MERRILL
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Media, Mission and Morality

A Scholarly Milestone Essay in Mass Communication

Volume I

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A Scholarly Milestone Essay in Mass Communication
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Marquette Books
Spokane, Washington

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Frontispiece

What has not been examined impartially has not been well examined. Skepticism is therefore the first step toward truth. —*Denis Diderot*

Outside, among your fellows, among strangers, you must preserve appearances, a hundred things you cannot do; but inside, the terrible freedom.
—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

It is easy to perform a good action, but not easy to acquire a settled habit of performing such actions.
—*Aristotle*

It [the press] is a mass of trivialities and puerilities … . What is missing is everything worth knowing … . It is this vast and militant ignorance, this widespread and fathomless prejudice against intelligence, that makes American journalism so pathetically feeble and vulgar, and so generally disreputable.
—*H. L. Mencken*

The voice of the press, so far as by a drift toward monopoly it tends to become exclusive in its wisdom and observation, deprives other voices of a hearing and the public of their contribution. Freedom of the press for the coming period can only continue as an accountable freedom.
—*Commission on Freedom of the Press*

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Preface

This essay synthesizes several controversial areas of communications studies, especially as they relate to journalism. It draws heavily on psychology, sociology and especially philosophy, and attempts to cross-pollinate theoretical concepts with practicalities in everyday communication. Philosophical areas of special consideration include epistemology, political philosophy and ethics, with some attention to language philosophy.

For more than 50 years I have added to the literature of journalism and subtracted from the pine forests. This little volume is perhaps my last attempt to summarize some of my ideas and opinions about the public media and to throw out a few new ones. Writing has kept my mind active and, I hope, creative, and my teaching has been a constant pleasure. What fun it is to trudge through the hazy swamps of communication where semantic fog hangs low over the intellectual landscape.

In this diversified field, unsubstantiated assertions and assumptions abound, precipitating a plethora of debates, articles, papers and books. Some of these even make their way into sermons, political speeches, television and radio shows, and media of specialized communication. Conceptual uncertainty makes for interesting dialog, much of it overly tedious and seemingly unending, but its exposition and analysis provide healthy catalytic stimulation for communications students and practitioners.

In this postmodern period (since World War II), the assurances of stability found in earlier periods of communication study have all but disappeared. Relativism and subjectivism affect the core of our active lives. The basic determination of the mission of our mass media is ever more difficult. The postmodern individual is found walking on sand, uncertain of the next step, testing new avenues of thought. In some ways this connects with the libertarianism of the Age of Reason, but often without the emphasis on rationality. Such an experimental and undisciplined attitude provides echoes of existentialism, with the proclivity of postmodernism to blend perspectives, to emphasize relativity, to suspect certainty, and to suggest pragmatic solutions.

At any rate I try to bring up some of the issues, myths, and ethical problems facing the mainstream media as well as bloggers and other interpersonal, specialized and private communicators of today.

The antinomies of freedom and control, individualism and communitarianism, egoism and altruism beset the communicator with their rigid hold on certainty. Successful compromise does not come easily. The tendency of today's public communicators is to hold on to as much freedom as possible and continue to ignore the communitarian urge to share this freedom with the public. A new synthesis perhaps is forming as media freedom and power clashes with public participation in communication. Another concern is the growing desire of journalists to take reportorial short cuts and to minimize public service while enthroning the lure of high salaries and profits. This can be seen in the attitudes of university students, with a few notable exceptions, who are in our journalism and communication programs.

The reader may feel that I have been overly impressed in this book by ancient Greek thinkers. Admittedly I have made much use of their thinking, but where else can one find so many catalytic ideas? The fact that Greece no longer provides such intellectual leadership to the world is probably evidence that wisdom has been progressively replaced (even in Greece) by pragmatic and materialistic concerns. Virtue is being subverted worldwide by a kind of Machiavellianism and hedonism, with a rhetorical overlay of moralism. And even a sense of fatalism, even nihilism growing out of cynicism, is casting a

dark shadow over portions of the media.

Although our society is placing increasing stress on media morality, the fact is that unethical practices are not diminishing; in fact, they seem to be growing. Educational emphasis on media ethics today appears useless. Relativity and subjectivity are washing away moral certitude. Normative ethics seems too authoritarian, and one is encouraged to develop a less formalistic and less rigid moral perspective where almost any action can be approved. A spate of instinctivism and emotionalism is dimming the emphasis on rational theories of morality.

My influences and gurus for this book include many contemporary colleagues and many not so contemporary. They have impacted my thinking but bear no blame for my missteps in reason and rhetoric. In my early years as student and teacher, I was influenced by such stalwarts as Wilbur Schramm, Leslie Moeller, Raymond Nixon, Frank Luther Mott, Robert Desmond and David Manning White. In more recent years these fellow journalism educators have provided intellectual stimulation: Everette Dennis, Ralph Lowenstein, Jay Black, David Gordon, John Michael Kittross, Phil Meyer, L. John Martin, Ted Glasser, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, Arnold DeBeer, Alfonso Nieto, Klaus Schoenbach, and many others.

Great thinkers of the past making a deep impression on me have been such diverse persons as Confucius, Plato and Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, Locke, Herbert Spencer, J. S. Mill, Constant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Emerson, and Mencken. Even maverick thinkers such as Joseph de Maistre and Machiavelli have provided insights. Other influences have come from the writings of the early Marx, from Popper, Fromm, Korzybski, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Habermas, as well as some of the critical theorists and communitarians.

If the reader thinks I am unrealistically pessimistic in this little book, I hope that opinion is not correct. What I am, I think, is a realistic pessimist. And this pessimism is based on recent communication history which I believe bears out my negative — at least skeptical — perspectives on the mass media. The Second Law of

Thermodynamics applied to the media system is not promising. The insidious tendency of the system to run down, to disintegrate, to lose strength (the process of entropy) tempts us to fatalism. But it can also challenge us at least to slow this process by building "islands of decreasing entropy," as Norbert Wiener called them, that will expand qualitative and moral communication, wherever we can. And who knows, the entropic process may even be stopped.

That is what I have tried to make all my courses — Entropy Stoppers 101. If journalism has an overriding mission, it seems to me that it would be to stop, or at least to slow down, the process of social entropy. I am certainly not as pessimistic as H. L. Mencken (see frontispiece), but without a doubt undisciplined, fragmented, uncooperative, destructive and immoral social action only accelerates entropy. And a public communication system that mirrors and stresses such disharmonic tendencies is unworthy of the huge financial profits it receives. In fact, it is unworthy of any respect whatsoever and the plaudits its gives itself and its functionaries are no more than putrid signs of hypocrisy.

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Conceptual Uncertainty

The media of mass (or better, public) communication are not only constantly changing, they are almost indefinable. Mass media messages bombard us from every direction and demand our attention even when we fight against their power. Media range from movies to billboards, from newspapers to the Internet and television. They institutionalize messages and assail us with advertising, propaganda, news, entertainment, interpretation and analysis. They insist on being heard and on selling us products, religion, sports, celebrities, politicians, gurus and a wide assortment of atypical people.

The world of the communicator is overflowing with uncertainty. Basic terms go undefined and more complex concepts continue to spawn debate and even ideological chaos. For some, the message is the match that ignites the flames of progressive social discourse and, in many cases, of communal discord. According to others (e.g. Marshall McLuhan, 1965), the media themselves impact our lives, causing us to think and act differently than we would without them. Some say the media create our world, set our agenda, create our biases, affect our language and cement our human relationships. Others say they create tensions, foster stereotypes, exploit the gullible, divide classes, races, and religions, cause excessive spending, destroy traditional cultures and solidify big-nation hegemony.

I see the media as mechanistic extensions of human morality, in some cases socially productive and civilizing and in other cases

promoting degrading and uncivil activities. I must insist, perhaps contrary to McLuhan and others, that people make the media what they are, and not the other way around. Humanity can rise above the media, but media always conform to the state of humanity. Ultimately it is the individual person who will save the world or will destroy the world. The media, however, have an ever stronger foothold of power and attempt to collectivize maverick individuals in corrals of social solidarity. Social ethics, authenticated by normative codes, is one result of this, and the allure of group cooperation and moral obedience to relativistic authority is extremely potent. This brand of media morality, predicated on majoritarian correctness, further endangers the individual person who may march to a different drumbeat.

I

Some of us hold the media responsible for many of our misfortunes and crises. We are critical of their excesses, of their free-wheeling liberty, of their exaggerations and misrepresentations, of their political biases (if we disagree with them), of their superficiality, of their vulgarity and sexploitation. In short, the American people don't seem to like the media very much.

But great numbers of them conform to the media's culture; it becomes an addiction. They expose themselves to the media, sitting for hours in movie houses, before TV screens, and reading newspapers and magazines. Right, they say, but what else do we have? We walk on broken and rough sidewalks if that's all we have. We vote for inferior candidates if we have no other choice. We expose ourselves to our media because that's all we have. If that is true, then we put media freedom (and power) above our own freedom, and that is a tragedy. Each of us always has the freedom to say "no" to the media as they are. Perhaps our freedom (and will) to evade the media would cause the media to reinvent themselves and take a higher moral road.

Whether the media are mainly instruments for social good or for social harm is an open question. But they are potent. Advertisers tell us that media are omnipresent and seemingly omniscient. They impact our thinking and our buying habits. We are all influenced in some way

by them every day. At least that is true of the middle classes, people who have the education, the curiosity, and the money to get the publications and technology they need to be well-informed.

The institutionalized communicators in the United States, the public media, have a basic problem: They are hanging somewhere between being responsible for public enlightenment and democracy and being a part of a successful business. It is easy to slip into the business mode and become simply cogs in the capitalistic wheel of profit-making. Since they are somewhat protected by the Constitution, they revel in their freedom and their autonomous marketplace determination of messages. Much of this high-minded self-determinism is natural, stemming from the liberalism of the Enlightenment. And much of it is a matter of false self-importance and an acceptance of uncertain or mythological concepts.

Huge profit margins at the beginning of the 21st century have lured the media away from a basic concern for public service, and from serious content. A desire to have a large and well-qualified staff — reporters and editors — has lessened and news executives talk more and more about the bottom line. News coverage especially has suffered. Foreign news is increasingly relegated to an inferior place in the media and much of it is only a revision of what appears in other countries' newspapers. Or, it comes from a drop-by visit of a circuit-riding reporter jumping from area to area. The rationale: (a) good foreign coverage is too expensive, (b) people are not interested in it, and (c) local news should be the priority.

Entertainment in the media has mushroomed. Even the news magazines now look like *People* magazine, and most newspapers are morphing into *USA Today* look-alikes. And media directors know that entertainment sells their products. News may be important to a handful of audience members, but what sells publications and programming is entertainment. A kind of superficial patina is covering a scant core of information. Having the choice between information and entertainment, the media moguls have in the main, opted for the latter.

Institutionalized communication enterprises — that is what media are. They can, and do, participate in all kinds of message dissemination — to mass, specialized, and individualized audiences.

They dispense entertainment, information, opinion, and news — probably in that order. They dip into all social areas, albeit superficially — into business, politics, religion, sports, international relations, military concerns, medicine, crime, education, travel, the arts (drama, music, literature, painting/sculpture, architecture), and they dabble sporadically in astronomy, astrology, gardening, hobbies, weddings and deaths, environmental matters, and many other "minor" news areas. In short, the media have managed to fill almost every social interest gap one can imagine.

They are said to do wonderful things. For instance, it is widely believed that the media make possible, or at least foster, democracy. They provide, it is said, the information needed for the public to understand their society and to make intelligent decisions as to elections and the conduct of public business. This, of course, is a worthy objective. But it is really little more than a myth, constructed mainly by the media themselves — especially by the so-called news media.

Little evidence has reached me that the media are seriously interested in democracy. As institutions they themselves do not exemplify democracy, having as they do a very hierarchical (Platonic) structure that is basically authoritarian. They provide little information or suggestions as to how their audiences can increase their ability to affect government. Major players in politics — namely the two parties — crowd out other political entities in the media's coverage. Those media with ideological identities are little more than platforms for a narrow-focused propaganda, either praising the Democrats or the Republicans, the liberals or the conservatives. And those with no ideological identities thrash around in all directions, their messages having no unity or coherence, trying to be everything to everyone. They end up being nothing to anyone.

Or something less than helpful to everyone.

The people do not rule, really. What we have is a "lobbyocracy" rather than a democracy. Or at least we have a system where our elected plutocrats too often are bought off by the lobbyists of the big corporations and institutions. And our media basically ignore this, giving little or no attention to the intricacies and anti-democratic

tendencies in the halls of government.

Opinion is cheap and easy to come by. News is expensive and hard to come by. Opinion mainly reinforces a public's opinion or tries to change it. News provides information upon which sound opinion can be formed. Media are tending toward the easy alternative — opinion — much less difficult and expensive to get. Mix this opinion with a heady brew of entertainment and you have the bottom-line formula for postmodern journalism.

Even though business concerns tend increasingly to dominate the news media, the basic philosophy of individual journalists can — and should — have an important part to play in shaping the media's policies. Much at this point could be said about the education of journalists. Certainly it has changed greatly since I began teaching in 1951 when most students were idealists and language-lovers and looked on journalism largely as a public service. Many were strong students of English in high school and wanted an outlet for their devotion to writing. They also were students who wanted to have an impact on their society in a positive way.

By the 1980s this was changing, and by 2006 it had changed, for the most part. Young aspiring media people, instead of being language-lovers, have become "technologists." Instead of jousting with windmills, they are largely satisfied to blow about on the winds of nihilism. Instead of public servants, they have become corporate functionaries or private entrepreneurs. Instead of objectivists, they have become subjectivists and relativists, and instead of journalists they have become communicators.

Students today are going into television and into public relations and advertising where they can make more money. Inheriting the baby-boomer lifestyle, most of them are not satisfied with the modest salaries offered by newspapers. And on television, they are mainly interested in how they look, their voice quality, and their ability to talk while smiling. The "news readers" are more important than the "news gatherers." One astute media critic, Joseph Epstein (2006), has pointed out that Americans regard journalists as unaccountable kibitzers who spread dissension, increase pressure on their audiences, and make trouble. In our "dumbed down" world, he says, there is little evidence

that our newspapers provide an oasis of taste.

It is small wonder that an emphasis on information is decreasing in our media and assorted entertainment is mushrooming. It is small wonder that op-ed pieces and lively letters-to-the-editor are commanding more attention in the print media today. And it is small wonder that what we once called "hard news" is disappearing into a miasma of popular, brain-numbing features. Journalism students are learning that sensation and infotainment is journalism's future, and, by and large, this is where the money is.

Various studies that my students and I have conducted through the years have shown clearly that the media contain very little substantial news about the democratic process, about alternatives to the status quo, about the background and character of candidates, about complex political and social issues, about ways citizens can have a regular impact on government, about the workings of various government agencies and organizations, or about the moral ineptitudes of "public servants." In short, the media mainly deal with superficialities of government, shining their light on the personalities of various politicians and their off-beat entertainment-oriented activities. As the elderly woman in the popular TV commercial said: "Where's the beef?"

As pointed out earlier, "the beef" should be instrumental in expanding democracy. Being democratic is better than talking democracy. But are these media institutions really interested in reaching all segments of society? Do they really want social equality and maximum public enlightenment? I doubt it very much. They don't even support democracy in their own internal affairs, spreading the editorial gospel to the conforming underclass of functionaries. Like Plato's philosophers, they don't trust democratically selected functionaries and claim they love meritocracy — as long as they manage to be a part of it.

However, in spite of Platonic objections, the concept of deliberative democracy is seen today as a good thing and American journalists generally embrace it — at least in theory. Democracy is said to enable the people to have significant input in government and to determine policy through deliberation on the issues. Media

observers such as Bill Moyers and Robert McChesney maintain that democracy cannot exist without an informed public. This may be true theoretically, but it does not work that way. The media fail to give people the information and interpretation with which to deliberate. And the people have little chance to make their weak and spotty deliberation heard in high places. The fact is that only a small group of intellectuals and practical politicians have any real impact on public issues. If observers like Moyers are right, then we must concede that little if any democracy exists in the United States.

II

Among the criticisms hurled at the media is that they are biased. The media largely refuse to admit any bias at all. It is this, more than the bias, that infuriates the astute audience member.

Media are full of biases. Media managers and staffers throughout the hierarchy have their values. This is natural, and it is strange that media people would deny their biases. I even met an editor recently who was biased against bias. The American press, from the very beginning, has projected its various biases on the people. It has been, in many respects, "postmodern," even before the term became popular. Behind American journalism is the philosophical notion that no one perspective or view of reality has ultimate dominance. At the end of the so-called postmodern (pre-futuristic?) age, one wonders if a monism of basic meaning will return to the world of communication. But perhaps such a situation has never existed, with the world always being multi-perspectival.

Biases have solidified around various communicative persons and factions. There were the views of Socrates and Plato, of Confucius and Lao Tzu, of Augustine and Aquinas. And then there were the Hegelians and those who followed Kierkegaard. There were the Marxists and there were the Adam Smiths. And more recently we have Fox television and we have CNN. Differing interpretations have proliferated and often contradictory "frames" have stressed different aspects of a story. But press people themselves hate to admit this, and maintain that they are basically objective and neutral.

Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher who has been a leader in inter-subjective postmodernism, has argued that interpretation is part of reality. True there has been some stress given to interpretative reporting. But this has been a difficult idea for American journalism, steeped as reporters are in keeping themselves out of the report. And it would probably take a Freud or a Jung to properly interpret interpretative reporting. Increasingly, however, journalists are beginning to recognize the impossibility (and the weaknesses) of so-called objectivity. Now it is generally believed that when a person buys a newspaper, he or she buys a point of view. Or perhaps better, when a person listens to, or reads, a reporter's story, what is received is a point of view.

Postmodern thinking has brought home the idea of a multiplicity of possible meanings and has heightened a suspicious attitude. Readers should be suspicious of news reports. Reporters should be suspicious of news sources, of other reporters, and of themselves and their perspectives. The postmodern position is this: have a suspicion of any single meaning for an event, and recognize the multiplicity of interpretations. No story is objective. In short, the individual interpretation is part of, not separate from, the story. Postmodernism does not depreciate the power of the media; in fact, the emergence of this new social order is largely determined ––or at least sped up — by the media and popular culture. Contemporary society reveals that most established certainties and traditions of earlier periods are disappearing. As ethicist Larry Leslie (2004, p. 11) has astutely noted, public communicators have "gone beyond the modern age to the postmodern era" where they are encountering moral and social problems they are ill-equipped to handle.

So the intriguing question arises: Just what can the reporter or the audience member know for certain? What is the true story? It seems that the old Miltonic belief that the truth will win out in a contest with falsehood has vanished. How can one know the truth? How can the news consumer separate the truth from the interpretation? The answer to all these questions is: It can't really be done. One must accept certain event-interpretations on faith. The truth may, or may not, manifest itself from the pluralism of viewpoints.

Managers of the media thrive on the accoutrements of prestige and power. Tucked away in their stately offices with their carpeted space and fancy desks, they are — even to their own workers — more like kings than democrats. Even the recent short-lived emphasis on public (a.k.a. civic) journalism, a manifestation of democratic interest, did not impress the media moguls. Not wanting to share power with the people, the media leaders have warned about unqualified public determination in programming and editorial decision-making. There is considerable Platonic aristocracy to be found in the top levels of every communication medium. Bad idea, they say, to get the people involved in journalism. This would simply popularize and undermine the quality of public communication. After a brief but insignificant ripple on the media scene, public journalism has all but faded away in the face of continuing capitalistic elitism and press plutocracy.

Media have largely determined "social and political realities" and have increased knowledge in every area, but they failed, as communication scholar Hanno Hardt has written, to improve the intellectual level of the public to a point that society can deal with the world's complexity. American media rankle at being called "propagandistic," although there is little doubt that they are. From ideological perspectives of the news and outright opinion, to overt advertising messages, the media spew out a steady stream of biased, persuasive material. Hardt makes the pointed observation that mass communication, from the invention of the printing press on, has led away from authentic individual expression to the institutional inauthenticity of the twentieth century. Quoting Max Horkheimer, Hardt notes (2004) that the media "fetter the individual" to prescribed modes of thinking and buying habits. In short, they have institutionalized propaganda and substituted public robotization for personal decision-making.

Public messages are largely propagandistic — persuasive, action-oriented, and deceptive. They generally serve some special interest, some ideology, some religion, some institution, some political position, or some special group. There may be some neutral, simply informational messages, but they are few. Most messages are tailored, often in very subtle ways, to capture our minds and our allegiances.

They, directly or indirectly, invite us to take an action — buy a product, vote for a certain person or party, accept a position, join an organization, participate in a demonstration, attend a certain university.

In America, unlike in many authoritarian countries, we have a diversity of propaganda. Often, therefore, one propaganda will cancel out another. What the audience members do is to seek out congenial propaganda, that which reinforces their beliefs and inclinations. Propaganda, it must be admitted, is hard to define and harder to detect. Perhaps the best we can say about propaganda is that is persuasive, intentional, selfish, deceptive and action-oriented. It is rather typical of many concepts related to mass communication that they stimulate public dialog but are semantically problematic.

Views on the News

Basic public communication concepts such as news, objectivity, truth, journalism, reporter, magazine, newspaper, bias, propaganda, mass, public opinion, profession, media, and media ethics — these and many others await meaningful definitions.

One of the most troublesome of the concepts is "news." What some would call news could be thought of as entertainment to others. For example, is the sports section of a newspaper news or entertainment? Or, beyond that, cannot a hard news story (like the August-September 2005 hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico) be entertaining, even a kind of *Schadenfreude*, for many people? Some advertisers claim that advertising is news. Telling the public of a new product is information not known previously, so they say, "It's news." That's stretching it in the best (or worst) tradition of advertising. If we're not careful every message will be advertising. At any rate, everyone knows that when a person is identified as an advertiser, this is not the same as saying that he or she is a journalist.

The very concept of news is problematic. I remember well the textbooks that insisted that an event had to be reported in order to be news. News was not out there waiting to be reported. The hotel fire may be something — an event — but it was not news until it appeared as a report in a news medium. It makes one wonder if a newspaper is a newspaper before it is circulated and read by someone. Such definitional problems are at least interesting.

Many will say they are not really important — that all this definition business is only "a matter of semantics." Of course this is correct. Definitions are matters of meaning. But a concern for semantics is important in a practical world, and if we do not pay attention to what people and things are called, we strain the limits of cognition and fall into an abyss of misunderstanding. A rose may smell just as sweet if called a table, but it could cause serious dinner problems. A newspaper may resemble a magazine, but it is different — and the careful communicator will use the proper name when referring to it. Oh, well — some antics with semantics!

I

Journalists generally claim they know news when they see it. Textbooks are replete with lists of characteristics of news — proximity, timeliness, prominence and such. It is true that there is a rough common concept of news throughout the media world. But there are also significant differences. The opening of a new hotel: news or not? Depending on a number of factors, it may or may not be. A storm that wastes a city and dislodges thousands of refugees: news or not? No doubt about it — news, big news. A football game planned months ahead. News? For some it is, for others — entertainment. Or a preview to being entertained. A deer hit by a car in the middle of a city? A child falling into a well? Several observers who say they have seen a UFO? A mayor's wife who crashes into a street sign and bends a fender? A homeless person who collapses on the sidewalk? A weather prediction? Just what is news?

"It all depends," the journalist would say. Surely that is correct — it depends on so many related factors that it is impossible to answer such questions. We do know that, in the real world of the media, news is whatever journalists want to publish as news. At least it is news for their purposes, regardless of what the audience members may think of it. News is not necessarily timely; it does not have to relate to prominent people; it does not have to be significant; it does not have to be sensational or negative; it does not have to contain information that is truthful.

News historically has been considered, in spite of semantic difficulty, the core substance of journalism. But from a realistic perspective, news today has lost its primary status. It has evolved into infotainment, into personality profiles, and into soft and slushy stories, somewhere between news features and entertainment, between polemic and propaganda. The citizen looking for credible information about government policy, about political candidates, about the intricacies of national economics, about what he or she can do to access the system, and about serious topics needed by democratic people to have their voices heard — this citizen will get little help from the hodge-podge and contradictory media with their emphasis on advertisement and entertainment.

We still use the terms "newscasts" (for TV and radio) and talk about "newspapers," but these are misnomers. News programs on the broadcast media are really happy talk revolving around personal opinion and entertainment features, and only about 10 percent of newspaper space is given over to what has traditionally been called news. The other 90 percent is consumed by advertising, features, editorials, columns, letters, puzzles, and an assortment of entertainment-oriented items and pictures.

So poorly are the masses of the American people informed that it seems time for the unrealistic belief that the media are essential for democracy to be put to rest. This belief may well disappear as we enter the rapidly advancing Age of the Internet and the possibility of direct balloting into that Great Computer in the Nation's Capital. However, it is well to realize that instant voting possibilities and computer-driven bombardment of messages do not assure credibility or democratic reality. The new world of communication may only serve to spread instantaneous ignorance and confusion.

Still said by many to be an ideal is the concept of full-context, thorough news-presentation. This is a very problematic concept, most often propounded within the news media. It is that stories (or reporters) can be objective. Such a belief rests on theory, not practice. It is no more than an ideal, valuable indeed for reporters. Schools of journalism often talk about "objective reporting" and an "objective reporter." Of course, a major problem is semantic; different people

have varied definitions for an abstract term like "objectivity," as the general semanticist Alfred Korzybski (1933) stressed in his writings.

II

Objectivity is one of the most misunderstood terms in journalism. Many (like most postmodernists of today) call it naïve empiricism; others refer to it as an unachievable ideal; others maintain that it should not be used at all. And others, more traditional, say simply that an objective story (or a reporter) is one that "tries to be" reliable, not perfect but generally credible. In spite of its vagueness, the term has a positive connotation.

The concept of objectivity comes from a scientific orientation, not a more artistic one, as C. P. Snow has noted. But the idea that a reporter has to be neutral or detached from the event being reported has lost much of its meaning. Postmodernism, with its emphasis on analysis and interpretation woven into a factual framework, has played a large part.

Postmodernism negates absolutism and certainty and proposes little more than experimental progressivism. E. O. Wilson has written (1998, p. 38) that the main difference between postmodern thinking and that of the Age of Reason is this: "Enlightenment thinkers believed we can know everything, and radical postmodernists believe we can know nothing." Naturally, then, the postmodernist would question the very concept of objective journalism.

Objectivity was the American journalist's creed in the second half of the 20th century but no longer. A kind of subjectivized objectivity has made considerable inroads. As Erich Fromm discusses it in *Man for Himself*, objectivity requires more than seeing an event dispassionately and neutrally. The observer needs to become related in some way to that which is being reported. The nature of the object and that of the observer must be merged, and they are equally important — that is, if we want to get at what constitutes objectivity. It is not, he says, scientific objectivity, synonymous with being detached with no interest or care.

During the second half of the 20th century, emotional, involved,

sentimental reporting took a prominent place on the media scene, especially in television. Teary-eyed Walter Cronkite choking up as he reported the first man stepping on the moon. Overwhelmed reporters trying to deal with the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in Manhattan on 9/11/01. And the weeping, emotional interview (with Louisiana Sen. Mary Landrieu) conducted by CNN reporter Anderson Cooper in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. The revolt against journalistic objectivity appears to get ever stronger.

Even with the statements of those who, like Fromm, advise bringing the observer into the concept of objectivity, and like broadcaster Anderson Cooper who does intrude in the event, the idea of subjective objectivity is still problematic. Reportorial intrusion is, of course, natural to some degree. The observer, of course, is subjective and his or her report will reflect this subjectivity — the process of straining reality through the filters of the observer's perceptions. This colors the report. Add to that the inadequacies of language itself to reflect reality accurately (Korzybski, 1933). A report may be truthful but not objective. It is always incomplete, although its facts may be accurate. Even the story of a speech that includes every word the speaker says is nonobjective in its incompleteness. Gestures, facial expressions, thoughts not spoken, tongue-in-cheek statements, and the like are all part of "the story of the speech" and go unreported. In addition, the audience's reaction is really unknown and unreported, although part of the speech story.

Many journalists (and audience members) simply don't care about all this reality talk. Audiences generally want to "believe" news reports but don't expect them to reproduce completely the event described. They are satisfied with the bits and pieces of reality and do not expect to get the whole story. We observe, we rely on memory, and we seek testimony from others. That's how we know what we know. Not much but perhaps enough. Is objectivism a myth? Maybe so, but most people don't care. It could be that all journalism is a myth and should be called public mythology instead of journalism. At least we can say that journalism provides little more than the shadows on Plato's cave wall. Rationalist or empiricist, the journalists (and we) stumble through the darkness seeing little of reality. Probably a good

thing because the stark brightness of reality would quite likely be too much for us.

Unlike Bishop Berkeley, the great idealist of Britain, I think reality is "out there," and it is there whether or not we see it or sense it. The journalist may never get it completely in the story, but it's out there. It happens; it is — this regardless of being reported. The Transcendental level of truth, the complete truth, the truth in all its fullness. This Truth with a capital letter, is always beyond the journalist. It cannot be reached. But portions of it break through into the empirical world and even the poorest journalist can find some of this potential truth. That is evidently what journalists mean when they speak of objective reporting. The pure facts, however scarce they are — that is objectivity for many journalists. We know that the reporter's subjectivity enters the picture — often bending or interpreting the pure facts, thereby adding a subjective dimension to the objective report. But that's all right; that's natural. Getting a really objective story is impossible. For one thing, the subjectivity of the persons involved in the story (the reporter and the one being reported on) is part of the "objective" reality of the story — and no reporter, even with the help of a psychiatrist, can ever come close to doing justice to that.

If a report is to be credible to the audience, it should be verifiable. At least that is the more scientific belief about it. That would mean, of course, that the reporter should provide the audience member with information as to how this information can be checked out. As a reader, for example, to whom can I go to check on the validity of the story? Some source must be able to attest to the story's accuracy. That means that, if legitimate news, the story must provide a means to substantiate its contents. This would mean, say many journalism critics, that a source must be given. Many newspapers are, for example, now requiring that their reporters give the names of sources. *The New York Times*, for example, in 2005 introduced a new policy stating that use of anonymous sources would henceforth be the exception rather than the rule. It seems there will be fewer "deep throats" of the Woodward and Bernstein era.

But there is the opposite view: that news is news and a report is a report without a source being given. If I write that the Picard

Building burned to the ground last night and I do not give a source for that fact, this omission does not detract from the story's truth. The building burned and it is news regardless of whether I say that the fire chief said it burned. The case of a news story based on a statement from some government official is more problematic. For example: "Property taxes will be doubled next year, a city official said today." This is not like a burned building out there for everyone to see; it is a report of what somebody said. How do we as audience members check it out? We can't, really, so we recognize that the source of the statement is very important to the story itself.

Also, as the argument goes, if a reporter promises a source not to reveal his or her name, then it is incumbent on the reporter not to do so. In addition to the ethical problem with breaking the promise, there is the practical problem of possibly losing that source for future stories. In any case, the revelation of sources is a real problem in journalism. Who said something is, indeed, important — sometimes very important. But, on the other hand, what was said was indeed said, regardless of who said it. But, in my opinion, the importance of naming sources outweighs the importance of hiding sources. For in the last analysis the source's name is an integral part of the story and, therefore, ideally should be included.

III

News in a theoretical sense is quite different from news in a real sense. More than one hundred codes of ethics from around the world were examined in 1985 (Cooper et al., 1985) and the expectations of what news should be were found to be similar if not identical. In reality news is almost anything. (Within a journalistic frame, news is what is presented by a news outlet, not what is told to a neighbor over the back fence.) It is, in fact, anything that an editor wants to publish as news. I conceive of news in a broader sense — what I don't already know and hear from any source is news. My neighbor's back fence information may well be as newsworthy as any put out by a public medium. If I am right, then we are all news reporters. But that does not mean we are all journalists.

What is the basic nature of journalistic news? In theory, at least in traditional idealistic press theory, news reports should be (1) information needed by an audience, (2) reporting that avoids harm to the society, and (3) factual, accurate, balanced, relevant, and complete. Reinforcing these three objectives of news was Deni Elliott's argument (1988) that these three objectives are found everywhere and universally have been non-negotiable.

Well, I'm not sure about that. In my experience these "requirements" for news have definitely been negotiable in many cultures and political systems. Even in the United States such norms are questionable. Let's look at the first one: that news must satisfy a need. Perhaps nine-tenths of the news today is not "needed" by its audience, unless one defines "need" in a very broad and perhaps psychological sense. The second objective — providing information that does no social harm. Ideal, perhaps, but not even mildly realistic. News abounds that does some kind of social harm, and one wonders if the journalist should even try to predict the consequences of stories. Unconcern with consequences (the Kantian stance) is the natural and, for me, preferable position for the reporter. And, the third: that the stories be factual, accurate, balanced, relevant, and complete. Impossible! No news reporting can fulfill these requirements. Maybe some in some instances, but never all of them.

This does not mean, however, that the news writer should not try. Different degrees of actuality and objectivity exist, and the best reporters are those who come closest to the ideal. Objectivity may be a myth, but it is a useful one that gives the reporter a goal to strive for. Semanticist Korzybski (1933) used to say, "The map is not the territory," but there are better and worse maps and mapmakers. News reporters need to go beyond the mountains and rivers, beyond the continents and oceans of their stories; the good ones will fill in with less dominant, but important, hills and streams, countries and seas and lakes. At the same time reporters can restrict what Joseph Epstein (2006) has called a "mighty cataract of inessential information that threatens to drown us all."

News is not objectivity. News is a selection from objectivity. It is a story that is strained through the perceptions of the reporter,

mingling biases and judgments of the reporter with the cold facts of the event. Many reporters think they are objective if they are neutral, dispassionate, balanced and accurate. Professor Ted Glasser (1992, 181) makes a good point when he says that often journalists claim neutrality in order to defend against criticism that they are biased, but in the process they deny "their passion and their perspective." And "balance" will not suffice. Always there are more than two sides to a question; giving two opponents equal time or space does not assure balance or fairness.

Often one side stands far above the other in truth and insight. The good news reporter will recognize this and get it into the story. A biased story? No. An unbalanced story? Yes.

IV

Another problem with news is the poor use of language by those who are reporting it.

Our schools and departments of journalism are not stressing brevity, conciseness, simplicity and organization. Nor are they trying to instill a love for the language. English departments have virtually given up on trying to teach composition. Speech departments are not refining the pronunciation, enunciation and the importance of good speech habits. For those going into print or broadcast journalism, it is mainly left to the journalism programs — the undergraduate programs — to try to remedy the generally awful language usage. I must say that many are concerned. But, by and large, the language deficiencies of students have all but overburdened even the most dedicated teachers. But, at least with undergraduates, there is hope.

Graduate education, however, is quite different. These programs in journalism and communication actually encourage bad writing. I would warn the conscientious writer to avoid graduate courses if at all possible. If they must take such courses, they must try to ignore as much as possible the gobblygook and affected language that the "research-oriented" professors so much admire. Theory and research have joined hands with sociological jargon to push upon students a kind of mystical and secret world of academic "spin" that makes the

shallow seem deep and the simple seem complex. To be fair, it must be said that here and there are graduate professors (mainly historians) doing a good job with their students. Some very good histories and biographies are being written, but they are on the decrease in our graduate studies programs.

Prospective news writers, if they want a graduate degree, fall prey to the dominant theoreticians and statisticians whose objective is to get grants, present their papers at conferences, and share their esoterica with other academics. What is important, obviously, is to get published, and maybe even have your article cited in someone else's article. The writer learns to hide (obfuscate?) meaning and resort to impressive, pseudo-language that gives the thesis, article, or book a sense of deep thought and seriousness. This practice can ruin, and probably has ruined, the writing ability of many reporters.

Reporting research should be done as well as reporting news events. There is no reason, other than researcher self-inflation and affectation, for the report of a research project to be difficult to read and understand. It is strange how many researchers seem to equate jargon with thoughtful rhetoric and obscure and tautological construction with careful reporting. One reason for such obscurity in research reporting is that either the research is unimportant or no definite conclusion has been reached. Fancy language and inflated construction can often hide the absence of substance.

Poor writing is one thing. Journalistic bias is another. As to the political orientation of today's students in journalism education programs, I will say only what the surveys tell us: that nearly 80 percent of those surveyed classified themselves as "liberal." A similar percentage of practicing journalists (at least in the big newspapers and TV stations) say they are liberal and Democrat in politics. This, perhaps, is not surprising because journalism draws socially conscious, public-service types who desire to "make a difference."

In my more than a half century in journalism education, I have observed the predominantly liberal bias of my fellow professors. And it is not surprising that if students hear this perspective day after day, month after month, it is going to affect their ideology. If one doubts what I am saying, just take a look at the textbooks used in journalism

courses, the names of sources in the indexes, and listen to media people who give speeches in universities and are keynoters at academic journalism conferences.

I am well aware that talk radio is dominated by a swarm of Rush Limbaughs, pushing the agenda of conservatives and Republicans. I know also that the grassroots press is largely conservative. But the colleges and universities are filled with liberal professors, hiring their own kind, denigrating the traditional values of society, and pushing students constantly into postmodern relativity and critical theory where everything (except liberal values) is constantly questioned. During my more than fifty years in academe, even my interest in such thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, Friedrich Hayek, and Frank Meyer has made me, among my faculty colleagues, a kind of dinosaur wandering in the wastelands of Germanic conservatism. What I am really is a Goldwater-Marxist sponge, trying to soak up wisdom from all quarters.

I have had a firm belief that I should provide students with viewpoints of articulate and thoughtful people from all across the political spectrum. I must admit that it is much harder to find conservative journalists and professors to quote than liberal ones, but I have been moderately successful. The opinion itself, not the source, is what is important to me, but I have found that who says something is a very powerful factor in the belief system of students. So, it has been (not often) that I will, when speaking to a basically conservative audience (and there are some), attribute an obviously liberal quote from Ted Kennedy to conservative Bill Buckley, and note the positive response of the audience. At any rate, in my opinion, teachers, students, and journalists should all consider substance and ideas rather than being influenced by an affinity to a person making a statement. And journalists should seek out people with rational concepts and ideas and not the same old worn-out spokesman for certain groups — like Jesse Jackson or Pat Buchanan, or Gloria Steinem or Jerry Falwell.

More voices need to be heard in the public forum. In the universities, it is important for students and introvert-professors (if there are any) to speak up, to present their views, to have their voices

heard. And more people in their communities need to enter the public conversation. It is not easy when one feels in the minority, when one thinks that his or her ideas are not the dominant ones. One is prone to keep quiet. The German scholar and pollster, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, has referred to this as the "spiral of silence" — the tendency of people in a group to keep silent when the force of opinion is going against them. How refreshing it is to hear dissenting opinions, opposing viewpoints, differing concepts. I have noted in some of my classes that a Chinese student, for instance, is reluctant to enter the conversation or to ask a question when she senses that what she might say would not be popular. Outside class, however, she may share her ideas with me, and I am always sorry that the class did not have the opportunity to hear her.

<div align="right">CHAPTER 3</div>

Media Melange

One of the main reasons for the conceptual uncertainty (as with the term "news") we have just looked at is that the relationship of media to authority varies so greatly throughout the world. If the intricacies of language don't perplex us, then the complexity of differing media systems will. Several theoretical media-support possibilities stem from political ideologies that add to mission and moral differences. Then, within each theoretical and actual system of media support, there are at least three substantial "types" of media. All of these theoretical and intricate media configurations, with their varied and ever-changing features, tend to confuse, frustrate and even anger mass communicators everywhere.

Many scholars say there are four theories of the press, getting their typology largely from the Hutchins Commission and a mid-20th-century book by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm. Although the concept has been severely criticized (i.e. by Christians, Ferre, et al.) for being ethno-centric (Western) and for not being semantically clear, this "four theories" concept has remained firmly in the literature and is taught widely in the classroom. Here we have the authoritarian, the libertarian, the communist, and the social responsibility "theories." I have maintained that the last one does not belong with the other three — that the authoritarian, the libertarian and the communist are all identifiable in actual societies, whereas the fourth is not connected to any one society. Also I have maintained that the first three theories are

all responsible to their particular societies (Merrill, 1974). In addition, the question comes up: Who is to define social responsibility? All in all it is a strange typology of three descriptive press systems and one extremely vague system.

My critique of the four theories was in turn criticized by others. A common accusation was that I called the communist (leftist) and the authoritarian (rightist) theories both "socially responsible." Certainly I was doing that, but I was not endorsing either of them or saying that they were moral theories. I was simply saying that, within the context of their politico-economic systems, they were "responsible." The communist media system, for instance, would have been irresponsible to its society had it permitted wealthy capitalists to own media and further widen the class differences or to permit a free press to endanger the stability of the party-oriented society.

I

So, I think that in this sense media systems can be looked at as all socially responsible to their systems. But since those days when I made such a suggestion, I have come to believe that there is but one really meaningful press theory (or system): the authoritarian system.

It seems to me that this is a more realistic way to look at media systems, none of which is really free of some kind of control or direction. It also avoids the labeling stigma of some systems being more authoritarian than others They are all authoritarian — just in different ways.

In order to study any press system, one needs to find the locus of the authority. And there is always some authority — or authorities (for often several combine in giving direction to the media). In the United States, I would suggest that the media authority is a combination of media owners and advertisers. Here we are talking about a capitalist system with a heavy overlap of Enlightenment libertarianism.

In fact, this press autonomy system is the one of the four theories (Siebert, et al.) called the libertarian theory. It is a market theory, a *laissez faire* concept, where media plutocrats rule over the press. The authority is not the government, but the media people themselves. Of

course, they are influenced greatly by the advertisers and by public opinion, so that in spite of their separation from government control, the public media have an authority. And at least in theory, they provide the greatest message diversity of all press systems.

The State-Party is another authoritarian media system. The authority here comprises the leaders of the state and/or party. An autocrat (like a monarch) may control the media through control of the state apparatus or a party (such as in Vietnam or Cuba). This is definitely state control and there is little or no chance that much diversity or freedom will exist in such a system. Advantages would be that policies cannot be delayed or disputed by the media, that central planning can proceed smoothly and expeditiously, and that public opinion can be molded to fit the needs of the governmental leadership. Relativists are not particularly bothered by such a state controlled system. Their view is represented by cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict, who contends that cultural differences determine ethics. So what is an improper system for the United States is not an improper system for Cuba.

Even a theoretically democratic country like Japan can hide under this second type, having a closer connection or partnership with government than is clearly visible from the outside. Press clubs are common in Japan, and through them government has enormous influence over the newspapers. The press club system institutionalizes and enforces cooperative relations between journalists and the establishment, encourages self-censorship, gives journalists a sense of elitism, discourages independent investigative reporting, and encourages boring and unhelpful news. Writing in 2004 *(A Public Betrayed)*, Adam Gamble and Takesato Watanabe cite these elite journalists' organizations as the main cause of Japan's "corrupt news media." They lead to interlocking sub-rosa relationships that destroy real press freedom and pollute the entire news stream.

The two systems discussed above (media owners and state-party) can be empirically studied; they have existed and do exist today. A look at the United States and several European countries will provide examples of the first. And throughout the world — in a large number of nations — can be found the second type of authoritarianism — in

China, in North Korea, in Cuba, in Saudi Arabia, in Egypt, in Syria, and in most of the African countries.

II

Let me suggest several other possible or theoretical systems that, so far as I can tell, have never been tried. But I recognize that they could work for media-support or authoritarian control. What might these authorities be?

First I would consider a populist/democratic media control system. The authority here would rest with the people through their elected news directors, editors and publishers.

Idealistic as this may seem, it would be possible and would make the press far more democratic than is the plutocratic press of modern America. Just how this would be done is understandably a big question. And an immediate objection to it would be that the people know little about journalism and could not elect the best people for the job.

This criticism has much validity, but no more really than trying to justify a system whereby we elect politicians to public office (e.g. the success of the extremist Hamas party in Palestine in elections in 2006). Would not a democratic media system put elected people in leadership positions? Journalists or media persons would campaign for media posts and people would choose their favorites. Such a system might be compared to the possibility of a university faculty choosing their deans and president, or to students choosing their faculty. Such a populist/democratic concept of media authority could, of course, only be possible in a country with substantial faith in the wisdom of the people.

Another possible system of state leadership and the media is a theocratic/religious authoritarianism. Here we have as the guiding authority of the society a holy book and/or religious leaders. Such a system is possible, at least for a short term, as we saw in Afghanistan with the Taliban Muslim leadership in the late 1990s. And it can be argued that there are many Muslim countries, especially in the Middle East, that are ruled by a combination of religious leaders (e.g.,

mullahs, ayatollahs, muftis) and the particular state ruler (e.g., president, king) at the time. Going back in European history, one might also say that a similar authoritarianism existed with the Holy Roman Empire. And today we can see it in the Vatican State where *L'Osservatore Romano* and other Roman Catholic information media are controlled by theocratic authority. In the Arabic world, as in the Holy Roman world, this type of authoritarianism can provide considerable stability and order to the society. However, as in any other of the authoritarian systems, cliques and sects develop and theocrats disagree, but in general this system would ensure social stability and viable governance.

Another type of authoritarianism related to the media could possibly exist: a subsidized media system. An entire media system could be financed by wealthy citizens, institutions and foundations. This would be different from the first (owner-advertiser) system discussed for, in this one, there would be no need for advertising. And the authority would be the subsidizer(s). Of course, this concept could overlap with the state-party system in that the subsidizer might be the party. The subsidizer could also be the national treasury itself, with the funding coming from tax money. But this system and its possible splintered possibilities would not appeal to the libertarian who would see the monopolization of communication by the subsidizer. But, like the others, this system would be authoritarian with, in this case, the subsidizer having the power and the authority.

III

Now, we come to the last of my authoritarian systems: the intellectual-elitist. Here we draw heavily on Plato and his *Republic*, mentioned elsewhere on these pages.

The wise, well-trained, virtuous, intelligent, socially oriented leaders (Plato: philosopher kings) could be called "Journalistic Philosophers." They would be the authorities. All levels of media workers would have their distinct duties and would perform them in a highly efficient and disciplined manner.

The Philosopher-Editor, for example, would be a generalist,

having a broad, but deep, liberal education. He or she would also have a firm knowledge of communication practice and theory and an overarching understanding of technology. This authority would provide practical and moral guidance for the media system or any one of its units.

Like Plato's philosopher king, the journalist-philosopher would be paid a modest salary. An elitist, yes, but not an isolated, unconcerned one. And certainly not one obsessed with making huge profits and buying up other properties.

But then, just how would such a system be financed? Here is the biggest weakness, of course. Without a doubt it would have to be combined with the subsidized system, with someone or group of wise financiers who would be willing to provide at least part of the funds and give editorial freedom to the meritocratic philosopher-editors.

Just how such a Philosopher-Journalist would be placed in an authoritarian position would have to be worked out. But it surely would not be the result of a democratic process. It would be a strictly meritocratic operation, seeking inherent intelligence, wisdom, education, leadership ability and moral superiority. This Platonic system would basically be an "aristocracy" (direction by the best), the system that Thomas Jefferson advocated — one that provided for the selection of the *aristoi* into positions of leadership. Jefferson believed, perhaps somewhat naively, that a democracy could select such superior persons. Just how the aristocratic leader in Plato's philosopher system or Nietzsche's *Uebermensch* (Overman) system would get selected for leadership is not clear. But it is obvious that they would not chosen by democratic vote. .

Such a Platonic-Nietzschean system certainly would assume special knowledge by some. Editors should be editors. Reporters should be reporters. These special people, whether they attended journalism school or not, would have journalistic understanding that the ordinary citizen would not have. It would be dangerous, possibly destructive, to journalism if "the people" were to demand a voice in running the media. The Greek historian Thucydides (Thorson, 1963, p. 27), tells us how, through a kind of class warfare, an emerging democracy ruined ancient Greece. Politicians, left and right, boasted

that they were devoted to the community, and they took refuge in high-sounding phrases to achieve odious ends. The masses, feeling insecure, demanded a greater voice in policy, and, as a result, inefficient government developed which ended Greek political and cultural domination.

Today the postmodern emphasis on democratization of journalism has similarities to the weakening of the Athenian state. If meritocracy (where it obtains) in the press hierarchy is overshadowed by citizen-intrusion into content determination, it makes one wonder if journalism will not fade away. Communitarians of the public journalism type, in their rush to diminish the power of capitalistic media managers, may well universalize the concept of "journalism" and destroy knowledgeable leadership.

Since there is such a mélange of media relationships with power throughout the world, it is small wonder that little global agreement exists as to functions or mission (dealt with later in this essay). A theocratic press will have different functions from a party press, and a libertarian or autonomous press will see its range of activities in a far different way than would a subsidized press.

Having said this, I believe that most of the press-power systems discussed briefly above would likely have three audience types (intellectual, practical, illiterate) in mind and would have segments or units that would represent three types of media discussed in the next section: class, mass, crass. Exceptions might be the theocratic media system and the journalistic philosopher system. They would, rather consistently, tailor their messages to the religious community and the intellectual community, respectively.

The media owners/advertising system would naturally want to appeal to the widest audience possible. The state-party system would aim at the power structure but would also want to provide something for all sectors of society. The subsidized system, although it could be very narrow in its offerings, would probably want to provide something for all segments of society.

Class, Mass and Crass Media

Let us turn now to what I call the media-audience pyramid, describing the types of media (and their audiences) at the top of the pyramid, down through the mid-section of the pyramid, and on down to the lowest (and broadest) section of the pyramid.

In most media systems, as we have seen, there is a desire to reach various segments of society — usually, I contend, three main ones. Although there is some overlap among the three, there are these media: (1) class, (2) mass and (3) crass. The small part (the apex) of the triangle represents the "class" media — the quality or elitist media. Below them, in the midsection of the triangle, is a much larger segment of media — the "mass" media. And at the broad bottom of the triangle are the popular, "crass," or vulgar media. I have adapted this trinary model from Plato's (Book IV, *Republic*) three kinds of lives — the philosophic, the ambitious and the appetitive.

This triad of audience types, based on Plato's classification above, is an attitudinal typology. Members of each audience group are drawn together by a basic attitude toward message content. The "intellectual" audience members (drawn to the class media), for instance, are not necessarily more intelligent than other types of audience members. It is just that they are disposed to want more thoughtful, serious material. The "practical" audience is wider-ranging, having a desire for more utilitarian messages. And the "illiterate" audience is not necessarily functionally illiterate but, rather, attitudinally illiterate. They do not like to read, to think, to analyze, to ponder the more profound aspects

of the world around them.

Also it must be said that there are members of each audience who roam among the three types of media. Each category of media — class, mass and crass — express some overlap in their content but not much. And their respective audiences are not pure and static — some are moving up to more serious media; others are moving down to more vapid and popular media. But at any one time the various audiences are predominantly drawn to their favored media.

I

It is rather obvious that the class media would have the smallest audience of the three.

They are aimed at the serious, cultured, well-educated readers, listeners and viewers (Merrill, 1968). They provide intellectual material, ideas, analysis and depth reports, and they stress more esoteric political, economic and cultural subjects. They include elite newspapers (e.g. *The New York Times, Le Monde, Neue Zuercher Zeitung*), magazines (e.g., *National Geographic, Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's*), political reviews (e.g. *New Republic* and *National Review*). Certain TV shows (e.g. the history channel) and broadcasting like National Public Radio (NPR), Public Broadcasting System (PBS), and C-Span. Discovery channel's nonfiction show with Ted Koppel that started in early 2006 is a good example of a show catering to serious audiences desiring ideas, analysis, deep background, and culture. The class media try to provide this.

The class media try to go behind the superficiality of people and events they deal with. Journalists working for such media try to get at the "why" of the news — at the causes — and not only the events. They subscribe to the belief that every event has a cause, and every cause is an event. The class media try to get into the minds of the people being reported. They may not go as far as Bishop Berkeley (believing that all that exists are minds and their ideas), but they recognize that ideas are as newsworthy as events. Joseph Epstein (2006), in his thoughtful article in *Commentary*, praises such media for their integrity, impartiality of coverage and the reasoned cogency of

their editorial positions. There are a handful of such papers around the world (Merrill, 1968) seeking elite influence and global impact, and appealing to an intellectual audience is not a popular one.

The intellectual audience is one that takes serious things seriously. It enjoys the stimulation afforded by good writing, clear thinking and rational discourse. This does not mean that members of this group never watch a soap opera or find some satisfaction in popular music. But it does mean that they are likely to be the same ones who prefer good wine, classical literature and music, poetry and Broadway plays. Quite simply, they like to think, discuss and seek mental, spiritual and aesthetic pleasures. Theirs is largely a life of the mind.

II

The serious intellectual air of the class media is too rarified for most people. Therefore, the most pervasive and important of the media — at least in a libertarian, capitalist country — are the mass media. They are the providers of practical information, general interest news and features, entertainment (such as comic strips), self-improvement information, a variety of advertisements and sports coverage. This is really the most materialist media segment, and what we usually think of when we speak of the "mass media." The great range of middle-area general newspapers (e.g. *Atlanta Constitution, Kansas City Star, Chicago Tribune*) on through smaller-circulation papers (e.g. *Orlando Sentinel, Denver Post , Shreveport Times*) would certainly be "mass" media.

There is no paucity of information in the mass media. In fact, there is such a variety of material that the consumer has a problem finding news in the vast outpouring. The editor of *Columbia Journalism Review* put it succinctly in 2005 (March/April) when he wrote there is "simply too much noise [in the mass media], that getting straight news from this hyped and opinion-loaded beast feels like trying to drink from a fire hose."

Members of the economic middle-class — and particularly the more affluent ones — comprise the audience of the "mass" media. They want a variety of information and direction — religious, hunting-

fishing news, home and garden information, health and education news, and all kinds of material for self-improvement. And they get large doses of it. They are the great consumers of advertising, and, as such, they are the mainstay of the general media. Naturally, in a society having a large middle class with a penchant for entertainment and materialism, one would find the most vibrant mass media system.

Newspapers once thought of as the serious press are fast becoming frivolous. The *Milwaukee Journal*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *Courier-Journal* of Louisville are good examples. Well, maybe they are not frivolous but certainly they are mundane and increasingly popular. In such papers, scandal and entertainment are replacing what once was "hard news." Spurred on by the success of *USA Today*, the mass media are adopting the principle of making their contents fast-paced, short and entertaining, with color splashed liberally about on the pages.

It seems that less and less does this middle class audience want news. Or at least there seems to be developing a mindset that is satisfied with little news. David Cay Johnston (2005) of *The New York Times* opined in *Columbia Journalism Review* that fewer people are paying attention [to the press], and "more of those who do … reject all or part of the news." He added that there is "a hostility and suspicion" in the audience that reporters and editors themselves detect.

So the "mass" media are slowly moving away from hard news, providing increasing amounts of feature material, profiles of successful persons and entertainment of all kinds. News, while still important to these media, is succumbing to the practical dalliances of the broad middle classes, increasingly educated but not intellectual in their media tastes. Many mass media today are accused of "dumbing down" their language so as to satisfy more and more of their audience members.

I seriously doubt that this is being done. In the first place, I think mass media writers write as well as they can — producing material that is natural for them. No journalist I have known "dumbs down"; if the writing is concise and simple, that is because that is the way that journalist writes. It would take a brilliant journalist to write at, say, "an eighth-grade level." Content or story-substance, not writing level, may

be "dumbed down," and one finds this in many crass or vulgarized media. Considering the broad spectrum of audience members and their various interests, mass media are not doing such a bad job. But no doubt they can improve in both writing quality and substance.

III

The situation can be worse and, as we go lower into the media pyramid we get to the "attitudinal illiterates" that cling to the thoughtless, superficial, entertainment-and-picture-oriented, negative and sensational messages that are being generated by the crass media. These audience members may not really be illiterate, but they expose themselves to TV and movies mainly. Millions of them might be called "attitudinal illiterates." They may be able to read and write, but they do not want to. They are mentally lazy. They care little for serious news and pass most of their days wallowing in the slime of journalism, wading through the dirty gossip, obscene pictures, and titillating writing that is spawned by press practitioners in the crass media.

Many in this audience are poor but not all by any means. In fact, many "illiterates" are from wealthy families. There is an element of alienation and hopelessness about them. They aspire to little beyond their physical appetites. They do not want to think. They want to enjoy in a kind of hedonistic way. And they expose themselves to media that provide this low or crass satisfaction. One might say that the majority of them are hedonistic narcissists, wanting to get through life with as little mental exertion as possible.

One perhaps cannot say that television is itself a "crass medium," but it is safe to say that as an instrument it provides a seemingly insatiable menu of crass programming. The few intellectual programs on TV are like occasional oases in a vast desert of mediocrity and vulgarity. Many (or most) TV shows are examples of "crass" communication. Radio is better but not much. Movies are often "crass," having little or no redeeming social value. Checkout-counter tabloids, mainly pictures of sex and violence, entice millions of "illiterates" every day. And "adult" movies spread their subterranean

sludge into the minds of lost souls across the globe, while the Internet provides more word-loving viewers a chance to descend into the netherworld of pornography and superficiality.

Even back at mid-20th century, Richard Weaver (1948, p. vi) wrote that the masses were dominating the American culture, and along with the adulteration of equality and the loss "of those things which are essential to the life of civility and culture," high quality in the media was ever more doubtful. Little wonder that "crass" media are gaining ground and their sordid and shallow messages are even invading the "mass" media. Civility and culture, if in short supply, will naturally be in short supply in the media. Undoubtedly in the future ever more of the population will be siphoned off into the Internet with its diversity of unchecked bloggerism and assorted vulgarity. The media increasingly, with the possible exception of a few elite or class media, slip into nihilistic and thoughtless degeneracy. The sound of the few civil and cultured individuals will truly be voices crying in the wilderness of crass communication.

Class and mass communicators are aware that the great canaille are beyond their reach for they are on the fringes of society, uninvolved in a democratic society. These "illiterate" members of society are largely ignorant, but as Socrates is made to say in Plato's Symposium, they are generally satisfied with themselves. They have no desire to be better informed or to think about the complexities of the world. No doubt that Socrates was right, which means that the class and mass media should not despair that they cannot reach the "appetitive" (Plato) population with solid information and wise analysis.

In concluding this discussion, I should stress again that the three classes of media and audiences above are not static. There is the mass medium that, seeking more exposure, is becoming more popular and appealing increasingly to the intellectually lazy audience. And there is another mass medium that, with different leadership and quality of staff, offers more serious fare and strives for a solid place in the elite or class category. But then there are media of all three types that are content with their basic status: the class media wanting to improve their quality, the mass wanting to reach an enlarged middle class, and

the crass media wanting to supply more scandal and sex.

Just as birds of a feather flock together, audiences tend to adhere to agreeable media and messages that give them pleasure. Intellectual pleasure, social and materialistic pleasure, and popular or vulgar pleasure. The distinctive products of the various media stem from the fundamental concepts intrinsic in communication. In accepting certain types of messages, the general public satisfies the tastes of its different segments. Around these segments of media reality has developed a fascinating semantically problematic belief system. This system often obscures the quiddity — the essence — of the concepts being considered.

MYTHOLOGY

A mythology hovers over the media of public communication and their various activities and policies. What we see or think we see is not always what is there. Just what media contribute to society is problematic, certainly not very clear. Their physical presence is obvious; their purpose and social consequences are far less so. As sociologists would put it, the media structure (personnel and equipment/facilities) is much clearer than the concepts (purposes, philosophy, policies, etc.). It is from media concepts principally that myths evolve, swirling with mystic circles and settling with a kind of ephemeral reality on the communication landscape.

Myths help us believe what we cannot understand. They simplify the complex and romanticize the puzzling aspects of life. Myths are, in short, based on the phenomena (as Kant called them) of the world, attempting to translate them into believable pictures in our minds. The media produce and transmit myths. They thus inscribe these believable pictures in our minds, wrapped in often contradictory packages that conceal basic truths. Even the concept that the media create our world is itself a myth. Our real world, or parts of it (*noumena*: Kant again), quite often pushes through the nets of mythology and impacts us directly through our senses. The giant rainmaker in the clouds can, and often does, become nothing more than the cloud.

Nevertheless, the media are powerful communication instruments

and this is no myth. Advertising agencies and political promoters can attest to that. Mythmaking in itself is potent. It wraps the human mind around an idea and skitters off with it, trailing truth and error as it goes.

I

Myths contain considerable truth. That's why they are found everywhere and at all times.

And they are also entertaining, soul-satisfying, and psychologically vitalizing. In the field of mass communication they are numerous, weaving in and out of conceptual venues and spinning their webs of pleasant deceit and stimulating endless debates and controversies.

One of the most interesting ones is what I would call the Myth of Professionalism. Many journalists consider themselves professionals and journalism as a profession. But false on both counts. A nice myth, one that attributes to journalism a kind of respect, status, and quality that the older terms "craft" or "trade" are unable to achieve. Again, one of the problems is the semantic problem. But, after all, are not most of our controversial dialogic problems semantic?

To many, being a "professional journalist," for example, simply implies being a hard-working, efficient, quality journalist — doing well the task assumed. To others it means working for a mass medium such as a newspaper or a news radio station — being in the "profession" of journalism. And to others it simply means being a "journalist." This, of course, brings up another semantic problem — just what constitutes a "journalist.?" I see a journalist as one who works for an institutionalized medium in a capacity relating to the getting, writing, editing, and commenting on the news. Certainly "journalist" is easier to define than a "professional journalist."

From a sociological perspective, a profession is not simply a business or a specialized "calling" (e.g. being a theologian or minister). Nor does it separate the good practitioner from the mediocre or bad. A true profession is an institutionalized collection of public service workers who, although individualists, set aside many personal