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The Story Beneath the Non-Story

By Ben H. Bagdikian

WASHINGTON—My heart sinks every time I hear about publishers and broadcast-station managers entering the Oval Office of the White House or the inner chambers of governors and mayors. They're all going to get "responsible" again.

I have no argument with journalistic responsibility, which, to me, means the discovery and validation of information that is true and significant and its maximum dissemination to the public.

But the "responsibility" the Government officials are about to lay on news executives is the opposite, to suppress some piece of information precisely because it is true and significant.

The President asks The New York Times to lay off Central Intelligence Agency assassination plots. The head of the C.I.A. asks a dozen news organizations to suppress their knowledge of the Glomar project—the attempted raising of a Soviet submarine.

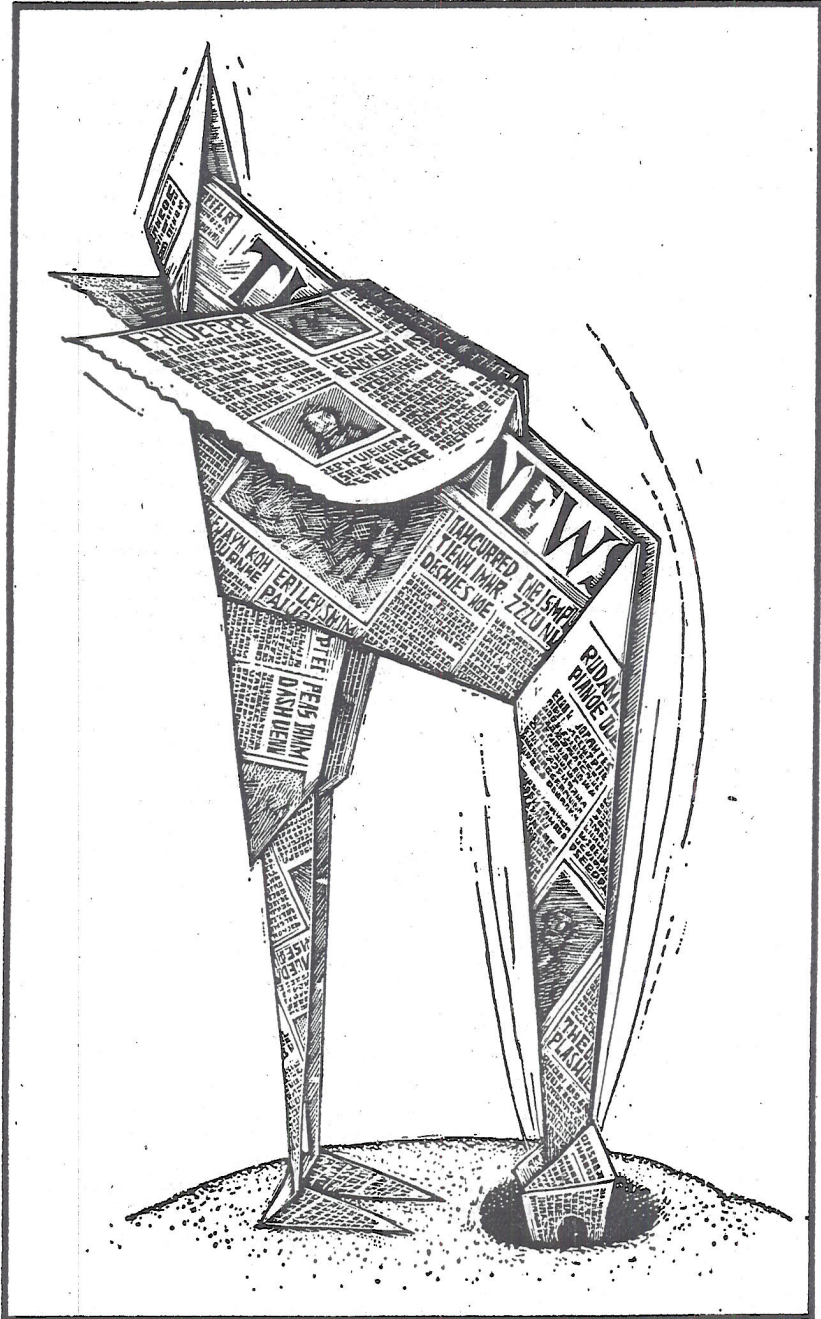
Governors and mayors ask their local press to stop publicizing true things that will make the state look bad to outside industry or cause turbulence in the community. Most of the time the publishers and station managers agree and most of the time history proves them terribly wrong.

A concise past illustration is the successful suppression of the U-2 flights in the late 1950's. High Government officials told major publications that if they printed their true stories that our U-2 planes were flying over the Soviet Union in violation of international law it would end our surveillance of internal Soviet military activity and destroy chances for a summit meeting.

The papers suppressed the news. They did it even though the Russians knew we were flying over their country with a military-purpose plane. The Russians didn't tell their people because it would embarrass the top officials and their client states.

Our Government, of course, knew we were flying U-2's over the Soviet Union, and we knew that the Soviet Government knew. But our top officials didn't want the news out because it would embarrass the Soviet Government into some bombastic behavior and embarrass our Government with its own people and its client states.

What we had, then, was an implicit conspiracy between leaders of the two Governments to keep this mutual secret from their own citizens, and the "free" press of the United States went along voluntarily the way the captive



Woodcut by James Grashow

press of the Soviet Union went along under compulsion.

It all came out in the wash, anyway, when the Russians finally knocked down a U-2, with total embarrassment for the United States, an end to the flights (with the United States announcement that they weren't that important any more), and a collapse of the Eisenhower-Khrushchev summit meeting — consequences probably worse than would have come from honest, timely reporting.

News executives don't agree to this kind of thing because they are evil. They believe they are acting out of

noble motives for the national good. Nor is it necessarily true that they persist in this illusion because they are stupid. Some of them are extraordinarily intelligent, but not as experienced as their reporters with the way powerful news sources manipulate information and use that ace card, "the public good," to promote public ignorance.

Today newspapers and broadcasters are especially vulnerable to the appeal of "public interest" to suppress news because they are still under fire from Government and much of the public.

I have heard it argued that in addition to accepting "responsibility" this self-censorship produces two good side effects. High Government officials, seeing the papers censor themselves, will thereafter feel confident in taking papers into their confidence. And the public will have more respect for the press because it is patriotic.

I think both are wrong. Even if the Government more often took the press into its confidence, such confidence would be private and do the public no good. And the usual result of the press's playing the Government's role is that the press will be taken for granted and forever pushed to suppress additional quantities of information.

Public officials are most candid with reporters who have demonstrated that they have independent sources of information and a determination to publish.

As for public attitudes, press conformity to governmental policies abroad has produced a post-World War II citizenry that increasingly believes that the First Amendment no longer means what it says, that the press is obligated to be an official voice.

The alliance between press and Government on cold war issues has led to an ominous shift in the American social ethic when it comes to governmental information.

It used to be considered the sole responsibility of the few Government officials involved in truly sensitive matters to be discreet. Now it is being said that if these officials are indiscreet the responsibility shifts to the press. This, at heart, means the public.

So now if an indiscreet Government official fails in this way, the people who hear him are supposed to be the guilty parties.

The proposed codification of Federal criminal law now before Congress is a constitutional horror partly because it would make it a felony for anyone, press and individual citizen, to hear or see classified material without reporting the full circumstances to the authorities immediately.

Twenty years ago this would have been unthinkable, but the latest word from Capitol Hill is that the bill has a chance of passing.

Freedom of expression is not going to be preserved by abandoning it. The First Amendment is going to survive only if it is used with our most crucial news, as a living principle, and thus fix freedom of expression in the public consciousness as a normal and inviolable part of the American social process.

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