

Who Is Victim?

A strange and dangerous misperception has crept into the popular debate over newsmen's privilege and the freedom of the press. However obvious the correction may seem, the error is so carelessly and widely believed that it needs explicit exposure.

A habit of thought has evolved among radicals and conservatives alike that portrays the press—that is, all the news media—as just another of the special interests in society, comparable, for example, to defense industries or the highway lobby or veterans' associations. To strike out against "the press," on this faulty logic, is to strike out against a special interest exploiting society for its own benefit.

There are certainly situations in which newspapers and the other media act to defend their own economic interests like any other business. In such cases, as this newspaper has often emphasized, the news industry has no automatic immunity from being criticized and judged in the same way as any other private enterprise that performs a social function. Nor has it any right in such situations to cloak itself in the First Amendment as a protection.

But what is under attack these days is not the business operation of the news industry. It is the concept of news itself, the principle of gathering and disseminating information of current interest to the public. News is not a commodity such as natural gas or sugar or shoes, passing through a market place and subject to governmental or commercial regulation. It is a basic feature of civilized social organization. The presentation of news may or may not bring profit to those presenting it. But the news itself is the property of everyone.

When the Government or any individuals inveigh against "the press," therefore, let these critics be clear that the victims of moves to inhibit the flow of news would not be primarily the owners of television stations or proprietors of newspapers. The victim of repressive measures is not one special interest, the so-called media lords. The victim is the public.