

Alan L. Otten

A New Media Role

One hallmark of contemporary America, it's frequently been noted, is the short life-span of its crises.

A problem emerges suddenly, builds swiftly to crisis proportions, briefly dominates public consciousness and concern, and then abruptly fades from view. Civil rights, urban decay, hunger, drugs, crime, campus unrest, medical care, the environment, energy—one succeeds another with blurring speed, almost as though some issue-of-the-year club were in charge.

Various explanations are offered for this tendency to streak across the public vision: the crises are unreal, manufactured by issue-seeking politicians; over-pressured modern man can't focus on several issues at once, or on any one issue for very long; most problems are too distasteful to dwell on.

And, of course, there's mass media overkill—two or three stories a day in

*This article is reprinted from
The Wall Street Journal.*

every paper; cover stories in the news magazines, nightly segments and longer documentaries on television. Competing for attention, they pour on detail after detail.

Perhaps the rapid build-up is inevitable, dictated by actual events—cities on fire, or long lines at gas stations. Yet many thoughtful people fault the media for dropping issues equally fast. If the problem was real, then shouldn't the press keep it under scrutiny—reviewing it periodically to see just how things are coming along, even if no particular "event" requires this?

"Partisan" journalism starts with a political slant, often antagonistic to the official position."

"The problems of the cities haven't gone away," says Stephen R. Graubard, editor of the intellectual journal *Daedalus* and one of those making this criticism. "Racial tensions haven't disappeared. Yet there's virtually no attention now to these and other subjects that everyone was talking about a few years ago—almost as though

The News Business

they weren't problems any more.

"And it's precisely when an issue isn't red hot that we may be able to think about it more intelligently, without all the emotions that exist at the moment of superficial interest."

All of which, really, leads to a broader discussion of the press' role—a matter of increasing concern for both press and public in the post-Watergate era. Writing in *The Public Interest*, political scientist Paul Weaver suggests that the U.S. press may be moving away from "objective" journalism to a more partisan, "adversary" posture.

The traditional approach sought a universal audience by "objective" reporting of facts and events, without commitment to any particular point of view. Inevitably, Mr. Weaver argues, this involved a cautious interdependence between reporters and officials; reporters won access to official information on the implicit understanding they'd treat the official position fairly.

"Partisan" journalism, in contrast, starts with a political slant, often antagonistic to the official position, and aims at providing information and guidance for an already-sympathetic but narrow audience. Inevitably, this process leaves "objectivity" behind, and also the necessary access to official information.

Mr. Weaver worries that while partisan journalism offers some advantages, a too-massive shift in that direction would threaten "the openness and

flexibility of American government and . . . the ability of public opinion to influence the conduct of public affairs and to attain consensus."

Yet why not something in-between, the sort of answer already suggested to the crisis-of-the-year syndrome? That would be an illuminating role—with papers, magazines and broadcasts devoting far more time, resources, and space to lengthy, thoughtful examination of important institutions and substantive issues, emerging trends, and persistent problems, intriguing ideas and stimulating individuals.

It would be journalism tied less and less to news "events" and devoted more and more to exploration and analysis. It might reach conclusions

and analysis. It might reach conclusions in many cases, without necessarily urging any particular solutions.

Perhaps, for example, there might be less attention to each small episode in the Battle of the Tapes, and more attention to just how (or whether) the government is working these days. Less attention to Democratic dismay over the latest price reports, and more to the debate among leading economists over the consequences of permanent inflation. Less attention to Governor Wallace's reelection campaign plans, and more to whether Alabama has fared well or ill under his stewardship.

Admittedly, this is hardly a completely novel approach. The *Wall Street Journal* and *Christian Science Monitor* use it quite routinely, and other papers are moving more in this direction. Educational TV does quite a bit of it, and commercial TV tries it every so often. But it's still all too rare.

There are problems, of course. Most media still feel a primary obligation to cover news in the old sense, and this absorbs most of the available resources. Analytical reporting is tremendously expensive, too; a great deal of manpower, time and money may produce only a two-part feature story, or an eight-minute film segment. It requires highly-skilled, knowledgeable practitioners, or the result is superficial, dull, or slanted. And there's always the question of just how many people will read or watch journalism not based on some "yesterday" event.

Yet these objections need not be conclusive. More papers could profitably cut coverage of spot news, recognizing that most readers have already seen it on TV the night before. Most major broadcasters and publishers could easily spend more on news budgets. The challenge of in-depth reporting would surely attract even more expert men and women.

Certainly this sort of journalism need not lack an audience. Well-done,

"More papers could profitably cut coverage of spot news, recognizing that most readers have already seen it on TV the night before."

it might grab all the more readers or viewers just because it isn't the same thing everyone else is doing. And even if it did draw fewer followers than a story on yesterday's anti-busing march, they might well be those who care the most.

And what's wrong with that as a role for the press?