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'New' and 'Old' Journalism

Vice President Agnew, in his thoughtful Harding College speech on "the responsibilities of the news media in a free society," argued, as his central proposition, that "it is advocacy journalism more than any other factor that has caused the current ill-feeling between government officials and the opinion-making media."

That is a view that is worth examining, not only because of its source but because of its import for the future course of the Nixon administration.

A few more quotes are needed to understand exactly what the Vice President is saying.

He defines "opinion-making media" as those with "more than local impact — the large newspapers and magazines which cover the nation and the world with their own personnel, the networks, the wire services."

"The opinion-making media," Agnew says, are "a formidable social force in our society," and their "awareness of this power has caused them to reinterpret their role."

"Once journalists believed their job was to report as much as possible of what happened," he says. "Today, the view increasingly seems to be that the media should control the public reaction to what happened."

"This mind set," Agnew says, "is the essence of advocacy journalism." Advocacy journalism, he contends, "makes him (the reporter) a salesman for his point of view," and "in recent years, many of these views have tended to be anti-government."

It is because they are engaged in selling the public an "anti-government" viewpoint that these reporters "do not trust the government to be fair to them" and tend to cry "repression" whenever "government officials defend themselves from what they consider unfair slanting of news stories."

That is the Agnew argument, in bare bones. How valid is it? First, it's obvious there are some journalists who espouse and practice the doctrine of "advocacy journalism" which the Vice President describes.

But those newsmen who "ferret out and publicize principally those facts which support their own points of view" don't usually get or hold jobs on wire services, networks, or large newspapers.

Most of the "advocacy journalists" are on magazines of opinion or "underground" papers. It is not their work that has caused the serious disputes between the administration and the press in the past four years.

Those disputes — the battle over the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the months of controversy over the Watergate story — centered on the probing of some very hard-nosed reporters into the actions and decisions of some very important government officials. Those reporters are not a new breed, but a very old-fashioned, classic type in American journalism.

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I was not involved in reporting either of these stories, but I know the men who were. They don't spend much time worrying about whether the government is being "fair to them." They know — as Mr. Agnew and many of his colleagues in the administration apparently still do not understand — that there is and should be a built-in conflict between the press and the government, no matter which party or which individual is in office.

That conflict results from the inevitable desire of men in power to conduct their business under maximum conditions of privacy. They rationalize this desire — and, again, I speak of all administrations — as being necessary to orderly decision-making, or to preserve the President's options or some other worthy goal.

But the penchant for secrecy can also be used — and has been, throughout our history — to conceal illegal activities and horrendous mistakes of judgment. It can be used to deny the public the information it needs to participate in democratic decision-making.

It is the last point that is most crucial in Mr. Agnew's analysis, and most important for the Nixon administration to grasp, as the time for restaffing the White House approaches.

Reporters do not "go after" stories in order to prove preconceived conclusions; they seek to lay out for public view those actions and decisions by government officials which have large public consequences, in order that the public can evaluate what is being done in its name.

Publication of the "Pentagon Papers" was not a plot to embarrass the Nixon administration. It was an effort to let the American people examine, however belatedly, the chain of decisions and events by which we entered the longest war in our history.

There was no reason to think — at the time of publication or since — that it would hurt the Nixon administration politically. It was equally ludicrous to suggest — as many administration officials did for months — that pursuit of the Watergate story was motivated by an effort to damage Mr. Nixon or help George McGovern.

In this case and in many others, it has turned out that the President himself would have been well served if he had heeded the reporting — rather than trying to discredit it.

As the Nixon administration re-groups, one can hope that its officials would now recognize the legitimacy and, indeed, the essentiality of the "opinion-making media's" role, instead of treating the work of those journalists as a special curse which an unjust god has inflicted on this particular, noble government of ours.