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Balance and Context: Maintaining Media Ethics

As this article moves toward publication, most members of the U.N. Security Council are arguing against using force to disarm Iraq. President Bush is claiming not to care about the opposition to a U.S.-led war in Iraq. *Slate* magazine has the likelihood of that invasion set at 99 percent.

The most pressing issue for American journalism is one reflected in, yet not completely embodied by, current coverage of our world's crisis. The most important job of journalism in democratic countries is to provide information that allows citizens to engage in fully informed self-governance. To do this, American journalists and news managers must figure out how journalism can best accomplish that goal in an increasingly global environment. A strongly nationalistic press is a relic of a bygone era, along with the notion of nations with hard borders that made nationalistic journalism possible. The world has changed, citizens' needs have changed, and the role of journalism must change as well.

Citizens and government need an independent professional press that has a voice separate from government and from public-opinion polls. This perspective need not be monolithic. The press should consist of a multitude of voices, not unlike that of a Greek chorus in ancient drama. But, like the Greek chorus of old, the press of the twenty-first century must both assist citizen audiences and governmental actors in communicating with one another and also provide professional perspectives that are committed to seeking and providing true and complete information above all else. The special function of news media in a democracy is to tell citizens what we need to know so that we can make educated decisions on our self-governance. News reporting in the twenty-first century requires independence, investigative skills, and a keen ability to look where others are not pointing.

I will start with a scattering of examples of reporting from January to March, 2003, to illustrate how news media have failed to report stories in a timely fashion and how they have demonstrated the lack of balance and context that is requisite for comprehensive reporting. I will then provide a few thoughts on some relevant changes in the world order and end with suggestions of how the press can best serve its audience in the new millennium.

IF SOMETHING IS NOT REPORTED, IS IT STILL NEWS?

In mid-February, a friend alerted me to some breaking news, just as I was preparing a public lecture on the responsibilities of press and government in the current world crisis. The evening before on his PBS television program, Bill Moyers had interviewed the executive director of the Center for Public Integrity. The Center had obtained a copy of a confidential draft of the "Domestic Security Enhancement Act of 2003." According to the press release issued by the Center, the Justice Department was preparing "a bold, comprehensive sequel to the USA Patriot Act . . . which will give the government broad, sweeping new powers to increase domestic intelligence-gathering, surveillance and law enforcement prerogatives, and simultaneously decrease judicial review and public access to information" (http://www.publicintegrity.org). I read the text of the confidential memo and then read the response issued by the Department of Justice. The response basically said to Americans, "Don't worry your pretty little heads about it."

This move to enhance the Patriot Act had been going on under the radar. If someone had not leaked the document to the Center for Public Integrity, it would still be going on under the radar.

"Wow, this is big news," I thought.

I was scheduled to give my lecture less than a week after this story broke, and I watched carefully to see how the mainstream media covered the news. The potential of citizens losing even more liberties in what has been called the "War on Terrorism" would certainly be a huge story. Liberals would raise the alarm; conservatives would argue national security over liberty. I would lead off my talk with observations on the coverage of a story that would undoubtedly be on the minds of those in my audience.

This turned out to be disturbingly short lead. There was no story. A few news organizations ran brief stories the day after the interview, but there was no follow-up. No second-day stories. News managers across the country seemed to agree that whatever plans the Justice Department might be making for Patriot Act II were not something that needed to be on the plate for public discussion. Governmental officials refused to discuss the story, and it simply dried up.

Here is another example. While the American press and U.S. citizens had become familiar, if not completely comfortable, with antiwar sentiments in this country and around the world by mid-March, knowing how to report these expressions lagged far behind the worldwide antiwar effort. Most notably, during the first half of February, nothing appeared in the nation's press on the plans for the international week of antiwar resistance that concluded on February 15 and 16 with millions of people around the globe demonstrating against a potential war in Iraq. Yet, the antiwar activities were just as surely scheduled as the weapons inspectors' report to the U.N. Security Council on Friday, February 14. Newspaper columns and news program minutes were filled with stories of possible implications of the upcoming inspectors' reports and, most particularly, with the U.S. governmental message that the United States would do as it deemed necessary, regardless of the inspectors or the U.N. Despite the lack of U.S. press coverage, information on the planned antiwar activities was getting out through the internet and foreign press, or millions of people around the world would not have known to gather.

Wire-service photos of that weekend's antiwar demonstrations contained, and many U.S. newspapers ran, a picture that showed two demonstrators with American flags printed on one half of their faces and death masks on the other. The implication of such photos is that these clownish extremists fairly represented the millions of protestors. Such pictures of extremists, which were also popular in illustrating antiwar protests during the first Gulf War, minimize the importance of the protest.

Journalists need to tell stories that should be of concern to citizens — such as proposed limitations on civil liberties and planned protests of U.S. policy — especially when governmental officials refuse to acknowledge the importance of the stories. This coverage would be an example of journalists looking for stories in places where officials are not pointing. The coverage needs to be respectful. What follows are some examples of journalists failing to provide balance and context in the coverage of the U.S. governmental perspective.

SELECTIVE BALANCE AND CONTEXT

"Balance" and "context" refer to the journalistic attempt to help readers and viewers create meaning. Journalists "balance" claims made by one source of information with other legitimate, but competing claims. Journalists provide "context" for a story when they let their audience know more facts than those selectively provided by a source.

For example in mid-February the National Public Radio newsmagazine, *All Things Considered*, ran a story about a group of poets from around the country who were gathering to give readings in protest against a U.S.-led war in Iraq. The story contained the voice of organizers who explained why they thought that such a public statement was important. The story also included a sound bite from a poet who called the protest "juvenile highjinks." The dissenting poet provided "balance."

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Coverage of antiwar demonstrations in print and electronic media always include mention of counter-demonstrators, regardless of their numbers. The stories include mention of any violence or arrests. In journalistic terms, providing more than one perspective within the story gives legitimate balance.

However, reporting on recent U.S.-governmental perspectives has been decidedly without balance.

The appearances of Secretary of State Colin Powell before the U.N. Security Council, in contrast to the coverage of representatives of countries that oppose U.S. action in Iraq, provide an example.

Statements made by Powell in that setting were consistently treated by U.S. news media as facts. When journalists report what was "said," rather than what was "claimed" or "alleged," they imply the truth of the statement. "Claimed" or "alleged," in comparison, signals a need for external verification.

Nor did news organizations seize that opportunity to provide context to what Powell was saying — to show that sometimes the U.S. government had been wrong in its allegations and assertions. For example, the Associated Press concluded in an analysis in January that, "In almost two months of surprise visits across Iraq, U.N. arms monitors have inspected thirteen sites identified by U.S. and British intelligence agencies as major facilities of concern, and reported no signs of revived weapons building." Providing that information in stories in which a U.S. governmental official claims otherwise provides balance and context. Information of this nature does not have the same impact when run independent of questionable governmental claims.

Columnists and news reporters consistently offered claims that should have been used to balance governmental statements at the time that they were initially reported. For example, Robert Sheer, a regular opinion writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, dissected Powell's February 5 presentation to the U.N. Security Council later that week in this way: "The main evidence presented by the secretary of state was a satellite photo of a forlorn outpost, allegedly linked to Hussein and Al Qaede and which Powell claims is in the business of producing chemical weapons." Scheer pointed out that the camp is outside of the part of Iraq controlled by Hussein, and inside the area patrolled by U.S. and British warplanes. (This information was clearly available to reporters covering the February 5 U.N. Security Council meeting, yet was not often included in the U.S. media reports on that presentation.)

Scheer said that the Kurds who control the camp responded to Powell's allegations by inviting twenty foreign reporters to wander freely throughout the camp. According to those reporters, they found a "dilapidated collection of shacks without indoor plumbing or the electrical capacity to produce the weapons in question." While the reporters wrote, and their newspapers published, stories describing the visit to the Kurds' camp, few included the link with the Secretary of State's presentation.

American news media have consistently reported without context the U.S. administration's disregard for antiwar protests in this country and for the arguments against going to war made by other member states of the U.N. Context would include information on the role of public voice in democracy and the fact that the United States might well be in violation of the U.N. charter it helped to write if it attacks Iraq without U.N. Security Council approval. The Charter states, "The Security Council shall determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression and shall make recommendations, or decide what measures shall be taken to maintain or restore international peace and security." While the Charter allows member nations to act independently in self-defense, that action is allowed only in cases in which an armed attack occurs. A story not yet written is why the U.N. is not likely to draft a resolution regarding the U.S. defiance of member-state agreements.

Governmental rhetoric, in the United States, as elsewhere around the world, has the primary agenda of promoting the governmental position. When news media repeat governmental rhetoric rather than reporting on it, citizens are robbed of the opportunity to think critically about what is being said.

COLLABORATIVE DECISIONS HAVE REPLACED SOVEREIGN NATION CHOICES

Governments, media, and citizens around the globe have a shared interest in creating a world that is based on something other than fear of violence. At least sixty nations and untold numbers of terrorist organizations possess or soon will possess what governments and news media now call "weapons of mass destruction." Power by threat must be replaced with a view toward mediation if we are to have any future at all.

Nations can no longer protect their citizens from alien others. Citizens have become preferred and purposeful targets in conflicts. This fact is true whether they are victims of suicide bombers acting independently of state sanction or whether they are targeted by national governments as were citizens in Germany, Poland, and in Japan in World War II. In 1900, the ratio of soldier-to-civilian casualties in armed conflict was nine to one; nine soldiers were killed for every one civilian who was killed. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the ratio had switched to one to nine, that is, one soldier killed for every nine civilians. (Stremlau, J. "People in Peril, Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Preventing Deadly Conflict." *A Report to the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict*. New York: The Carnegie Corporation, 1998. p. 25.)

However, national governments had lost their power to protect their citizens from external aggressors and accidents long before 9/11. For decades, we have lived in a world in which political borders are increasingly meaningless in the ability of one state to affect another.

- Degradation of the water, land, and atmosphere happened without respect for national boundaries.
- A nuclear accident in one country caused death and destruction in another.
- No nation is a financial isolationist.
- Global communication no longer allows citizens to remain ignorant of the plight and strife of innocents anywhere in the world.

The idea of sovereign nations is based on the seventeenth-century social contract in which citizens give up individual power in return for being protected by the state, and nations exist in suspicion and distrust with occasional displays of their military ability to dissuade others from aggression. While national governments still play an important role in maintaining domestic peace and prosperity, foreign policy is now, necessarily, a collaborative project.

THE INADEQUACY OF GOVERNMENTAL RHETORIC

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If news media had done more than simply repeat the U.S.-governmental claim that war was necessary to "disarm" Iraq, citizens might have had the opportunity to engage in a debate about whether it was appropriate or just for the U.S. military to engage in a war with the intent of forcing the leader of another nation to leave office.

"Axis of evil" is another example of news media repeating governmental rhetoric rather than reporting on it. The phrase was developed by the Bush administration soon after the September 11 terrorist attacks to provide a link between those attacks and Iraq. The speechwriter's assignment, in his words, was to further the World War II analogy already begun by the administration in describing the attacks as "another Pearl Harbor," and "to extrapolate from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to make a case for 'going after' Iraq."

For the State of the Union address after the attacks of 9/11, the speechwriter wrote, and Bush said, and news media repeated, that "a lesson taken from Sept. 11 was that the United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."

But, because Germany, Japan, and Italy together formed the Axis powers in World War II, two other bad actors were needed to lump in with Iraq. Iran and North Korea fit the bill.

"Axis of evil" is no longer used by the administration because the effort since August has been to explain how Korea and Iraq are different fron each other rather than alike and how the provocative actions of the former necessitate a diplomatic response as compared with how the less provocative actions of the latter necessitate a military response. Once the administration dropped the phrase, it disappeared from the journalists' lexicon as well, with no explanation of how or why that change took place.

THE ROLE OF NEWS MEDIA

The first job for American news media is to refrain from being journalistic cheerleaders. News organizations became flag-waving, banner-rippling, nationalistic voices during the Gulf War and in the wake of 9/11. In both cases, the journalists' nationalistic rhetoric became more vehement as the public-approval rating for military intervention soared, which resulted in higher public approval both for the action and for the media. News media need to break out of the government-citizen approval spiral to provide opportunities for alternative voices, no matter how quiet or few. News media need to be safe for voices other than the U.S.-company line. That safety is hard to find, even on the opinion pages, if editors are fired for questioning the war effort, as some were during the first Gulf War.

The next, and toughest, job for American news media is to convince citizens and government that providing a public forum for discussion and alternative views is not disloyal. News organizations need to provide context for statements and stories, especially those made by our own administration. I am not advocating that journalists stop being objective, only that they start being the Fourth Estate, watchdogs on government, again.

The idea that objective reporting means that journalists simply repeat what powerful governmental officials have to say was discredited more than fifty years ago when courageous journalists stopped allowing Senator Joe McCarthy to make his vicious and unwarranted accusations.

Contextualized reporting includes letting citizens hear the voices of our government's enemies, as well as critics of governmental policy from within and from outside of the country. The purpose of providing alternatives is not to lessen the effect of governmental messages, but rather to open those messages to broad examination and understanding. Support for governmental perspective, if warranted, will be stronger when citizens can understand that view in light of opposing alternatives.

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