockerbie had to face reporters whenever they ventured into the town, as well as deal with the catastrophe and comfort grieving families of the victims on the plane.

The people I interviewed in Lockerbie made it clear that some journalists had shown compassion and behaved professionally, but they were clearly apprehensive about the media coverage that they expected would accompany the anniversary of the crash and the subsequent developments in the still-unfolding story. Some had had to deal with news people posing as social workers; many were shocked by the liberties with the truth taken by Britain's tabloid press, especially the *Sun*, owned by Rupert Murdoch. Coping with media attention has become one of the added stresses that victims of tragedy face. Increasing sensitivity of the media to the needs and problems of people, then, is a uniquely appropriate mission for those of us educating the future labor force of our news industries. Many of us in the Newhouse School of Public Communications thought we were doing an adequate job of this until the tragedy of Flight 103. We know now that we were not and that we were not alone. We have begun a search for journalism texts that provide effective guidance for dealing with grief, but so far have found none.

The challenge to increase media sensitivity is not restricted to academics specializing in the public communications fields; on the contrary, I think the greater challenge is for those colleagues in the diverse disciplines ranging from the natural sciences to the social sciences to the humanities, as well as for those in other professional schools. I believe the media may at times provide the channels through which all members of the academy may inform public debate or even inspire public action.

The degree to which the media truly serve us all and do more than just intrude on our grief can be amply illustrated by looking back briefly to another recent tragedy. When the space shuttle Challenger exploded, killing all seven crew members, the nation shared the terrible experience and explored its causes through the media. Although the story is now part of our national consciousness, the role of the media went far beyond the portrayal of human grief. It was the press (news media generally) that was most insistent in asking *why*? It was a group of reporters that began putting together the detailed theory that the tragedy could be traced to leaks in the O-rings.

John Noble Wilford, a science correspondent for the *New York Times*, with six colleagues from that paper won a Pulitzer Prize for their investigation of the Challenger disaster. Wilford said, during a recent visit to the Newhouse School, that the initial "break" about the O-ring cracks came from tips from NASA sources who insisted on anonymity. NASA was maintaining official silence about everything connected with the possible causes of the disaster, including the temperature at Cape Canaveral at the time of the launch. But a responsible paper, such as the *Times*, does not report such information from "unnamed sources" without checking their credibility and the validity of their disclosures.

The reporting team consulted with scientists independent of the space program. Wilford, who received his master's degree from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University in 1956, said they asked their consultants to comment on the possibility of a hypothetical situation in which there was such a leak. Some of the scientists they questioned thought that it could happen and that the cold temperatures could have played a role. For example, Edward Pierce, a professor of aerospace engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology, was one of the first academics consulted by the *Times* about the possible effects of subfreezing temperatures.² Wilford said university scientists, working with information that reporters had been able to glean from anonymous sources within NASA, even set up experiments to test the plausibility of the theory that the seals on the booster rockets had cracked from the cold. Thus, dedicated investigative reporters, teamed with technical experts from campuses, were able to penetrate official silence and bring the facts to the public. There is little doubt that their disclosures brought closer public scrutiny, which has had an influence on the formation of future space policy.

2. *New York Times*, 5 February 1986, A25.

ANOTHER AREA in which academics can play a significant role in combination with the news media is in bringing responsible attention to social problems. This is an area with ties to the traditional concerns of many social scientists. I would like to see them conduct research and offer courses that would help future journalists and future experts in their own fields understand how the media can be used, systematically and responsibly, to bring the problems of the disadvantaged and disenfranchised to a more prominent position on the public agenda of our society. I am not aware of any such courses at the present time.

Too often these people feel their complaints and concerns are ignored

by the media; too often they are right. The result can be dangerous to the media as well as to society. Witness the 1988 incident in Robeson County, North Carolina, in which two American Indians held people in the newsroom of the local daily at gunpoint to call attention to their claims that the county's white-dominated justice system is corrupt and discriminates against American Indians and blacks, who together make up two-thirds of the county's residents. The case landed almost on our doorstep when one of the two principals in the drama, a young man named Timothy Jacobs, fled to the Onondaga Reservation just north of Syracuse, New York. He and his co-defendant had been acquitted in federal court of weapons and hostage-taking charges, but then were indicted by a Robeson County grand jury under state kidnapping laws.

This is a strategy of desperation by people at the bottom of the socioeconomic structure to obtain a place on the public agenda, and it is not an isolated case. To me, the entire episode prompted a feeling of *déjà vu*. In 1973, when I was working for United Press International in Chicago, stories began filtering out of the Dakotas about trouble near the Pine Ridge Reservation of the Oglala Sioux. Two hundred Indians had clashed with police in Custer, South Dakota, during a protest to demand stiffer charges against a white man accused of slaying an Indian. The man had been charged with second-degree manslaughter, and the protesters said the charge should be first-degree murder. Two days later the National Guard was ordered into the town to back up local law officials.³

One of our senior editors was dispatched to help local correspondents by doing a feature piece on the situation. He did a few interviews, including some with the Indian protesters, flew back to Chicago, and filed his story. It was, in retrospect, a pretty cursory piece, although it was more than most media were doing at the time. Certainly, it did not give the Oglala Sioux the feeling that their grievances were understood.

A few weeks later they seized ten hostages, and an armed confrontation began at Wounded Knee, a hamlet that had been the site of an 1890 massacre of a group of Sioux by the U.S. Cavalry. This standoff lasted seventy days with federal marshals, FBI agents, and Bureau of Indian Affairs police, backed up by two armored personnel carriers, surrounding the village and eventually trying to cut off food supplies to its Indian occupiers.⁴ The whole episode was triggered by the Sioux's belief that no one was listening to their grievances through official channels and that the media did not find them newsworthy. Whatever side one takes in such disputes, it is clear that the disadvantaged have no orderly and effective way of getting their case on the public agenda.

3. *New York Times*, 7 February 1973, 34.

4. *New York Times*, 1 March 1973, 1; and 7 May 1973, 1.

A SIMILAR PROBLEM can be seen today among other disadvantaged groups in society, especially the poor and the poorly educated. For them, First Amendment freedoms of the press and of speech are irrelevant. The people who prepare and shape the news not only decline to pay attention but believe that few people in their audiences want to hear about the poor or their problems. There have been notable and even classic efforts in the past, to be sure, where investigative reporters and

others from journalism have spotlighted the problems of the disenfranchised. When reporters do pay some attention, however, the poor often become stereotypes. They are shown as problems, not people.

It is in the interest of developing what George Bush is calling “a kinder and gentler nation” that those who are not sharing in the rewards of that nation have legitimate access to the media. If institutionalized means are not developed to assist them in placing their problems before the public, we may face a time when representatives of the developing underclass begin to routinely use more drastic means, even beyond kidnapping journalists, to get their grievances aired. I am not referring darkly to hostile armed invasions of newspapers and broadcasting facilities—most offices and stations have so much security that scenarios in which angry mobs reach a newsroom with weapons are likely to be rare. But as the tactics of those who bring down airliners filled with innocent victims so tragically demonstrate, it is not that difficult to get the attention of the media by deviant means, which, unfortunately, usually guarantee a place on the agenda.

Academics from relevant disciplines can have input into the thinking of media professionals. They have to help define *why* it is important in a democracy to use the media to help the public at large understand the plight of the disadvantaged. There are no other mentors to do it. People who are poorly educated may not be able to frame the issues surrounding their situations in a way that the media can understand. Media owners and managers are unlikely to formulate a deliberate policy of better informing the public about individuals and groups outside the system. This is not a problem that can be addressed sufficiently in the college classroom; it requires academics from pertinent disciplines to speak directly and eloquently to media professionals. Social scientists with expertise and ingenuity could help in the case of media access by clearly outlining the roots and causes of the problem, by underlining the issues with comprehensive and comprehensible evidence, and by helping news people find articulate and representative sources among the disadvantaged segments of society.

These are not easy tasks. For example, poverty is a particularly difficult problem for news people, who tend to come from middle-class backgrounds. My own consciousness of this journalistic blind spot was raised when the faculty of the Newhouse School was asked to judge the Dallas Press Club’s annual “Katie” awards (for effective news writing) in the summer of 1988. It was truly a learning experience and gave me a new perspective on my own teaching. Going through the stacks of entries from throughout Texas, I was struck by how many of the stories, which represented what reporters considered their best work of the year, attempted to deal with poverty. “Attempted” is the operative word here. They detailed the lack of resources in many communities to help the poor: according to reports in several different newspapers, the local method of caring for homeless people was to provide transportation to some other city where shelters existed—a contemporary version of what used to be called the “bum’s rush.” Generally, however, the way these talented journalists portrayed the poor was superficial at best and demeaning at worst. I found only one series on poverty that I considered prizeworthy. It was by a reporter who had not only dug deeply into the statistics and issues of poverty but who, on seeing a family struggling with their belongings along

a dusty highway, had backed up and offered them a ride. His writing about that experience reflected the pride of that homeless family as well as their dilemma and explored his own mixed feelings as he had tried awkwardly to help.

Reading of this experience inspired me to adapt one assignment for my students in my reporting class in the fall. To help them develop their skills, I always ask them to go into unfamiliar situations and write a piece based strictly on observation. This time I told them to volunteer for a couple of hours of service at one of the local sites where the poor receive help and then to write about the experience. I have made assignments I thought were as difficult as this one—to visit nursing homes when the issue for the semester was aging; to go someplace where they were in the racial minority when it was racism—but I have never encountered the extent of resistance that I met by asking them to spend some time with poor people. They had dreadful misconceptions. Several students were prepared to take an F for the assignment rather than to fulfill it. It was only when I made it clear that they could not pass the course unless they did the story that they reluctantly agreed. In some cases, compliance came only after lengthy one-on-one discussions about their desire to avoid the experience.

Equally revealing was their reaction to the poor and to the people who serve the poor at the Rescue Mission, at the feeding program at a downtown church, and at other sites around the city. They experienced far greater diversity than what they had anticipated. The students were genuinely surprised at some of the things they observed: the conversations among the poor about a variety of topics, including concern about drug abuse; the good-natured kidding; the range of grooming from stereotypical filth to careful neatness; the variety of reactions of those being served from open gratitude to deep resentment. Although the students were, of course, reporters in the making, not employed professionals, I suspect the main difference between them and most established journalists is the candor with which they expressed their feelings.

How can we increase the knowledge that these future professionals have about the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised? An effective way would be to have them take courses from specialists in disciplines such as political science, economics, sociology, and psychology, who have a depth of knowledge about how U.S. society is structured, how it works, how income and power are distributed, what causes some people to be outside the system, and how such people build psychological coping skills and subcultures for dealing with their worlds. Assignments such as those I have described would not catch middle-class students by surprise and arouse negative and stereotyped reactions if they had such a knowledge base. Only by such an approach can we raise the sensitivity of our media to people and their problems.

MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMY can play three roles that would help media professionals work more effectively and thereby help change our society. These roles can also help academics increase the impact of their ideas and insights on society. Too often the confines of specialization leave scholars talking mainly to others who

share the linguistic shorthand of their disciplines, while ignoring the relevancy of their knowledge to society. Moreover, even those in disciplines most allied to making and implementing public policy seldom use the media to gain support for convictions they develop through thoughtful scholarship. Taking steps to spread their messages can be difficult, frustrating, and time-consuming, but that does not reduce the importance of the effort. Although I speak here with special reference to the news media, I see members of the academy playing similar roles in entertainment and, to some extent, advertising. After all, a television sitcom or dramatic serial can provide a powerful vehicle for carrying new ideas to the public or for raising consciousness about particular issues. Making a message public does get it on the agenda, can heighten awareness of issues directly, and can lead to changes in behavior. This is as true in political and public information campaigns as it is in advertising.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, role that academics can play is as educators preparing all of their students, whether future media professionals or not, to be intelligent media consumers. One of the great anomalies of the information age is that young people seem to be adrift in a sea of events and issues with no sense of what to do with the media resources. I recall so well my own college days: going from a small town to the big Michigan State campus, being introduced to the better newspapers and magazines, and then drawing on them for classroom discussion. I know some faculty members still incorporate such media resources in their teaching, but I have the impression that little of that learning goes on early in students' academic careers.

Most of my sophomore students in news writing arrive with an appalling lack of knowledge not only of what is happening in the world but of where to find out about it beyond clicking on the television for a quick capsule or scanning the headlines of a local newspaper. And these are students planning to make careers in public communications, who have some reason to pay attention to the media; I suspect that their colleagues in other majors may be even more ill prepared.

Those of us teaching in accredited schools of journalism and mass communications recognize the contribution that our colleagues in other disciplines make to the development of future media professionals by requiring undergraduate majors to take three-quarters of their course work outside their professional school. At the Newhouse School, we take the further step of requiring students to develop an area of concentration or a formal minor in a nonprofessional discipline, and we permit and often encourage students to pursue a double major—one in a professional sequence within Newhouse and one in a discipline elsewhere on campus.

At the same time, the faculty remains compartmentalized. For lack of individual initiative or of leadership from administrations, or perhaps for other complex reasons, many of us teaching in journalism and mass communications seem either unwilling or unable to develop collegial relationships and intellectual exchanges with faculty in other disciplines. This is a serious limitation because they provide 75 percent of our students' academic experience. It may be that, for some of the reasons outlined by Everette Dennis in his opening essay, those colleagues have the same problems in initiating interaction with communications faculty. Unfortunately, the big

losers are our students. If that communication barrier can somehow be breached, together we could probably think of ways to enrich students' experience outside and inside the professional school.

I will discuss the second and third roles of the faculty together because they share certain prerequisites for effective performance. I have alluded to the second role earlier in this paper. It is as what journalists call "sources," quotable and credible experts willing to be interviewed, especially as news sources in their areas of expertise. The third role is as expert consumers, ready to provide well-argued, authoritative criticism when the media err or perhaps to pass along a word of encouragement if they see someone in the media effectively tackle a subject in their special area.

To carry out those tasks, all academics need to have some basic knowledge of how modern media function, which could be a useful outcome of exchanges between colleagues who teach media studies and those in other areas of the university. But first, we must recognize that individuals working in the media are embedded in an organizational structure that is much more constricting than any academic bureaucracy. Because the work is highly time-oriented, tasks are broken down into parts so that, for example, the reporter who did the interview and quoted accurately cannot be held responsible for the erroneous headline on the same story; it would have been written by a copy editor. Likewise, the television team that showed up at a seminar may or may not have written the introduction delivered by the smiling anchorperson.

Second, we need to acknowledge that news work is conditioned by uncertainty. Sociologist Gaye Tuchman studied Chicago newsrooms and found that news people and news organizations develop routines for dealing with various degrees of unpredictability.⁵ They can plan for prescheduled events, such as news conferences and speeches, but they also prepare for certain kinds of unscheduled events, such as crimes and fires, by setting up "beats" or assigning staff to monitor police calls. She discovered that they behave somewhat predictably even when the unimaginable happens. She christened these "what-a-story" events. She was in a newsroom the night Lyndon Johnson surprised the nation by announcing he would not seek another term as president. From time to time, she observed, reporters and especially editors would rub their hands together and exclaim, "What a story!" Staff who had been off duty showed up to help; no one had to telephone them and ask. Newsroom veterans harked back to other such events in making assignments. The same thing would have happened after the Challenger disaster and when Flight 103 went down over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Third, understanding the media requires us to recognize the special nature of news. Based both on my own professional experience as a reporter and on my research on the subject, I define news as information that is or can be made relevant to the audience of a given medium.⁶ I do not regard it as the exclusive domain of the journalist; in other words, a journalist's treatment of an event or issue as news does not mean that any significant segment of the audience will concur. I think that a great deal of relevant contemporary information is never recognized as such by the news media. As a correspondent in this country and abroad, I frequently found that the hardest thing to get my editors to accept was a really new news

5. G. Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Hastings House, 1978).

6. Some other writers take a different view. For example, Leon Sigal, in *Reporters and Officials* (Boston: Heath, 1973), said essentially that news is what news people say it is. This is a circular definition that omits the audience and the news source from the picture and that provides no criteria for judging the performance of news professionals.

story. Reporter time was a scarce resource, and editors were loathe to risk it on stories that might not appeal to newspapers that subscribed to United Press International. But if an expert can show the relevance of an issue or problem to the audience, this can help it gain credibility as news. The catch is that the relevance of the topic and what is said about it must be exceptionally clear.

In deciding how much attention a story merits, journalists make use of criteria they call “news values.” Essentially, these are economic values—guidelines for determining how to allocate scarce resources of time and space. They include prominence, proximity, impact, conflict, novelty, and timeliness.

Prominence means, for example, that well-known persons may be given greater attention than those who are less famous, even when the latter have greater expertise. Thus Dr. C. Everett Koop may be able to command attention by contending that scientific data on the health effects of abortion on women are inconclusive, while many medical researchers are unheeded when they point to a large body of scientific evidence showing abortion has few long-term physical effects.⁷

Proximity means that people like to hear about events in their own community or area. For example, Syracuse newspapers might give more attention to what researchers on our campus or at the teaching hospitals in the area had to say on the effects of abortion on women’s health than they would give to Koop, even though he was the surgeon general.

Stories with high impact are those that can have significant effects on people’s lives or their environments; they could be as distant as sunspots or as near as a Syracuse Common Council decision to raise taxes. These are stories of high news value because they are almost certain to generate much interest among the relevant audience.

Conflict is a news value often associated in the minds of media critics with the worst journalistic practices; coverage of the 1988 presidential race could be cited as an example of how excessive attention to conflict—to the election as horse race—deflected a closer look at crucial national problems. But conflict, as a news value, also makes it more likely that a person whose opinions on some issue differ significantly from someone who has already made news will be able to gain attention through the media.

Novelty creates perhaps even more debate. It is the old human-bites-dog test of a news story. People always seem to be attracted more to the unusual than to the routine. An example may be when a rabbit swam across a pond in which President Jimmy Carter was fishing and passed within about twenty feet of his boat. (Rabbits often swim to get away from what they perceive as danger.) Mr. Carter simply watched with interest; however, the incident was reported by the news media as an “attack” on the president by an “aggressive” rabbit. It occupied the news media for days, displacing news about important presidential decisions and actions.

The most exasperating news value for those outside journalism—and for those working under intense deadline pressures within—is timeliness. It is particularly aggravating, I suspect, to those of us whose work is planned by semesters or whose projects take years to complete. But the reaction of an expert to a story that is news today may be treated as news tomorrow or next Sunday; the same reaction a month later will be ignored

7. *New York Times*, 15 January 1989, 1.

because the focus of the media and the audience will have moved on.

Keeping these news values in mind, academics could play a valuable role by providing feedback to the media, especially to individuals in the media. Lack of feedback is a special problem for working journalists. Most news people work under conditions of anonymity, with little constructive criticism and analytical feedback from their editors, much less from their readers or viewers. My own research showed that newsroom supervisors typically did not discuss performance problems with reporters or photographers and initially doubted that praising good work would have any effect.⁸ Consequently, there is little incentive to change patterns, such as increasing sensitivity to needs for privacy or focusing on the problems of the disadvantaged. Academicians can provide welcome feedback. A phone call or letter citing specific problems with a story or praising a well-done story can make a difference. Responses from academics with special expertise on the topic are likely to be welcome indeed and may influence the journalist's approach to the next story on the subject.

Feedback from academics on ethical issues can be as helpful to the working journalist as an educational foundation for ethical standards is to the communications student. It is not necessary to be a specialist in moral philosophy to help a news professional understand the special circumstances in a particular discipline that shape its ethical codes. As other articles in this issue of the *Syracuse Scholar* make clear, the topic of ethics is one of the most difficult areas in journalism and one that needs special attention.

8. J. Deppa, *Change in the Newsroom: Field Test of a Training Program for Newsroom Supervisors Using Video-Taped Role Models* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1981).

OVERALL, THEN, we live in a society in which the mass media play an increasingly important role. The news industry, in particular, touches us all in a multitude of ways. That industry is still evolving and has yet to develop ways of informing the public that do not intrude on the private sensibilities of individual human beings. In addition, the way that the industry is structured within our society produces emphases on news stories with the specific kinds of characteristics discussed (stories that are covered from the perspective of the dominant groups, reporting that responds more to competition than to the needs of people who are the focus of the coverage, articles that skim the surface of complex topics). These may benefit the media more than they do the society. That is, such stories tend to make up the majority of our daily news and also tend to displace or overlook the important concerns of people who are not sharing the benefits of our democracy. How can these conditions of sensitivity and social responsibility be improved?

In summary, members of the academy can play several roles to increase media sensitivity:

—With communications students, explore the ethical bases of various disciplines and encourage them to examine critically the ethical issues of their own profession. Advise them to take courses in which they will learn how U.S. society is structured, how it works, how income and power are distributed, what causes some people to be outside the system, and how such people build psychological coping skills and subcultures.

—Learn to use the media effectively to inform public debate and inspire public action, especially in bringing responsible attention to significant social problems. What this involves may vary from discipline to discipline, but it will require a basic understanding of the way media function in modern society. It will also require extra effort to make complex issues clear to the general public.

—Help prepare all students to become intelligent media consumers and to set the pace by becoming expert consumers themselves, ready to provide well-argued criticism or a word of encouragement when the media address a topic relevant to their individual disciplines. ♦

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