

Should Personal Bias Influence a Newspaper's Content?

By Ben H. Bagdikian

How much should the personal desires of newspaper employees influence what gets into print? Should reporters take personal stands on public issues that are subjects of professional news coverage that claims to be fair? Many people, most noticeably Vice President Agnew, believe that the content of American news media already is unfairly biased by personal political values.

A middle school claims that the traditions and disciplines of American journalism insulate papers from such bias as much as is humanly possible. At the other end, "advocacy journalists" tend to see the ideal of "fairness and balance" as an excuse used by some of their colleagues to avoid their moral duty to speak against injustice and civic danger.

And the debate and the disparity of views are not limited to the newsroom—to writers and editors. Another aspect of the same problem was on display one night last month in a melodrama that took place 30 feet below the surface of 43d Street in Manhattan in the pressroom of the New York Times. It began at 9:30 p.m. on May 30, when a pressman bearing a large piece of paper approached his union chief, Robert Siemers, and said, "Look at this."

It was a paid political advertisement to be printed in the next morning's Times whose first edition was scheduled for the start of presses in 15 minutes. Siemers looked at the preliminary proof of the ad and went at once to the pressroom foreman, Charles Cohen, and said:

"We refuse to handle those two plates."

Cohen, as Siemers recalls it, was shocked and said, "You can't do that!"

What they stood looking at was a two-page ad with a big headline:

**A RESOLUTION TO IMPEACH
RICHARD M. NIXON AS PRESIDENT
OF THE UNITED STATES.**

The ad consisted largely of the text of a House resolution sponsored by eight House members alleging that the President had exceeded his legal authority by taking new military action in Vietnam. The ad was sponsored by "The National Committee for Impeachment" headed by a former U.S. senator from Alaska, Ernest Gruening, and a civil rights leader, Randolph Phillips. The ad cost them \$18,870 and, among other things asked for contributions.

It is easy to imagine the foreman's alarm. A big paper's production involves thousands of interlocking operations and when one crucial link is suddenly frozen the whole system goes into shock.

Foreman Cohen said Siemers couldn't do it, and legally Siemers couldn't. But as union head of the disciplined 600-man press crew, Siemers had the brute force and if he persisted, the Times at the moment would have only two choices: cancel the printing of its 900,000-plus papers for that day, or pull the ad in favor of something more to the

union's liking.

Times executives were quickly involved in the negotiations. Siemers says now that he relented only on the promise that his union's opinion on the ad would be printed. On June 1 the Times ran a story reporting the delay in the press run and in the sixth and seventh paragraphs gave the pressmen's opinion as issued by Siemers.

Siemers said recently that he considered the ad in bad taste. In addition, he said, "You know, all of us are middle-class people and we're sick and tired of people protesting and beatniks lying down in the street and stopping traffic and all that. We wanted to show the enemy that there were ordinary people in this country behind the war."

Asked if in his 25 years as a Times pressman he knew of any similar action taken against the epidemic of "Impeach Earl Warren" ads while Warren was Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, Siemers could recall none.

He said the threat to block the impeachment ad had results "beyond my wildest dreams."

President Nixon sent a personal emissary, Donald F. Rodgers, to greet the incoming 7:30 p.m. shift of the pressmen on June 1 with official presidential thanks and in a small ceremony presented Siemers with a pen inscribed, "Richard M. Nixon, White House."

Former Attorney General John N. Mitchell, now the President's campaign manager, sent a telegram commending "the sentiments of patriotism and responsibility expressed by The New York Times pressmen in objection to the advertisement . . ." Gerald Ford, Republican leader of the House, also sent congratulations.

By coincidence, a related issue was tak-

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ing an opposite direction 200 miles away in Boston. About 50 reporters and editors of the Boston Globe wanted to buy an ad in their own paper calling for the President's impeachment.

Thomas Winship, editor of the paper, told them he believed in maximum access to the ad columns for them but urged them not to do it for professional reasons, since it would raise doubt about the paper's ability to cover the President fairly.

Winship convinced the group that their case could be made in an article signed by one person on the page opposite the editorials with a counter article against impeachment signed by Charles Whipple, editor of the Globe's editorial page.

There are many incidents in which the issue of the Vietnam war has caused a crisis in journalism as it has in other American institutions. In 1970 during the Cambodian invasion, James Doyle, a prominent reporter for The Washington Evening Star, was permitted to have a personal letter-to-the-editor disassociating himself from a pro-invasion editorial in The Star and the editorial's harsh condemnation of critics of the invasion. The letter, according to an editorial note, was endorsed by 29 other members of The Star staff.

At about the same time, some editorial employees of The New York Daily News



TOM PAINE

'... the advocate journalist can play an honorable role ...'

tried to buy an ad in their own paper to disassociate themselves from their paper's support of the invasion. They were turned down and took their ad to The Times, which printed it.

Occasionally, fierce local issues also break through traditional restraints. In Chicago when the Sun-Times and Daily News, both owned by Field Enterprises, endorsed Richard Daley for re-election as mayor, 270 newsroom employees petitioned for equal space to rebut the editorial and ended up buying paid ads in their own papers. The editor, James Hoge Jr., laid down two conditions to the ad. One was that the ad had to be signed personally by each one subscribing to it. The other was that anyone signing it would create serious concern by management about his future assignment to cover politics.

In Philadelphia, where Frank Rizzo aroused similar emotions, five members of the staffs of the Philadelphia papers signed Rizzo's nomination petition, including the Philadelphia Daily News' City Hall re-

porter, and Daniel McKenna, the Evening Bulletin's City Hall Bureau chief (who was hired by Rizzo after the election). A Daily News photographer who covered the campaign wore a "Rizzo for Mayor" lapel button throughout.

(Benjamin Bradlee, executive editor of The Washington Post, said that the basic manual for The Post newsroom recognizes "the incompatibility of many outside activities and jobs with the proper performance of newspaper work." Staff members of The Post are required to discuss with their editors outside activities and jobs. "I would consider the signing by staff reporters of an advertisement calling for the impeachment of the President to be incompatible with the proper performance of newspaper work.")

There are two simplified views of the problem. One is that some issues, like war and race, are so threatening to society that "professional detachment" is personal irresponsibility, a kind of Eichmannism that permits a person to carry out technical duties without personal responsibility for consequences. This can take the form of advocacy journalism in which the person openly propagandizes for a cause, or writes partisan speeches, or marches in protests.

The other view is that honest, disciplined journalism is sufficiently important to justify sacrifice by the journalist of some degree of personal adversary activity. Furthermore, there are acceptable forms of advocacy within commercial papers. Editorials by definition are judgmental. Special articles done in depth are implicitly judgmental to the extent that they say the subject requires special attention. Knowledgeable reporting calls for background and some degree of interpretation. Columns are subjective and sometimes ideological. But reporting of a public event, in this view, must be fair and balanced, the facts presented un-governed by personal opinions of the reporter.

The evolution of public policy is not a serene, Socratic process. There is charge and counter-charge, propaganda and anti-propaganda and in this the advocate journalist can play an honorable role, indispensable to the arousal of society to do what needs to be done. John Milton and Tom Paine were advocate journalists and so are hundreds of contemporary writers. It is a time of deep passions and social change and it is inevitable that people will speak and write passionately.

Precisely because it is a time of passion and change, there is a need for the professional journalist dedicated to skeptical and disciplined observation, able to suspend his own opinions while interpreting the actions of others. This does not mean that the journalist has no strong personal feelings on issues, he deals with—he would be a strange citizen if he didn't and probably a bad journalist. But it does mean that he takes seriously his role as the public's—the whole public's—representative on the scene.

Unless some fundamental facts about important subjects can be agreed upon by most of us, we are all in danger of flying off into mass paranoia. If essential reality is not recognized by a significant part of the popu-

lation, society is blind. "Essential reality" is not always simple to arrive at. A reporter merely reporting accurately what some politician says is not necessarily "essential reality," as most people learned during the days of Joseph McCarthy. What public men say may be only the beginning of the good journalist's job, but at least it should be agreed what was said.

It is possible for journalists to sign a petition for the impeachment of the President and still cover the President fairly. It is possible for the pressmen to censor political ads they don't like and still have most of the paper open to dissenting ideas. But it's asking the public too much to believe it, or to know when they are seeing a disciplined report or an uncensored paper.

When the government used its legal sword to take The Washington Post and The New York Times to court to censor the Pentagon Papers, at least the public knew something was being suppressed. When the pressmen, or unprofessional reporters, simply omit ideas, very few people know something is missing. In this case, President Nixon seems to have discovered that the ballpoint pen given to Mr. Siemers can be mightier than his legal sword.

If the pressmen or the newsroom staffs can censor a paper outside the bounds of professional news responsibility, in daily papers which, in 97 per cent of cities with papers, are monopoly papers, they are diminishing the only major institution dedicated to providing a hardcore of believable daily intelligence during a time of wild confusion. The government can't be trusted to do it because it has its own axe to grind. Nor can committed advocates, no matter how honorable their cause, because they have no obligation to present opposing views. If vigorous national debate is good—as it certainly is—then a believable record of the debate is indispensable to it.