

The New York Times  
Times Square

A. M. ROSENTHAL  
MANAGING EDITOR

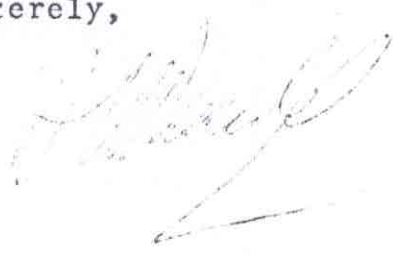
February 7, 1972

Mr. Jerry Policoff  
69-01 35th Avenue  
Jackson Heights, New York 11377

Dear Mr. Policoff:

I have seen a copy of your letter to Mr. Reston. We believed, and still do, that a newspaper has the right to ask questions without committing itself to run the answers if the answers present no new information, or repeat what has already been said. If it were otherwise, a newspaper would turn itself into a propaganda mimeograph machine. I am attaching a letter that I wrote to the New York Post that sets forth our position in detail.

Sincerely,



cc: Mr. Reston

The New York Times  
Times Square

A. M. ROSENTHAL  
MANAGING EDITOR

January 24, 1972

The Editor  
New York Post  
210 South Street  
New York, New York 10002

To the Editor:

It seems to me and others on The Times that your editorial of January 22 criticizing the initial decision of The Times not to print a reply from North Vietnam in response to some questions we asked concerning the prisoners of war was based on some misconceptions of a rather complicated chain of events involving a fairly simple journalistic principle. I believe that a chronology will set the record straight.

1. On January 2, President Nixon said that the possibility of a total troop withdrawal in exchange for the release of prisoners had been discussed with the North Vietnamese at the Paris peace talks, but that Hanoi had totally rejected such an approach. The administration's position was that the North Vietnamese had made release of the prisoners conditional on American withdrawal of support from the South Vietnamese government.

2. On January 3, Senator McGovern said that Hanoi would recognize the announcement of a firm withdrawal date as representing the end of support for Saigon and would release the four hundred prisoners.

3. It seemed to us that there was a contradiction here that might be clarified by direct questions addressed to Hanoi. We sent Hanoi a list of questions designed to find out whether the release of the prisoners was conditional only on the troop withdrawal date or was also linked to the political future of South Vietnam.

4. On January 6, before The Times had received a reply to its questions, the North Vietnamese spokesman in Paris issued a statement making it clear that the release of the prisoners was not only linked to a withdrawal date, but to an end of backing the Thieu "bellicose puppet group."

5. These remarks were printed on the front page of The Times on January 7.

6. On January 15, The Times received a relatively brief reply from Hanoi that did not answer any of our questions directly, but made it quite clear again that North Vietnam believed that the release of the prisoners was linked to an end of support of the South Vietnam government.

7. There was a discussion among the editors and correspondents involved at The Times. They believed that the thrust of The Times's questions had in effect been answered on January 6 by the North Vietnamese, and printed in The New York Times on January 7, and that the reply from the North Vietnamese to The New York Times did not add anything to the situation that we had not already printed. Therefore the decision was taken not to print the North Vietnamese reply.

This decision was based on what seems to us to be a simple journalistic principle. Newspapermen ask lots of questions and receive lots of replies. They then have to decide whether the replies they receive present any new information.

If a newspaper took the position that every time it asked a question it was duty bound to print every reply it received, it would no longer be a newspaper, but a mimeograph machine, and a propaganda machine for anybody or any government to whom it addressed questions.

Obviously this would result in a situation in which a newspaper had the choice either of refraining from asking questions, or turning over the decision on what appeared in its news columns to the people or government which received the questions. I dare say it happens every day on the New York Post that reporters ask questions, do not receive pertinent replies, and make the decision not to print the replies they do receive.

On January 20, The Times learned that a brief summary of the exchange of questions and answers was included in a weekly report distributed for United States government use by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, a bureau of the Central Intelligence Agency. This report is made available to newsmen covering the State Department.

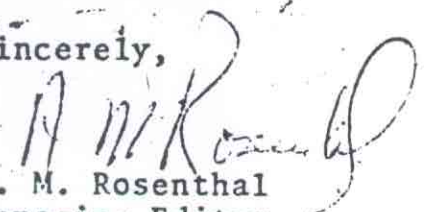
The Editor

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We also heard incorrect rumours had been circulating in Washington, as the result of the brief government report, that the North Vietnamese reply to our questions contained information or views that were new or significant. To prevent these rumours from circulating and getting credence, and thus creating confusion about the issue, we decided to print the whole story of the exchange including the chronology, which we did on January 21.

Sincerely,

  
A. M. Rosenthal  
Managing Editor  
The New York Times