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In his letter headed "bad reporting hurts the First amendment" John C. Laughland states an important truth: too much of modern reporting is obviously inaccurate when it need not be, as is column writing. In the latter category he singled out Roy "eachum, as I also have. By inference Mr. Laughland says that if those of us who are not reporting can know the truth, why don't the reporters and columnists take the time to learn the truth?

My own reporting days are far in the past but I've never lost my interest in it and I have observed it closely, ^{more} particularly in the past 25 years, when my own work has been reported widely and has been the subject of columnists.

I believe that in general, two factors contribute to less concern for what was basic in reporting, accuracy. One is the corrupting influence of TV, which refers to its own "reporting" as "shows." Except to a degree for major disasters, like hurricanes, TV's interest is in ^{the} appearance of the talking head, simplicity and ^{often} glibness, presented with a background of high-school humor. The other major corrupting influence is the abdication of independence in thought and expression on partisan issues, ^{especially} particularly those on which government has taken a policy position. Reporters and columnists have their ^{own} opinion, and in expressing them they too often find fact irrelevant.

On ⁱ issues of national and international affairs non-metropolitan papers even with the best of intention, which not all have, the editors simply do not and cannot have the background ^{necessary} necessary, particularly with columns, and do not have the time to be fully informed on these matters.

Not infrequently, ^{for example} particularly with regard to Israel, dislike and hatred of Jews and of that ~~sa~~ state combined with ignorance of realities, characterizes what the people are told by the media - the people whose knowledge is vital in a representative society in which, at least in theory, government does as the people want it to do.

A recent example of ⁱ this in the local papers is a Scripps-Howard column on the

truly awful problem of cocaine and the so-called "edallin cartel that distributes most of it. That column said, with no ifs or buts, that the cartel's murderous thugs were trained by Israeli's sent by that government. It concluded with the question, "Is this the way you want your tax dollars spent?"

Any reporter or columnist who made any effort to learn what the ~~facts~~ ^{actually} reported facts are would have known that nationals of a number of countries trained those Columbian murderers, that the Israelis were a minority and that most came from Great Britain. He would also know that, rather than the government of Israel sending those trainers, ~~it~~ it was a violation of Israeli law and the government had ^{not sent them} opposed the participation of any Israeli citizens in it. Thus, in all major particulars, this widely-syndicated column was grossly and prejudicially false and was an incitation to both hatred and political reaction.

There just is no excuse at all for this kind of hate propaganda foisted off on trusting editors and their readers. It cannot be reconciled with any reasonable interpretation of column writing and it does "hurt the First Amendment." It is evil propaganda of evil purpose and it tells us that Scripps-Howard is run either by ignoramuses of hate-mongers.

Similarly, one of Roy Meachum's relatively recent columns blamed Christian Arabs for the awful situation in ~~simply~~ devastated Lebanon. This is the "line" of that faction of Arabs to whom he is devoted, including the terrorists, like the Abu "idal gang he has described as not terrorists ^{but} ~~by~~ patriots. The actuality that is widely accepted is that of ~~these~~ Lebanese who have not been forced to leave their native land (a majority believes that the Syrian occupation of ^{much of} Lebanon for so many years is the root cause of continuing warfare there. Mr. Meachum has a career of denouncing Israel for all the evils of that part of the world ~~and~~ this once blaming the Christian Arabs, but there has not been a peep out of him about Syria's murderous occupation of so much of Lebanon, ^{It} which is, by the way, a major cause of Israel's establishing a small buffer zone at the southern ~~ed~~ of Lebanon.

The world and its politics have become enormously complex, so complex that the

metropolitan papers require many experts among their editors, and non-metropolitan papers simply cannot cope with these complexities.

This does not excuse their publishing inaccurate information and hate propaganda because there are always those on whom they can call with questions. In my own work in the recent past I've responded to questions of fact from TV producers and writers from Los Angeles to London (BBC-TV ~~several~~ numerous times), reporters from all over, and book publishers and magazine/writers.

Badly as those who depend on metropolitan papers are often served by reporters and columnists, those who depend on non-metropolitan ^{papers} ~~papers~~ and TV ^{are} ~~are~~ more badly served. This is a major reason so many Americans today are less well informed on important and controversial ^a ~~mat~~ters than most other peoples.

Sadly, Mr. Laughland is justified in his mistrust of the press.

Harold Weisberg
Harold Weisberg

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Bad reporting hurts the First Amendment

"The pen is mightier than the sword." I believe it. But there seems to be little defense against the publishing of half-truths, inaccurate or misreported accounts of events and wrong or (even worse) contrived quotations. Are the reporters or commentators dishonest? Are they ignorant? Or, are they just guilty of sloppy research?

There was a time in my life when I trusted the press. But then I read a so-called expose in *Readers Digest* on a subject about which I knew the details. The writer had reported a series of incidents that appeared to be scandalous but he had either left out, or chose not to report, the other side of the story which explained why the incidents had occurred and that the incidents were strictly honest, fair and legal.

And back in 1975 I was in Guam and passed by the two-story wooden barracks where boat people were being housed quite comfortably. When I got back to Maryland I saw a CBS News show which included an item about the boat people. The film clip used by CBS showed food lines in front of a refugee tent-city. CBS probably didn't know that the tent-city was a very short phase and that the boat people were getting good care. CBS probably had some flunky in the film room pull a tape off the shelves and never considered that it was history, not news.

Or, how about the AP feature in *The News-Post* about water buffalo meat. The accompanying wire photo showed American bison, not water buffalo. Again, I'll bet some ignorant AP staff gopher, or maybe not ignorant, was sent to the photo files to get a picture of a buffalo. Or

maybe they didn't hear the word "water." Or maybe the reporter didn't know the difference between the two animals.

Finally, a federal appellate court in New York recently said it was OK to make up quotations as part of freedom of speech.

What am I getting at? I'm trying to explain why there exists a constant need to review the output of the media in general and local journalists, such as Roy Meachum, in particular. I don't believe that they have the time, the inclination or the incentive to get the facts straight.

Remember, the media (except for public radio and television) are in the business of selling advertisements but they hide behind the First Amendment like some divine right. And truth and accuracy suffer due to it. If Roy can't get the facts straight when he writes about things I know about, why should I accept his facts concerning subjects foreign to me?

And if he or any other journalist is hurt by these or other comments, he has no one to blame but himself. In my opinion, bad reporting does as much violence to the First Amendment as does censorship.

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