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SHAPING MEDIA CONTENT: PROFESSIONAL PERSONNEL AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

BY BEN H. BAGDIKIAN

THERE HAS BEEN a rapid change within news institutions in the last decade. The received conventions that decade after decade automatically conditioned each novice journalist to comply with traditional values are being rejected and reformed. Standards of "legitimacy" are being questioned. The primacy of direction from above is being challenged from below. A different kind of novice professional has entered the field. And the alternative press has produced new journalistic forms and content: radio, television, books, and personal contact with experts in fields covered by journalism have replaced the daily newspapers as the daily bible of the outside world. All this has placed the standard media in the position of competing not only for the attention of the citizen but also for power to conceptualize distant reality.

The change has come about partly because the audience was ready for it. Since World War II the average American has become more cosmopolitan through travel; television; job mobility; higher educational achievement; and the breakup of traditional family, neighborhood, and community ties. Public affairs have also achieved a higher place on the common public agenda. The growth of government influence on individual lives has led to the average citizen's deeper involvement in the political and economic life of his community and nation—concern about property taxes; school curricula; and the influence of zoning boards on his neighborhood, of highway commission decisions on his driving, and of national policies on his employment and income.

It appeared to some observers that newspapers in the 1950s and early 1960s were out of touch with these changes in their audience and in their social environment.* Television, a newer medium, tended to have younger executives and was less ingrained with an ancient body of tradition. On the other hand, this medium was less serious so the contemporaneous nature of broadcasting leadership was not as

* Some unattributed observations are by the author on the basis of journalistic work and research in the mass media over a period of twenty-eight years.

influential as it might otherwise have been, though it was plainly more communicative with younger audiences than print.

THE NEW JOURNALIST

Until this decade, a majority of newspapers were owned or controlled by small private groups, often a single family (Swayne, 1969). Leadership was by genetic accident with newspaper direction determined by the most promising or aggressive sons or sons-in-law (almost never daughters). But the elder who built the paper was usually a strong, tenacious man who continued leadership into his seventies and eighties. In the meantime, his sons, sons-in-law, or other heirs apparent grew old in subordinate positions and passive obedience. Eventually "the old man" died or became infirm, by which time the appointed heir was in his fifties, beyond his prime and still known to his staff as "the kid." Or else, the long reign of the founder permitted proliferation of progeny until many families were taking incomes out of the property and dividing inherited power, providing struggles for inheritance of leadership or unanimous apathy.

Whatever the causes, the 1950s were characterized by the passing of the elder proprietors of a generation of modern papers, instability of leadership, and the start of impersonal corporate accumulation of newspapers that was accelerated by diffusion of individual leadership. Today newspaper chains own two-thirds of all dailies and increasingly have conventional corporate standards for business and production management rather than traditional or idiosyncratic ones. They tend to change editorial operations slowly or not at all.

The largest factor of change has been the introduction of a new kind of professional journalist at the lower levels. Before World War II newspapering was one of those occupations that afforded working-class families—rarely women except during wartime or for limited special work—middle-class status or better. College educations were seldom required and were often a disadvantage at the point of employment. This produced some outstanding journalists who remain examples of the importance of personal qualities over formal training.

But it also produced a majority of journalists whose only perceptions of the outside world after they left junior or high school were what they saw and heard in their newsrooms. Typically, they began as teen-age copyboys, learning from their demi-gods in green eyeshades. If they were aggressive and intelligent they became cub reporters, usually spending their early months or years as a police reporter, at that time considered a major avenue to daily news and a beneficial introduction to news values and techniques. It also provided

a simplistic view of society and a habit of close association with formal power which came to be seen as a natural reward of their occupation. It could lead to a healthy rejection of pomposity and pretention, but it also helped to produce the strong strain of anti-intellectualism that characterized American newsrooms for generations.

With the expansion of higher education and more sophisticated demands upon newspapers by their audiences, there was an influx of reporters from middle-class backgrounds with college educations. They brought a different view into the newsroom—conditioned by formal study and book knowledge of politics, social forces, and economics as opposed to the simplistic standards previously accepted on most papers. It created tension between the older, traditional leaders and the younger, more intellectually prepared novices.

Ironically, this tension was probably prevented from becoming explosive because the earlier college-educated journalists seemed not to be the most intellectually skilled and highly motivated of the college graduates. According to academic journalists, it is in the last fifteen years that academic journalism has changed from attracting students from the lower half of their classes to students from the upper half.*

Originally, skilled students regarded journalism as a low-status occupation. Those who did enter the trade were small in number and lacked the critical mass to challenge traditional assumptions; thus, they tended to perform as though they accepted the older, anti-intellectual patterns of "news" coverage. Learning by doing was still the chief method of entry so they learned how to write in the special pyramidal style of older journalism and to adopt the superficial cynicism of the traditional veteran.

The social revolution of the 1960s changed all this. The importance of social reform in American society affected large numbers of college youth and as they recognized the importance of the media as agents of change, more perceptive, highly motivated students began to appear regularly in the better journalism schools. The influx of the new students also brought turbulence, expressed in problems of "advocacy journalism" and the clash between older editors and younger reporters who challenged, and still challenge, assumptions of journalism.

The growth of professionalism among journalists, started earlier, continued in this same period. It was encouraged by a number of factors: the evolution of larger, more stable newspapers; the slow but steady maturation of broadcast news; greater demands of society upon public information; attraction of a more carefully prepared novice;

* This information is based on interviews by the author.

the overlap of daily journalism with periodicals, journals, and books that placed journalism within the mainstream of intellectual and social change; and a sharp increase in pay and job security through unionization and competition for journalistic talent by other industries.

Professionalism has both aggravated and provided an escape for tensions between traditional and the newer social consciousness values of the news media. It has aggravated tensions by providing a new degree of unity among working journalists in opposition to traditional, institutional constraints that they regarded as inadequate, unethical, or demeaning. There is a growing incidence of staffs openly challenging the policies of their superiors in news organizations. Staffs have, for example, attempted to buy advertising space for editorials counter to their own paper's position (sometimes granted by the paper, sometimes refused). It is one of the motivations behind the growth of local journalism reviews, usually published by reporters from local standard media and printing stories rejected by the standard media or critical of their policies.

Such challenges have led some papers to offer space on their editorial or "op-ed" pages for working journalists to write their subjective assessments of current issues. In a few news organizations, provision has been made for participation of professional staff in periodic reviews of news and editorial policy. But the tensions continue to grow in intensity and are not always peaceful or resolved. In some organizations, reporters are discharged for contributing to local journalism reviews and there are continuing crises of "loyalty" and conformity to institutional standards.

GOVERNMENT-MEDIA RELATIONS

It is difficult to discuss developments in government-media relations without acknowledging the complicating factor of recent government hostility toward the media. On the whole, urban professionals have rejected official pressures and have demanded that their organizations decline to cooperate with authorities in ways that tend to make the media arms of law enforcement or conforming organs of officialdom. The government attack has made professionals more conscious of their individual ethical responsibilities as differentiated from their responsibility solely to their organization. This is not wholly unjustified. Journalism corporations have often asked the government for special postal rates, exemption from anti-trust laws, and other privileges; and there is significant concern among working journalists that in a conflict between the institutional press and the government such

considerations might outweigh journalistic independence and tempt corporations to cooperate with law-enforcement and other agencies of government in order to prevent harm to their corporate position.

Government attacks have taken the form of orchestrated denunciation of the media by the highest officials of the executive branch from 1969 to 1973, the threat of removal of broadcast licenses from stations that carried public affairs commentary offensive to the executive branch, the demand for political and news commentary scripts by the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, intensified investigations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other intelligence arms of government of news media professionals considered hostile to the current political leadership, audits of income taxes of news media correspondents and columnists considered unsympathetic—all to a degree unprecedented in previous White House-media conflicts.

A number of broadcasting stations have quietly permitted law enforcement authorities to have their outtakes (film and tape eliminated by editing and never aired), and some newspapers have done the same with photographic negatives and reporters' notes and documents—without the approval, and sometimes without the knowledge, of the individual journalist who first gathered the material from his sources. While the media as a whole reject official collusion on principle, there have been enough individual cases of quiet or open assistance to intensify the motivation for professional separation of the journalist from complete direction by his organization on matters dealing with the press and government.

The conservative Republican attack on the media has aggravated the endemic tension between conservative media leadership and working journalistic staffs. It is generally assumed (but not known with any scientific accuracy) that most working journalists tend to be liberal Democrats. It is known—from endorsements—that the overwhelming majority of publishers and station managers are Republicans. By attacking working journalists, the Nixon Administration, and before it to a lesser degree the Johnson Administration, has driven a wedge between the two. Until the Watergate disclosures, accomplished by only a handful of newspapers and journalists, the growing trend of independent investigative reporting on national politics and political organizations was threatened.

Objective studies of media coverage of public phenomena in which the media have, or believe they have, a substantial corporate stake are needed. For example, a history of media treatment of tobacco and health should be done in the context of the simultaneous behavior of the media and other medical reporting of preliminary indications of

causes of well-known diseases. What is particularly needed is insight, using the social sciences, into the evolution of the "legitimacy" of such topics—from unawareness to rejection to open treatment.

OPERATING PRACTICES

Because so much of the quality of journalism depends on economic support it is curious that there has never been a systematic study attempting to answer the haunting question of whether persistently high-quality news is more profitable than low-quality or mediocre performance. There are problems of definition of "quality" and that, by itself, should be a major research concern. On the whole, however, research has avoided the subject of measurable criteria of quality in journalism for discrete institutions. The subject can be approached from a number of angles, some of which are comfortably quantitative.

Papers can be described by daily space devoted to serious news, size and salary level of staff, types and quantities of stories. Broadcasting can be judged in the same way, using time rather than space. Qualitative judgments can be made by separate sets of panels whose collective personal judgments can be compared according to common criteria for degree of agreement.

The causes of economic success are difficult, but not impossible, to analyze. The impact of editorial and content changes must be measured over a long period of time before anything like a clear consequence can be hypothesized. Economic influences—like the nature of average content, the growth pattern of the market in which the medium operates, and the relationship to competing media—have to be factored out to approach a thesis on cause-and-effect for quality news.

An understanding of the dynamics in conferring "legitimacy" to categories of news will provide needed insight into how the media both create and reflect social forces. The early stages of school integration, civil rights, student rebellions, and ecology as prime public issues have reached sufficient maturation to permit studies of the methods by which they became "legitimate" subjects of news treatment and of the nature and consequences of media treatment.

For example, the Supreme Court decision of 1954 on school integration produced such a public impact that it automatically became a "legitimate" subject for reportage; however, subsequent media coverage of school integration was not accompanied by equally discernible public phenomena to fully explain how various media reacted to the evolution of the issue and its current fading.

A study of birth control treatment and abortion would also provide insight into the interaction of the media and other public institutions,

such as the church and legislatures; the conflicting perceptions of practitioners within the media; and the changes in power relationships of other institutions to which the media respond—all of which would illuminate the media as agents of change, if in fact they were.

Richer studies are needed of the origin of perceptions of key individuals in decision-making in the media. Harold Isaac's *Scratches on Our Minds* (1958) demonstrated the inadequacy of prior and subsequent quantitative and simple research in this area. It showed that valuable and original insights can be gained by working in depth with a selection of persons most of whom have had subconscious emotional reactions to broad subjects (in Isaac's book, India and China) of which they were unaware but which had profound consequences on American attitudes. Too little modern psychological and psychiatric knowledge has been applied to the study of decision-making in the media.

There is needed, for example, a careful set of parallel studies of social perceptions of owners, publishers, editors, and various levels of working staffs. Until this is available, knowledge of the complicated interaction of these people to produce news absorbed by the public has to depend on reference to older studies such as Breed's (1955) or on individual and impressionistic reports.

Understanding the interaction of these actors in the scene would provide guidance in the struggle to keep professional journalism insulated from the increasing power of corporate trends in journalism. On the one hand, more and more news media companies are being absorbed in chains and conglomerates that not only increase impersonality but also raise the problem of journalism becoming a subsidiary or byproduct of much larger non-journalistic activity of the parent company. If a non-journalistic corporation is considered justified, as it is, in trying to positively influence media treatment of its activities, what happens when the same corporation owns the news medium it wishes to influence? On the other hand, the clear growth of professionalism—that is, an assumption of more or less standard ethics among a large body of working journalists—provides some counterweight to corporate journalism. There is a growth of the idea of "democracy in the newsroom"—participation by all practitioners in the news policy of their institution.

Exploratory studies are needed to determine, first, if there is a pattern of new relationships arising from corporate giantism in journalism and, second, the effectivneess and practicality of experiments in existence for purely professional influence, at a working level, on the major decisions that determine the total treatment of news.

Despite over a generation of intense controversy, the simple, factual

data on social and political characteristics of practicing journalists is not yet known. It is assumed that most are now college-educated and liberal in political tendencies, but this is just beginning to emerge from preliminary data (Johnstone, 1972).

There are problems of "herd journalism" and the disproportionate influence of a few prominent journalists in setting directions for their colleagues but this, too, is only impressionistic. We do not know from any serious data the effects of practitioners being heavily concentrated away from corporate leadership, as in Washington; or of large groups of professionals being mixed with corporate leadership, as in New York; or of varying mixes of size and relationship to corporate leadership in other parts of the country.

How do internal ambitions and rivalries within journalistic institutions affect the news? It seems clear that they do, but we do not know enough about the phenomenon. It is generally assumed that the evolution of local printed monopolies in 97 per cent of newspaper cities has diminished or eliminated the factor of competition. But the disappearance of a "common enemy" may merely have aggravated internal struggles. With the growth of large corporations extending far beyond a local unit, competition in both print and broadcast media is for promotion into the national hierarchy of the organization or for transfer to more prestigious units. The conflict between the pressure to increase circulation and the pressure to economize in order to maximize profits takes on a novel dimension when it becomes a strictly internal confrontation—without an external source, such as a local competitor, to use as a standard of comparison.

Forms of employee ownership or participation of ownership have had insufficient study. There are questions here that go beyond the comfortable assumption that workers are justifiably rewarded for their efforts, or that professionals exercise their control for the benefit of the news product. There are sufficient fragmentary data to justify careful examination of such issues as the following: Does an employee-owner become more or less tolerant politically? Does he or she become more or less generous in allocation of budgets for news? (In some places newly invested news employees have become opponents of anything but minimal expenditures on news gathering in order to increase their dividends.) How are daily and hourly decisions made when a large group has real power?

Research, or at least careful projections, on media organizational structures must be under new conditions of information gathering and dissemination. It is reasonable to assume that within five to fifteen years much of what is now the majority of printed news organizations —production—will be eliminated by new technology. What will

happen when news and editorial operations constitute not the present 10 per cent of budgets but perhaps 60 or 70 per cent? How will this affect the nature of leadership? In the light of giantism in news corporations, will the savings increase the exportation of local profits to diversified industrial development, or will it intensify the energies used in producing local news?

RELATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Media-community relations have been a major subject of concern for some time. Surface manifestations are local and national press councils, the slow but significant increase in "action lines" and correction columns, the anxiety of some proprietors over public opinion polls that show substantial hostility toward the media, especially the printed media. What are the most effective feedback mechanisms for enabling news media to learn about their own communities, about undramatic but significant social change, about constituent needs and reactions, and about the efficacy of different information-diffusion techniques within their communities?

Metropolitan newspapers usually operate in the midst of nonwhite inner city populations while serving white suburbanites. It is not a tenable pattern but newspapers have not responded in any large-scale way to the problem. The status of minorities on news media staffs and the absence of women in anything but specialized and constricted positions are equally and increasingly troublesome matters. As the situation changes, new questions will arise: What is the social and psychological impact of granting new status to previously inhibited minorities on the staffs? Does their inclusion in the professional ranks change the newspaper's contents? If there is a change, is it related to the number or the position of such individuals involved in policy-making? Do the answers to these questions suggest how the news media can remain in touch with a changing society and at the same time become more highly professionalized and corporately stable?

There has been a steady rise in the last decade of small alternative news media, yet there is no good history of their growth and impact. If cable television achieves the status many wish for it—surplus multiple channels operated by a common carrier and open to all users —how will that change dissemination of information within the community? What will be its impact on existing professional institutions of news?

Research suggestions cannot be made without acknowledging the general resistance of the media to systematic study. This appears to arise from a combination of several factors: a traditional sense of

privacy persisting from the time when newspapers were family enterprises; fear that information may be used by labor unions in negotiations with management; the atavistic reflex to deny information to competition; plus anxiety that any information or systematic plan to obtain information will be utilized by government to restrict, tax, or disturb existing patterns of the media.

Some of these fears are justified; others are based on genuine uncertainty about the effect of current moves. There is a significant move, for example, to provide more public access to the news media and right of reply enforced by law or court order (Barron, 1967). It addresses itself to a real problem but it also raises questions of freedom to publish and speak without restraint. Careful research into such problems and fears might bring a needed degree of factuality and knowledge to a field now characterized by vagueness and anxiety bordering on paranoia.

Another major reason for lack of research on so many fundamental matters has been fear on the part of investigators and their supporting institutions, fear of offending media operators, fear of public denunciation or private political retaliation by the media. Excessive caution and prudence has not been beneficial to the public or to the media that desperately need some of these data but do not realize it.

Two optimistic impressions: More competent social science and other investigators are now available for media research; insofar as news media anxieties can be allayed by care and competence this should help. Also, the new breed of professional journalists—those more knowledgeable in social science techniques, less ingrained with inherited xenophobia when their own institution is involved, and more concerned with challenging traditional assumptions—are increasingly reaching positions of editorial power and can be expected to understand and sympathize with serious research into the dynamics and structures that control our news and public information.

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