

Doing an Awful Lot that's Right

BY DENI ELLIOTT

It's true. Once again, in the midst of breaking news, news media are making mistakes. They are floating some rumors, some speculations, some insider thoughts that turn out to be false. Unable to get access to the few mysterious "sources," news organizations rely on one another, repeating allegations second-, third-, or fourth-hand, with supporting evidence as strong as a house of cards.

But, you know what? News media are doing an awful lot that's *right* this time. It's worthwhile to pause in our traditional after-the-storm hand-wringing about the sins of the news media long enough to note what has been *good* about the reporting.

First, consider the job of journalists. The reason the crafters of the U.S. Constitution wrote an Amendment that gave special protection for freedom of the press is that journalists, then and now, have the important job of telling citizens about how well their representative government is doing at representing their interests. In this Clinton-Lewinsky melodrama, news media have, from the beginning, done a great job of telling citizens some of what we need to know about how our government works.

For example, thanks to the careful crafting of stories by news media, we now know:

- A Federal prosecutor will wire one woman so that she can surreptitiously tape a supposed friend so that the prosecutor can attempt to get that second woman to surreptitiously tape a White House official with the hope that the official would suggest that she lie under oath. Whew! The deception in this situation is so convoluted the prosecutor must think the acts cancel each other out in the end. But, the explanation offered by Prosecutor Starr for
- why this official government endorsement of deception is acceptable is that it is a "traditional law enforcement technique." U.S. citizens need to know that a Federal prosecutor will engage in a series of deceptive practices and then call it business as usual.
- Our President has denied Ms. Lewinsky's assertions. But, he has denied them in a way similar to his denials in the past that turned out to be true on the surface, but deceptive at their core. By recounting the history of Mr. Clinton's linguistic acrobatics, news media are reminding citizens that what Mr. Clinton is saying in response to Ms. Lewinsky may mean something different from what the listener might reasonably expect that response to mean. Citizens need to know how to weigh the words of the leaders they elect.
- News media are giving citizens outside the Beltway an opportunity to consider speculations and rumors in a way that used to be reserved for Washington journalists and other insiders. Propelled by the reality that we live in a new era of instantaneous information, no one can any longer think that a rumor is the property of a favored few.



While the Internet is still viewed by some journalists as a speculation-spewing monster, forcing the more careful and judicious news organizations to repeat allegations before their time, most have tamed the beast. News media are using the very force they fear to share what they know with the American public the minute they feel ready to stand by their story. Holding a great piece and watching the deadline go by in a weekly news magazine still leads to a gnashing of teeth, but the Internet means that Newsweek did not have to wait a week to catch up with the competition. Just as the printed story in *The New York Times* will be believed before a story in the *National Enquirer*, so too does the electronic story from Newsweek carry greater credibility than the Drudge Report.

But, with all of the good news about news media, there is more that the American people need to know and are not being told by news media. We need to know why sources might be saying what they are saying. Detailed profiles have appeared on Linda Tripp and on Lucianne Goldberg, the literary agent who counseled her. It is important that we are getting a sense of what their political and

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...insiders knew who was saying what and they had enough information to speculate on why.



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the U.S., a third of the total, now publish a Web news product—now operate and staff their Web operation separately from their traditional newsroom. An E&P survey shows that 65% of those surveyed maintain separate new media staffs, and that 84% of those with a separate new media staff use those staff to create banner ads for their advertisers.

What will happen to the sacred separation of “church” and “state” or editorial and business in news organizations in an online world where advertising and editorial are closely intertwined? Will editorial credibility erode even further? Is this a slippery slope that serious news organizations can afford to enter?

The Audience and Society

New media present the promise of democracy fulfilled. As the great journalist-philosopher A.J. Liebling once observed, “Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” Today’s Internet and World Wide Web make it possible for nearly everyone to own an electronic press. But in days past, that press freedom came with a price: those news organizations that owned a press, or who operated a licensed broadcast operation, had a commitment to act responsibly and to serve the public interest.

Do those same rules of responsibility apply to the public at large when everyone can be a journalist, a publisher or “Webcaster”? I believe they do. But it is incumbent upon schools and departments of journalism and mass communication to play an active role in educating the public to act responsibly in creating electronic content and in serving in a leadership role in shaping public behaviors on the Net. If we do in fact live in what former NBC News President Lawrence Grossman calls “The Electronic Republic,” then it is vital to the health of our democracy that all citizens exercise and

enjoy their full First Amendment rights vigorously, but they must do so knowledgeably, responsibly and ethically.

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Coverage of Clinton’s legal difficulties apparently is justified largely by such sophistry. But those who cannot make distinctions between civility and civics, between public and public, or between official and unofficial conduct by a governmental official, are doing a disservice to the body politic of which they still are part.

This is, in every sense, unethical.

Is there a way out? How about reverting to the almost-forgotten “good taste” standard? Above all, if news media are to retain even short-term credibility or long-term purpose, why not look beyond scandal, gossip and notoriety to reclaim the news-value-determining function?

Why should we cheer “civic” or “public” journalism efforts when the front pages or newscast are devoted to ever-more salacious details of unproven acts? Why should we be proud of holding the line against competition by the Internet through a dumbing down and sensationalization of our own work? Shouldn’t we educate ourselves and our audiences to differentiate between law and morality? Between gossip and news? Between the public and the private?

The only good thing about the “Bill, Monica & Ken Show” is that it may prompt the more embarrassed of us to step back and think—in advance, and not merely in retrospectives in the trade press—about the effects of what we deliver to society.

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private agendas might be.

But, what about all of those “unnamed sources”? There may be good reason to protect a source’s identity, but there is equally good reason for the U.S. citizens to know the political and private agendas that lay behind these anonymous disclosures.

In the days when only Washington journalists, staffers and officials knew the good or juicy gossip, these insiders knew *who* was saying *what* and they had enough information to speculate on *why*. Now, while everyone can access almost everything, only the *what* is being reported. That doesn’t provide much to help people weigh the information provided. Journalists may have to promise not to disclose *who*, but, for sure, journalists can and should include in the story the *why* the source might be making some particular claim.

The inclusion of journalistic speculation about the sources’ agendas may turn out not to be relevant, but that sort of publication would be no more speculative than reporting the political history of Tripp and Goldberg. Journalists make educated guesses about what is behind the offering of information and those guesses need to be shared with the public. The connections may turn out to be irrelevant, but if the political profiling is deemed newsworthy with an identified source, then it is almost imperative with one that remains anonymous.

There are also some things that we are being told by news media that we really don’t need to know. Whether Ms. Lewinsky is a young seductress, a pathological liar or a wide-eyes victim, she never chose to go public with her claims. Her privacy was unquestionably violated in spirit, if not in law, by Linda Tripp and Kenneth Starr in their surreptitious tapings. But,

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her privacy was also violated in spirit, if not in law, by *The New York Times* and other news organizations which chose to describe her to the American public on the basis of what her parents claimed in their divorce pleadings. The fact that some information *can* be obtained by journalists doesn't imply that it *must* be shared.

However, if you weigh all of the recent governmental and journalistic excesses and mistakes of the oral variety, it is a lot easier to take pride in how the U.S. news media are handling this situation rather than how the U.S. government is.

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brotherhood.

Ultimately, the largest and most-respected white media created their own Million Man March. In his book, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of Mass Media*, Michael Parenti described how the media invent reality. For instance, by exclusion or inclusion, it may invalidate certain views and legitimate others (p. 23). He also writes that "by dwelling on surface details and slighting content, the media can neutralize the truth while giving an appearance of having thoroughly treated the subject."⁸

Newsweek can be accused of vilifying the march by creating "Farrakhan-the-Monster." They ask, "Will blacks accept him as something more than a megaphone for anger?"⁹ First, that's not the way most African-Americans see him. Second, that question totally

ignores Farrakhan's message of racial pride and self-respect. This, not white people or Jews, is his focus. Then, by not defining the white supremacy that Farrakhan "hates," Farrakhan can be portrayed as a maniacal vehicle of hate and division. His message of self-reliance is misconstrued into a message of separatism and "racism." Hence, "his" Million Man March is reduced to being just an anti-semitic protest against white racism. And thus, "they" can rationalize the argument that "participation in the march implies agreement with Farrakhan's 'racist and anti-semitic' views."

Perhaps *Time* thought it was putting Farrakhan's role in the march in cultural context when it asked African-American men, "Does the black community's need for renewal outweigh Farrakhan's history of demagoguery and racial hatred?" According to *Time*, the men answered with the metaphor: when your building is burning, you don't worry about the pedigree of the fire fighters.¹⁰

I believe Farrakhan and the march were taken out of cultural context. Though the white media accused Farrakhan of political aspirations, he is a religious leader—a preacher. He is not a legislator. As a preacher in the African-American community, Farrakhan is expected to tell the "truth" as he sees it. Were any of those journalists listening? Such views may or may not make him unpopular, but, as my mother once said, "A preacher just preaches what's in the Bible and if you're hit with it, you're just hit with it." Farrakhan is not in a popularity contest. He is not running for political office. He is interpreting scripture. If one is to challenge him, one must challenge his interpretations. He should not be ignored simply because he is "not nice" or "politically incorrect."

Besides, do white media reasonably expect African-American men to accept their denouncement of Farrakhan—simply because they tell us to? Farrakhan has repeatedly stated that he is misquoted and

misrepresented in the white media. We, the African-American men, see ourselves constantly vilified in a similar way.

The white media love to call Farrakhan a "black racist." Most African-Americans see through this labeling. In his book *Racism and the Press*, Teun van Dijk describes how blacks who speak out against racists are vilified in the white press and accused of intolerance and racism. Now we have this new "phenomenon" of black racism against whites; whites are not portrayed as the victim.¹¹

It is for this same reason that one can wonder if Saddam Hussein is really a madman and a threat to world peace, or if his vilification is just another misrepresentation by the white American media. Wouldn't that help explain why most of the rest of the world does not back America in this conflict?

I believe that the debate should not be whether or not the participation of the African-American editor in the Million Man March was a conflict of interest. The debate should be on with *whose* interest does his participation conflict?

NOTES:

¹ Alia, Valerie. "A Conflict of Interest," *MEDIA ETHICS* 9:1:1,12 (Fall 1997).

² Fletcher, Martin. "Anti-Semitic gibes mar Million Man March: Farrakhan outburst unleashes backlash on eve of black protest in Washington." *The Times* (London), Oct. 16, 1995, p. 10.

³ Kochman, Thomas. *Black and White Styles in Conflict*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983, p.8.

⁴ Friedman, Murray. Op-Ed: "Jews Have Reason To Worry About Farrakhan's D.C." October 1995, p. 5. Jewish Telegraphic Agency daily service, dated 10-00-95.

⁵ "Marchers Express Support for Farrakhan, But Most Came for Black Men Survey Says." *Washington Post*. October 17, 1995, p. A23.

⁶ Adams, James. "Washington Surrenders to Apostle of Race Hate." *The Times* (London), October, 15, 1995, p. 20.

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