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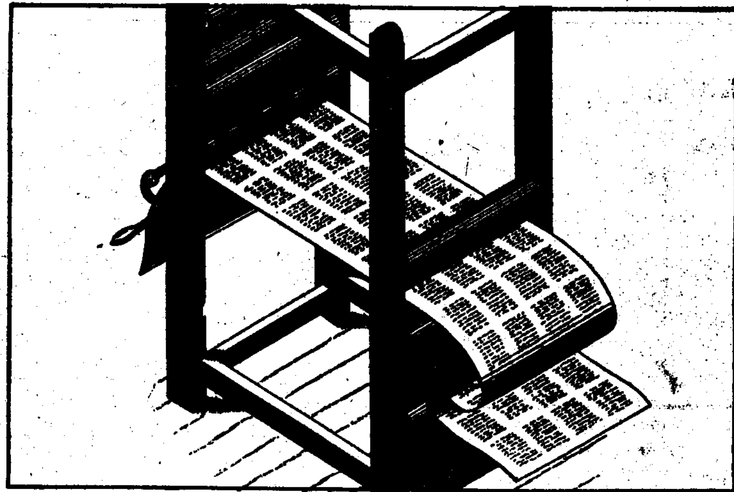
Sensitivity And a Little Conspiracy



A. J. Liebling, the premier press critic, said back in the simpler '60s that "newspapers can be more fun than a quiet girl."

It is a sign of the times that today a journalist would wonder as he wrote that remark whether it was (a) sexist and/or (b) too frivolous. More to the point, it is doubtful that newspapers today are more fun than a quiet girl. They are more responsible than they used to be; a good many of the outrages enjoyed and chronicled by Liebling would not occur today. But with responsibility and a Watergate-spawned sense of power have come a pervasive self-righteousness and its companions, stuffiness and the inability to face up to one's faults.

All this is by way of introducing the first of a continuing series of observations on the media in general and this newspaper in particular. I am sold on the vital role of the press in our system and I am proud to have been a newspaperman once myself, as the expression goes. But I hope to be able to prick a few balloons and possibly even demonstrate that newspapers can still occasionally be fun.

As a starter, I'll not deal with such weighty matters as the media's own problems of post-Watergate morality, of which there are several, or the threats to the First Amendment guarantee of a free press, which are always present. My themes today are modest: First, the ridiculous sensitivity of the press to any suggestion that it is less than perfect. Second, a deceitful little conspiracy between journalists and public officials that the press would have shot down long ago if it had not itself been involved. Both are illustrated by one case history

On Nov. 25 The Post carried in a prominent position on Page One a startling story by a British expert in Sino-Soviet relations. He reported that three times in the past eight months a third power warned China that Russia appeared to be preparing an attack. "It is clearly implied," the story went on, that the warnings came from the United States and drew on intelligence collected by spy satellites. "U.S. Said to Warn China on Soviets," was the headline. Strong stuff in these days of detente.

The next day on page A-11 of The Post there was a story from Peking on Secretary Kissinger's hospital visit to Premier Chou En-lai and his exchange of toasts with Foreign Minister Chaio Kuan-hua. At the end of the story was this paragraph:

"A senior American official aboard Kissinger's plane to China described as nonsense a report that the United States had told China of possible Soviet action against the Chinese. The official, who cannot be identified under ground rules established for his briefing, said telling one country about a menace from the other would place the United States in an impossible position and had never been done."

That was the way The Post disposed of an official denial of what it had presented as major news the day before. There was no acknowledgement that the report denied was a report this paper (and no other, so far as I know) had published. And the denial

itself was consigned to quiet oblivion at the tail end of a secondary story well back in the paper. The reader, one must conclude, was shortchanged.

Now it is important to note that there was no conscious decision anywhere along the line to suppress the denial of a Post story. The conspiracy theory of journalistic misbehavior, always vastly exaggerated, certainly had no application in this case. What was operating was something far more subtle—a firmly rooted reluctance on the part of newspaper people to even suggest in print that they can be wrong and sometimes are.

It is true that what was involved here with was not proof of flat-out error but a denial that could well have been pro forma, based more on diplomatic necessity than on the facts—and by an official who chose to be anonymous. But the denial was made and it should have been reported properly, with identification of the original story and at least a modest display.

The News Business

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That anonymity of the official on the plane brings me to the second theme. Every reporter and editor who has anything to do with foreign affairs coverage would be quite willing to bet that the "senior American official" quoted was, in fact, Kissinger. So would most governmental and diplomatic insiders. It can be assumed that for his own reasons Kissinger didn't want to be quoted directly, so he was granted anonymity under a time-honored deal with the press. That "senior American official" is a well-traveled fellow, making his appearance in the Kissinger entourage any time he is needed.

Now a question: Is the press lying if it quotes a "senior American official on the Kissinger plane" while knowing that Kissinger was speaking? Technically, no; Kissinger is, after all, a senior official on his plane. But the device is certainly the last stage of obfuscation before an outright lie.

Take another example: Congressman X wants certain of his remarks to be attributed to "associates of Congressman X" and the reporter goes along. Is that a lie? Yes, if words have meaning.

Or take this sort of thing, likely to turn up during the holiday season when news is thin: "President Ford is known to feel that inflation and recession are about to cancel each other out and that a generation of peace is at hand. Sources close to the Oval Office say . . ." and so on. If the past can be taken as a guide, and it usually can in these matters, the fact will be that the President invited the White House press regulars into the Oval Office, quite possibly at their request, to hear a wide-ranging but unattributable year-end presidential report. Did that fictional lead-off paragraph contain a lie? Well, a deception at least.

Please note that we're dealing here not with anonymous sources as such but with the deceptive identification of sources. The anonymous source—that is, the source who provides the reporter with a tip or even hard information—is a staple of journalism and of great value when properly used; the Watergate story would not have been told—at least not as quickly and as thoroughly as it was—had it not been for anonymous sources.

But should a journalist, in league with a source, deliberately mislead his readers? I think not.

This is a complex matter. Draw the rules too tightly and you will deprive readers of information they should have. Draw them too loosely and the reader can be misled in a meaningful way. If a source insists on being identified as a "U.S. official" rather than more specifically as a Pentagon official, does that not withhold from the reader a piece of information he should have in evaluating the story? Or if the plural, "sources," is used in connection with the statement of one man, does that not cause the reader to think that the opinion expressed has broader origins than it really has? Many efforts have been made to bring the problem of attribution under control. Many sets of ground rules have been written and then discarded in the heat of journalistic competition. No early solution is likely.

In the meantime, the insiders will continue to have the advantage over the layman, who knows only what he reads in the paper. To redress the balance a bit, here are some tips for the outsider:

- When you see something like "a senior official on so-and-so's plane said . . ." it's a good bet that so-and-so himself is talking. It's also a cue to wonder why he doesn't want to be identified.
- When in the middle of a story quoting Congressman X on the evil of sin and the virtue of motherhood you suddenly encounter "sources close to . . ." floating a trial balloon, you can safely assume that X has simply lowered the shade for a moment.
- When you see that the Secretary or the Senator or the President is known to feel this or that, you'll seldom be wrong if you assume that the gentleman himself told the reporter how he felt.
- And if you sometimes get the feeling that you've been conned into a childish game of guess-who that you shouldn't have to play, you're right.