

THE JOURNALISTS' REBELLION

by Nat Hentoff

The publication of the *Pentagon Papers* once again underlines the urgent need for a new kind of reporting which abolishes the hoary myth of "objectivity." What are the forces at work inside the media that keep the facts from being aired? And what—if anything—is the media doing about it?

We must have citizens able to choose representative people in any field of activity. And they can do so only if the citizens know the real facts—the factors of every situation. If you don't have that, it is a caricature of democracy. That is why we say that only a society which has highly qualified journalists can progress. —Jean Schwoebe, diplomatic editor, *Le Monde*

The only security of all is in a free press. The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary to keep the water pure.—Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette

Because the waters of information are so impure, a rising number of teachers and students, including this writer, are working on courses in media ecology. Our conviction is that as citizens become more deeply aware of how badly informed they are, they will eventually demand much more accountability from the media. So far, most of these courses are being developed in high schools and colleges. My belief is that young-

sters in elementary school can also begin to learn to be critical interpreters of media. Acquiring these skills can't begin too soon because survival may literally depend on what we really know, not on what we think we know.

One example—and this is not as cosmic as the possibilities of nuclear annihilation about which we are staggeringly uninformed. Following the National Commission on Product Safety Hearings held in 1969 and 1970, Ralph Nader noted: "Each year, as a result of incidents connected with household products, 20 million Americans are injured seriously enough to require medical treatment or be disabled for a day or more. This includes 585,000 hospitalized, 110,000 permanently disabled, and 30,000 who are killed."

Think about it. How much consumer reporting do you see in newspapers, magazines, and on television? And how persistent is what little of it you do see?

What are the forces inside the media that prevent and deflect such reporting? What other stories, vital to our physical survival or to the survival of the Bill of Rights, are being ignored or underreported?

As of now, there are few ways of finding out from the outside, since there

is as yet no massive drive for media accountability from those who consume the media. Therefore, for some time to come, our primary news about the institutions of information must come from inside. And this inside rebellion of journalists is beginning. Throughout the country—in Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Denver, Providence, New York—journalism reviews are in operation. Staffed by working reporters from all kinds of media, these publications are into bedrock muckraking. They are disclosing the ways in which the waters of information are polluted as soon as they begin their journey.

In its first issue, for instance, (*MORE*), a New York-based journalism review (P.O. Box 2971, Grand Central Station, New York, N.Y. 10017), revealed: "Homer Bigart, perhaps the *Times*' most respected reporter, tried to make an important point in the story he filed from Fort Benning, March 29, on the conviction of First Lieut. William L. Calley, Jr. Some editor ruled him out of line, however."

(*MORE*) then published the original Bigart story: "Although he had just been found guilty of 22 murders, Calley was treated far more gently than was Army doctor Captain Howard B. Levy

four years ago after receiving a sentence for refusing to give medical training to Green Berets on the grounds that the training would be used unlawfully in Vietnam. Unlike Levy, Calley was not handcuffed and left the court unfettered. An officer explained: 'His conduct has been exemplary throughout and he'll continue to be treated as an officer.'

This is how that same Bigart story actually appeared in the *New York Times*: "Lieutenant Calley was not handcuffed when driven to the stockade."

What was Bigart's reaction? (*MORE*) reports: "Bigart, who is 63 years old and retires next year after 17 years on the *Times* and 45 years as a journalist (during which he twice won the Pulitzer Prize), accepts the editing with the resignation of a man who has been mangled many times before. 'I never read my stories in the paper anymore,' he says. 'It's a safe way to avoid ulcers. You can't win. You finally come to the point where you either have to take it or quit. People have tried to fight back, but they get nowhere. You can't beat a newspaper bureaucracy any more than you can beat any other kind of bureaucracy.'

This attitude — resignation — is also complicity. It's not enough to start journalism reviews where we can find out about such indignities of "editing" as were visited upon Bigart and his readers. If the rebellion is to have substance and durability, journalists will have to bring it into their own shops. (That means television, magazines, newspapers, and any other points of information-gathering and disseminating.)

I am not calling for extraordinarily brave men. There aren't that many in any field. But certainly there are ways for journalists to incorporate elementary safeguards of self-respect in their union contracts. It took one veteran reporter at the *New York Times* to insure that editing could not change the meaning of what appears under a reporter's byline. He refused to resign himself to having his copy distorted and so he fought long and loud to get this degree of self-protection into the contract for editorial employees at the *Times*. Yet this same reporter remains chronically exacerbated because his copy is crudely cut for space by editors who don't begin to understand the crucial elements that should be kept. The meaning isn't changed, but his stories sometimes end up without meaning.

Why ought not journalists—and this includes television reporters—have a say in how they're edited? One reason for the silent complicity of many news-

men in the malfunctioning of media is that over a period of time they do lose much of their self-respect. It is not so much that they become cynical as grayly resigned. But if the majority of a reporting staff simply refused to cooperate any longer in their own evisceration, they might then go on to have sufficient self-esteem to dig out core stories and insist they be published.

Furthermore, such reporters could have the force, singly and collectively, to finally annihilate the myth and mandate of journalistic "objectivity" that so delimits their capacities at most newspapers and television stations. No single factor has been more responsible for media pollution than this dogma of "objective reporting," as enforced by most editors and publishers.

At a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April of this year, Thomas Winship, editor of the *Boston Globe*, addressed himself to the false consciousness embedded in the no-

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tion of journalistic objectivity: "I'd like to give my definition of objectivity. Objectivity is what we gave Joe McCarthy before a great group of reporters took their gloves off, and before Ed Murrow's TV show. Objectivity is what we gave cancer-producing cigarettes before the Surgeon General's report. Objectivity let the most unexplained war in history go on without challenge until one and a half million people were killed.

"Objectivity," Winship continued, "let industrial wastage almost clobber to death the face of America. Ralph Nader and Rachel Carson blew the whistle; not our great newspapers. . . . Objectivity is such a nice trip for an editor. Every morning he swallows his little objectivity pill. It turns him off from all that paranoia among the long-haired kids in the city room who whisper dirty talk over the water cooler—words like 'Nader,' 'Hanoi,' and 'Panther.' Objectivity is a code word for playing it safe, covering up, and superficiality. These young people still think the newspaper is one of the most effective instruments for social change. They are not in the business to become stenographers. . . . Editors and publishers who continue to preoccupy themselves with this objectivity jazz will have as much luck keeping the establishment press afloat as they will selling Nixon as a folk hero to anyone under 35."

The *Boston Globe*, as you might expect, is a good paper to work for. But there are not yet that many Thomas Winships in executive positions in the information institutions. Therefore, just as basic changes in schools will only result from concerted thrusts by students, so basic changes in media responsibility will take place only through sustained rebellions of journalists. And that means a rebellion against the kind of false "objectivity" that Winship skewered. It does *not* mean a rebellion against getting all the facts straight. Too much "advocacy" journalism subverts itself by being careless with facts. But once secure as to facts, the journalist increasingly must *interpret* if the information is to have any meaning to him or his readers.

Also part of the rebellion should be a redefinition of a journalist's "beat." Many potentially first-rate investigative journalists are wasted by being tied to daily assignments and beats. You cannot develop a story if you're a prisoner of daily deadlines. More "highly qualified journalists," in the phrase of the *Le Monde* editor at the beginning of this article, should be freed to dig up their own stories or to quarry a particular field without being narrowed by short deadlines.

Not only is so much of what is printed superficial—because reporters do not have time to think, let alone explore—but the effect of this superficiality on society can be calamitous. As John Rothchild puts it in an excellent analysis, "The Stories Reporters Don't Write" (*The Washington Monthly*, June 1971): ". . . [The reader], along with the entire country . . . is also a prisoner of [this] concept of news—wanting to work where the action is, unwilling to implement programs because implementation does not bring publicity, going from one new agency or organization or project to another, and leaving as the headlines shrink to the back pages.

"Nobody knows how much effect our love for news has made mental nomads of us, working for civil rights until racism no longer had news value, then shifting to ecology, and now with the third eye out for something else. The emphasis on change creates a need for immediate feedback, a cheapening of experience—while the world is stripped, we scratch the surface of each problem and leave it scarred and behind."

But who can reverse the concept of news as "a cheapening of experience" if not the journalists themselves? The kinds of changes, none of them revolutionary, I've been advocating are not

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viewers. But a system of self-correction, of course, would have just the opposite effect, conceding (to no one's shame) that journalism even at its finest is an inexact art. Equally important, a regular process of correction (at the end of the network news shows; at the beginning of each day's 'A' wire [wire service]; on page 2 of the *Times* every day) would make reporters and editors far more accountable than they are now and help put an end to much of the sloppy journalism that pervades the press."

That's not much to ask, is it? Do you think it's going to happen—without considerable pressure? Of course, it won't. Spiro is right, for the wrong reasons. Of all our institutions, the most important—"the only security of all"

—is the least accountable. Even for the simplest factual mistakes. That's why the rebellion from within is important.

Final example: Toward the end of May, I printed the following in the *Village Voice*: "Just before the deadline for this issue, I received what I consider reliable information that the *New York Times* has a breakthrough, unpublished story concerning the White House, the Pentagon, and Southeast Asia. The story is the result of intensive team reporting by some of that paper's most diligent and experienced men. Is this story going to be published? Or are there still *Times* executives and editors who might hold back such a story 'in the national interest?'"

As I write this, the story has just been published—the secret Pentagon history of American involvement in Vietnam. Has the journalists' rebellion finally reached the *Times*? □

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him. Can of pineapple juice is released to roll across the floor and settle against a table leg. Stud stumbles after camera, meters light, fumbles interminable time. Framing his docile, doe-eyed baby lying under her covers, he finds the light's too little.

Confused, hesitating long, he realizes he must rewind Plus-X half-shot at pool with newest baby. He looks for Tri-X, tries to concentrate on film-speed setting. In and out of kitchen, turning dials, he locates film, finally gets a roll of Tri-X tracking.

Twig is coaxed from under her sheet, lets hair protrude, then haunting face, lets quaking man persuade her to prop her head. Shooting too slowly, re-checking focus after every shot, he trembles at what he's doing, peeping

