

Fairness and the Media

After more than a decade of being what is known in Washington as a "news source"—that is, someone who is often interviewed by reporters—I can recall only two instances where I felt a reporter was biased, meaning that he was seeking to prove a thesis regardless of the facts he might uncover.

Two cases out of many hundreds—that's a very good average. Using this as an elementary definition of fairness, I came to conclude that, in my own personal dealings, the press had been fair.

Assuming that the vast majority of reporters and editors are hardworking, have relatively high IQs and attempt to be fair, why, then, is the American press corps these days so widely perceived as being otherwise?

One answer to this question, I think, lies in the lack of full public understanding about the relationship between government officials and reporters—and, ultimately, a failure to understand what fairness is.

The general impression around the country at this time is that the press and the President are locked in deadly combat. This may be true, but if so, it is atypical of the usual state of affairs that exists between government officials and the media. To someone viewing us from a distance, it is much more likely to appear that government offi-

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cials and reporters are allies in an elaborate and unwritten system of back-scratching based on mutual convenience.

While heartily endorsing the concept of civility, I would argue that in no other capital of a democratic country is there a closer and cozier connection between those who make the news and those who report it. In London, for example, you would find a rather severe separation between the worlds of journalist and government leader. This may be partly a product of a more rigid class structure, breeding the belief that each is rightly divided from the other by tradition and status.

In Washington, however, journalist and government leader are contained in the same social class. They call each other by their first names, drink together after hours, and comfortably commingle as part of one world. You can also find the kind of reporter here who claims to know more about what is going on than he is willing to write for his paper. When pressed, he may say that he does not write a given article because he knows that his paper would not print it; if so, this is a more serious indictment of the press than I am willing to make. What the reporter is less likely to say is that there are other reasons for self-censorship based on the established codes of conduct for doing business in Washington.

(I should make it clear in this year of Watergate that I am hardly talking about every reporter or every story. My focus is on how most of governmental activity is reported on a daily basis.)

Press and government are not handmaidens and are not natural allies. I do not contend that the press, by definition, should be anti-establishment; I

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am simply saying that the role of the press is to produce information that approximates the truth as closely as possible.

To perform this function, a report-

er's best posture is to start from a position of healthy skepticism. To this degree, the President is right that the press is biased—but it is a bias that he should work hard to preserve. Whenever a reporter and a politician become too comradely, one has a right to suspect that the reporter has either become an advocate or has been taken in. On the other hand, the proper attitude of the politician toward the reporter is: "This is what I am doing and this is why; if you want to know the whole truth, you had best also talk to my enemy."

The Government official, of course, should not lie to a reporter. But it is folly to expect any official to tell a reporter something that is not in his interest to reveal. As Lord Tyrrell of the

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British Foreign Office once said to a newsman, "You think we lie to you. But we don't lie, really we don't. However, when you discover that, you make an even greater error. You think we tell you the truth."

In short, the public is best served in government-media relations—as in jurisprudence—by each side's recognizing its adversary role. The courtroom, in fact, is a useful parallel to keep in mind: neither side should impute the motives, goodwill or honesty of the other, yet neither should assume for a moment that his interests are necessarily the same as the other's.

Not long ago in New York I had a conversation with an industrialist who said he believed absolutely in everything he read in the newspapers about politicians in Washington, while explaining to me that everything he read in the newspapers about businessmen in New York was inaccurate.

His views are not unique. But should he have stopped to consider that even if an editor could give a reporter an infinite amount of time to write a story about one of his business deals,

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the businessman, his colleagues and his competitors still would not tell the reporter everything they knew, he might have viewed the state of journalism in a somewhat different light.

By the same token, I am frequently surprised by Washington officials and politicians who accept at face value most political stories in which they were participants—unless, of course, they happened to be the source.

The problem with assessing fairness is that any such measure must be made by common consent. The reporter and the government official would have to agree on what constitutes fairness, and that's hard to accomplish in Washington. To qualify fairness often produces its own unfairness. Much of the press set out to be measurably fair in the 1972 presidential campaign and ended up producing a new form of unfairness. Major papers adopted a policy of "twinning"—running parallel columns about the two sides.

But President Nixon rarely campaigned. The result was that on most days the attacks of secondary Republicans were given equal prominence with those of the Democratic presidential nominee. The next time that an incumbent President chooses not to campaign actively for reelection, the press may choose not to report a nonevent. But would this be fair?

By now it should be obvious: fairness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. The government official looks at fairness his way, the reporter looks at it his way and the reader—well, it is ultimately up to him to judge which is right.

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