

A Call For Generalists In Journalism

James Russell Wiggins

December 1983

Diversity is the conspicuous characteristic of the press in this country, but the printed dailies and weeklies, in successive periods have exhibited different marked tendencies and served different primary purposes.

In the period before the American Revolution the newspapers were the aspect of advocacy noted so well in the brilliant work of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "Prelude to Independence," in which he described the "Newspaper War on Britain, waged from 1764 to 1776."

In the years following the American Revolution, through the first administration of President George Washington, the newspapers were notable for a uniform support of the new nation--achieved in part by the intimidation of dissenting newspapers.

Thereafter, the notable characteristic of the American press was its partisanship, in the struggle between Republicans and Federalists. Newspapers wore party labels, for the most part, up through the Civil War period. Then, gradually, the newspapers were transformed from the role of biased servants of party to the task of dispensers of information and entertainment. A near-neutrality in politics coincided with the commercial role of a general circulation media, not quite as neutral in content as cars of a freight train are toward the "goods" they bear to all patrons but prevaillingly nonpartisan enough to be widely acceptable. This very acceptability led gradually to increasing monopoly with a single newspaper in many communities satisfactorily providing news emphasizing impartiality, entertainment and information generally, and editorials aimed more at shedding light than generating heat.

At intervals of political crisis, individual newspapers left the fold of impartiality to approach politics in the spirit of the Kentucky editor who said he had not made up his mind what to do in a forthcoming election but that, when he did, he was "going to be bitter, damned bitter". But that was the exception.

In the sixties, some newspapers first undertook and then defended briefly in principle something they called "advocacy journalism." But it was a sport in the general media because if persisted in, it would have involved a return to the multiple media of the party press period with each section of the political spectrum requiring its own mouthpiece if justice were to prevail. So, "advocacy journalism" did not become the prevailing pattern and now is a diminishing rather than a growing aspect of general circulation newspapers. In the end, either it would have been abandoned or the near monopoly of the general circulation press would have been abandoned.

What of the future? Who can say with any certainty in a world of rapid change where political, economic and social institutions seem to be fluid, plastic and shifting? There is a role at hand that the newspapers of general circulation are notably qualified to fill--a role which other professions increasingly abandon. It is the role of the generalist.

Many of the most enlightened elements of society, the learned professions, the academicians, the scientists and technocrats, the bureaucrats of government, tend increasingly to become specialists--specialists who know more and more about less and less, to use a Churchill description. Each from his own vantage point views the given wisdom of his craft and creed but lacks the expertise to relate his narrow version of the truth with the larger truth of interrelation and interdependence. We are in

danger of a dilemma against which Churchill warned when he said that specialists ought to be on tap but never on top.

We ask the witnesses in our courts to speak the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but we have fewer and fewer witnesses who know the whole truth. We expect the clamor of special interests in the body politic to somehow add up to a formula for action suiting the general interest; but the ingenuity of modern communications gives the most articulate narrow interest and faction an incredible advantage over the views less passionately felt or less eloquently and dramatically argued by the general population. The pressures of immediate crisis register forcefully and emphatically on the present. The sharp impact of today's events eclipses the lessons of history and the views of precedent and coerces governments and agencies to reflex actions deriving from instant impulse and passing pain.

Our society is threatened by the exquisite accuracy with which the camera records the narrow scene and the inadequacy with which it captures the distant landscape. The television screen speaks preponderantly in the present tense; its advertising is overwhelmingly committed to advice on how to gratify immediate appetites, diminish instant distress, gain speedily beauty and power and sex appeal, relieve in moments the pain of contemporary distemper and gas on the stomach. The camera focuses upon the narrow stage, the immediate scene, the visible, the self-evident, the short range. Night after night, we look darkly upon the world through our marvelous magnifying glass.

The written word, unless it has lavished upon it the skill and care and talent of a wider vision, is similarly astigmatic. The mere facts are not enough unless they appear in the frame of historic and geographic perspective. It is not sufficient to report the death of a soldier unless

the report portrays besides the anguish of his demise the nature of the disasters he tried to fend, the alternative to his sacrifice, the origins of the tumult that claimed him, the possible ways to avoid them in the future, the misery that but for his heroism would have claimed the people he was defending.

The press is rightly indulgent with dissenters. The cards are often stacked against dissenters. The voices of the minority must be heard. We have properly become solicitous of the rights and ideas of nonconformists. But we are also suckers for manufactured episodes. Six scholars may propound in their lecture halls a new view of the universe without breaking into print; but if they mount their central theme on a placard and throw a rock through a store window they will make the front page. These fabricated events must be viewed in perspective and reported with balance.

Traditional and conventional conceptions of newsworthiness and the urgencies of timeliness handicapped the newsrooms of the fifties and sixties, unfitting them to a degree for the general view of events. Reporters hastening to meet a deadline and editors hurrying to write a headline are forced to make judgments that more reflection would have rejected. Elements of news judgments helped distort the significance of extreme words and extreme acts, of novel exhibitions and surprising and bold tactics. The big lie became, in the naive craft of the day, the big headline. When violent words no longer commanded the headlines, violent acts made their petition for typographical display. Martin Luther got attention for his 95 theses, 500 years ago, by fastening his manuscript to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenburg, and the printing press enlarged his challenge into an international episode.

In the sixties a dissident priest might have thought it necessary to blow up the church to get the same amount of attention and achieve the same

degree of newsworthiness. Words and acts that are bizarre and violent are not in themselves a passport to publicity in the more sophisticated newspapers of the eighties, but the press still is confronted with the use of burning bodies and other gruesome and spectacular demonstrations as devices to capture attention for the trivial, inconsequential and unrepresentative factions. Such episodes must be reported, but a press functioning as a generalist press would retain perspective by weighing the significance and depth of the cause as well as the smoke and the noise of the demonstration.

The generalist-journalist has an opportunity to put in perspective the clamors of a multitude of special interests and fragmented pressure groups, weighing each in the general scene. It is not easy to do this with either words or photographs. Neither a literal image nor a word picture of a national deficit can be printed in the space adjoining the photograph or description of an unfortunate mother deprived of part of her aid for dependent children. The printed page, in words and pictures, can portray dramatically a thousand claimants on the public purse. Each of them has its particular credentials; altogether they may add up to the national ruin. Elected politicians are hostage to such insistent pressures. Each of the special groups to which he says "no" takes its place among the ranks of his enemies; nobody mobilizes the citizens of the whole body politic.

The quarrel over social security changes was a dramatic demonstration of the helplessness of Congress in the face of an insistent pressure group. A society's care of its needy aged is one of the best tests of its civilization; but not everyone over 62 is entitled to a summer and winter home and an annual cruise. The vision of the aged exhibited in the press was that of an entire age group in dire need. (And such is the accumulated prestige of "social security" that few readers got a glimpse of low paid working men with children struggling to pay a tax sufficient to support not

only the aged needy but the aged with money to burn.)


There is never going to be complete agreement on what the "general welfare" is; but some version of the "general welfare" is what the Constitution commits us to, and some social force ought to exist to keep emphasizing that it is the general welfare that government ought to serve-- the "general welfare" and the "common defense."

Editors are uniquely equipped to become this force. In the news columns they can present the multiplicity of factors involved in any decision affecting a narrow and particular interest. They can summon up a lobby for the whole people to array it against the special interests. When an eloquent and articulate protagonist of federal aid for ingrown toenails corners a cowering congressman or belabors him in print, the generalist on the copy desk owes the readers (and the congressman) a clear view of how much the program will cost and what it (and a thousand programs like it) will do to the burdens laid upon the young and middle-aged taxpayers who pay the bills for such special benefits.

When the influential corporation corners a federal or state agency and makes a pitch for loans, tax exemptions, subsidies or grants, a generalist journalist owes his readers a perspective on the transactions involved that will stress the general interest and not just the particular advantage of the proposal.

Elected and appointed public officials need to have the insistent sharp sticks of special constituencies blunted by a view of the general concerns and advantages of government action and the printed general press is one of a few institutions that can perform this function.

The press of general circulation is not obliged to assume a new and novel function in order to speak for the whole community, but only obliged to carry out with more even-handed attention the function its readers have long depended on it to perform. Copy desks and editors repre-



sent a collective body of experience, training, and wisdom upon which the community ought to be able to rely for a generalist approach to news and information. The generalist role requires them to leave out nothing they have been printing, but it obliges them to permit no narrow, particular fragment of the body politic to utilize dramatic articulation of special interests to sound like the voice of the whole society. It challenges them to avoid hailing summer with the first swallow, joining henny penny in crying that the sky is falling, and saluting every evangelical enthusiast as the prophet of a new resurrection. The breadth of experience in a newsroom ought to make journalists into skeptical and even cynical generalists capable of discerning the self-serving proponents of coming new revelations. The newsroom could become the last refuge of citizens whose lives are more and more exposed to the clamoring fragments of society who put narrow and selfish interest above the general welfare. For the lack of generalists these special groups are too often able to persuade and coerce society into policies that threaten the nation. The generalist press ought not disregard the special interests of individuals and groups but it ought to give readers enough information to weigh their claims against the demands of the general welfare.

All those seeking the attention of society and of government, including the press itself with its own special interests, need to remember the remonstrance of President Harry Truman, who was himself a rare generalist in an age of specialists, when he said "It's your country, too, you know."

Somehow or other, the generalist journalist must make the newspaper columns reflect the interest and purpose not only of our own country, but of the whole world, not just by printing the contradictory effusions of each individual interest, but by consistently relating the pressure of the specific, the narrow, and the particular to the larger field of vision.

In a world of clamoring me-too, mine-first, let-the-ship sink individualists and specialists, we need to have somewhere in society generalists guided by the relatedness of all things. The newsroom is a good place to have them.

Biographical Note

When I retired to Brooklin, Maine, in 1969, after a short stint at the United Nations, I planned to find time to do a lot of things that my job at The Washington Post did not permit me to enjoy. Then, just to keep my hand in, I began to spend more and more time at The Ellsworth American, 24 miles from our farm at Carlton Cove, on Benjamin's River, just off Eggemoggin Reach.

I should have known that a country weekly is as jealous a mistress as a daily newspaper (I had tried a weekly in Minnesota in the thirties). So, I am still hoping some day to find the time to do the things a newspaper has kept me from doing. The Ellsworth American leaves the affairs of the great world mostly to daily newspapers except for some notable occasions when events tempt an intrusion into broader precincts. The paper has prospered as measured by circulation (grown from a modest 3,500 to a still modest 12,000), as gauged by the judgment of its peers, and more modestly when measured by the accounting books. On this smaller stage we play in the same scenes that enliven the larger national stage, with episodes in the struggle to maintain access to information. Fortunately, it is not possible to maintain an illusion of great power and influence, so the frustrations of being a mover and a shaker are avoided. The Washington Post, the New York Times, The Boston Globe, the Wall Street Journal, the Bangor Daily News, and the Portland Press Herald bring daily reminders that no town is an island of itself alone, but a "part of the main". Still, echoes of the great world's roar reaches these precincts, muffled by the quiet and comfort of rural life.

James Russell Wiggins
December 1983