

# The Fairness Factor

AS THE FIRST POST-COLD WAR ADMINISTRATION takes office in Washington, there is general agreement that the media will play a significant role in its success or failure. Whether Americans wish President Clinton well or ill, they will all agree on at least one thing: that the media ought to be fair in reporting his efforts.

In a sense, the advent of a new administration offers a clean slate for media, a chance to confront seriously the idea of fairness. For all the criticisms of the press, especially in the final days, the 1992 campaign is regarded as the best covered ever. Much of that yield, itself born of critical assessment of 1988, might be applied to developing a regime in the news media that makes the best effort to avoid pitfalls of the past and offers a new, fair-minded effort to give the public an impartial accounting, neither slavish to the new administration nor so hypercritical that it blocks essential information from coming out.

In the last days of the presidential campaign, bumper stickers urging the public to "Annoy the Media—Reelect Bush" began appearing amid complaints from the president and his campaign team that the media were "unfair" to him, that there was clear bias in the news. While this is a claim made by virtually all losing campaigns (Richard Nixon's famous "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore" statement in 1962, for example, or Adlai Stevenson's attacks on "the one-party press" a decade earlier) and occasionally by winners (as in Mario Cuomo's criticisms of the press after his landslide victory in 1986), it is only sometimes true.

One of the hallmarks of the 1992 presidential election campaign was a new journalistic practice of combining news analysis with

reports of campaign activity. For example, a speech by President Bush or Gov. Clinton that contained verifiable inaccuracies might be corrected in the same news story that carried the initial claim. Some critics feel this instant rebuttal overstepped journalistic fairness, but it also was a response to public concerns about fairness. Without doubt, reporters sometimes dislike or like candidates for a wide variety of complex reasons, but conscious fabrication or slanting of news accounts is so much less common than the public perceives as to be nonexistent.

Journalists' personal political views are much less important in this country than they are in virtually any other. While there are certainly more journalists in the 1992 study reported in this volume who identify with Democrats than with Independents or Republicans, there is still no indication that biased, politically motivated people are covering the news. Indeed, the most noted political news reporters and commentators—such as David Broder of the *Washington Post*—are noted for their sense of fair play. In 1986, *New York* magazine mused that journalists were “the best and the blandest,” not biased ideologues. In any case, against any individual reporter's personal preferences, there are balancing forces, such as conservative-minded owners, standards of professionalism and public scrutiny, regarding what is equitable treatment.

Still, in 1992 even the *New York Times* asserted that President Bush might have gotten coverage that was less than fair coverage; White House reporters were “openly derisive” of the president, *Time* reported. And Hugh Sidey, *Time's* longtime presidential watcher, contends that the press corps couldn't wait for Clinton to win. “This was the most stilted media experience since Ike,” Sidey says, claiming that editors of Clinton's generation who shared his worldview let “bias, enthusiasm, emotion” get into the press.

WHETHER in the election season or not, fairness is an article of faith for most Americans, who think *should* be fair. This fervent belief that fairness is an entitlement, even if it is not always practiced or even fully expected, is a relatively recent development in the United States that is unknown in many other parts of the world.

It is tied, no doubt, to fundamental American values of individualism, opportunity and equity, evolved over 200 years as the press moved from strident partisanship to the belief—at least—that something approximating impartial accounts of the day's news was a worthy goal. Of course, the distance has always been great between professed values and beliefs on the one hand and actual performance on the other.

Still, the dream of a fair-minded media and the presumption that fairness is a right explains why people take issue with virtually all of the mass media when they find themselves disapproving of some aspect of performance. "What most annoys news subjects about the 1992 media is not getting stories told from their point of view—that would feel to them like fairness," *Time's* William A. Henry III says. "They are not entirely wrong."

THE MEDIA ARE, after all, the means by which information, news and opinion reach people, a process regarded both theoretically and practically as essential to democratic order. Still, nowhere in either the First Amendment or consistent judicial interpretation is there any requirement that the press be fair or responsible.

Even so, both the public and the press itself expect fairness in the reportage of news, both as a matter of journalists' personal honor and because of the centrality of accurate information in a participatory democracy. At the same time, ironically, people also seem to expect fairness in other media—entertainment, commentary, in advertising, on opinion pages and in letters to the editor—venues that are expressly designed for expression of individual perspective and viewpoint. It was Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes who suggested that there are no false opinions, pointing out that exchange of ideas—even ideas that turn out to be wrong—also is essential to a functioning democracy. Although the standard of intellectual honesty is generally expected in the utterance of opinions, who would require *The Nation* or the *National Review* to reflect all views or give their opponents equal time?

The media can no longer assume that the public understands fully the differences between general news reports and commentary,

between what is largely informational, presented without prejudice, and what is strictly opinion. On a talk show in Grand Rapids, Mich., recently, a caller complained that a television report had accused President Bush of "sulking in his tent." The caller claimed that there was no evidence offered for this characterization. Later it became clear that the phrase was part of commentary, rather than straight news.

"But nobody told me that in any clear way," the caller said, "and anyway, shouldn't commentary be fair too?"

Even the entertainment media have recently been struck with the fairness standard. People dispute portrayals of women or minorities in television sitcoms, and "Murphy Brown" even became central for a time in the 1992 presidential campaign. Editorial cartoonists, whose job it is to caricature and spoof, have been sued for maligning their targets and for being unfair. Both Frank Sinatra and Dan Quayle have rebuked Garry Trudeau for his treatment of them in the "Doonesbury" comic strip. Recent films such as "JFK" and "Malcolm X" have been scored for their fast-and-loose treatment of history, their sacrifice of facts for story line. Even advertising, which is by definition self-serving advocacy, comes under attack for being unfair.

WHILE DEBATE DOES SWIRL around all mass media, it is the news media that most often comes in for scrutiny, attack or praise. This is clearly the zone where the highest standards exist and where public expectation is greatest. Critical commentary and public intelligence indicate that most people wish someone could conjure up a news media that were just and honest, fair to all parties, equitable and even "consistent with the rules of logic and ethics," to quote one definition. Tumbling from this continuing public conversation are terms such as "impartial," "unbiased," "straightforward," "dispassionate," "unprejudiced," "equitable" and "objective."

That final term—"objective"—is something the press once claimed as a noble goal that would separate fact from opinion and offer a system in which accuracy and facts were core ingredients. Journalistic objectivity, always an illusive idea, was the product of technology (the telegraph and short dispatches), a reaction to the excesses of Yellow Journalism and wretched sensationalism in the era

of Jazz Journalism in the 1920s, and much more. It lived in devotion to a uniquely American journalistic form and became our central journalistic ideology between the 1930s and the 1960s.

Since the late 1960s, however, the term has fallen out of favor and is even seen with embarrassment by some because of its simpleminded nature. In its place, editors and other communicators with good intentions and little reflection have offered "fairness," which in a sense is a euphemism for objectivity but, in fact, really runs much deeper. It aspires to a sense of completeness and continuity, a devotion to facts and details and to the pursuit of the larger goal called truth.

The companion idea of "balance"—something that works only when issues are clear and facts uncontested, as in a debate, for instance—has largely been abandoned in an era when many disparate forces and factors play roles in most issues and events that become the stuff of news. Issues and controversies, after all, have more sides than a piece of paper. Now more than ever, even a fairly limited controversy may find journalists drawing on multiple points of view to represent the various interests in a public debate. There are, of course, times when such good intentions to recognize the complexity of the post-modern world break down. Periods of war, such as the Persian Gulf conflict, are examples. Then, most media closed ranks with the government and, while there was grousing about informational ground rules, there was little diversity in coverage of the conflict.

FOR MOST OF THIS CENTURY there have been efforts to make the press more professional, from formal training programs to codes of ethics and general agreements about what constitutes professional practice. With the advent of the computer and greater availability of data of all kinds, the press, once a crude, even haphazard information gatherer, can be more systematic.

In large part, however, post-World War II journalism was Cold War journalism, in which large parts of the world were either ignored or treated as gray blobs with the occasional demonic leader from Third World countries appearing on the scene. Now, with delineations less clear, what had been taboo subjects are likely to be openly discussed and, thanks (or curses, take your pick) to the excesses of television talk

shows, tabloid TV news and other say-it-all media, there are few remaining standards of appropriateness that have any kind of universal acceptance. Media codes of ethics and provisions for standards and practices, always among the best-kept secrets in America, are unknown to the public and virtually unused by practitioners.

Despite its nearly universal support, fairness, like objectivity, lacks definition and few understand what it means in practice. However simplistic the old journalistic forms, they at least had the cant of certainty and quick answers to all basic questions: who, what, why, where, when and how. Today we're in a period when purely descriptive news coverage (Jack Webb's "Just the facts, ma'am," school) has been blended with analytical reporting—background, analysis, interpretation, multiple sources—and even the journalism of consequence, wherein probable outcomes of events are discussed and even predicted.

Virtually every institution in America faces unsettling change as the more certain assumptions held in place in the Cold War period fall to a new order. The journalistic consensus for which the flawed objectivity standard was a guarantor is now in flux. New, clearly articulated standards are sorely needed, especially at a time when the public has deep doubts about the essential fairness of the press. Fairness need not mean agreement or serving everyone's special interests, but an articulation of how news content is developed that makes sense to the public. It is essential to both the press and society that the public understand the processes that "manufacture" the news, acquire confidence that media people are professionals dedicated to quality, and that media content is complete, accessible and reliable.

**S**UCH PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING of the essential professionalism and fairness of the media is doubly needed today, in a media scene that is incredibly complex, what with talk shows, tabloids, entertainment fare and even MTV now playing a role in delivering political information. The fairness factor has never been more important to the news media than in a year when new services possible through telephony and other end-run and direct-access

approaches are available to presidents and various institutions and interests in society. The news media are no longer the only game in town for a society hungry for information, but instead must compete with a broad range of upstarts from talk shows to direct-mail opinion media to on-line and interactive services. When one considers fairness in the context of the First Amendment and its central role in democracy and in the increasing diverse information marketplace, the complexity and necessity of ensuring fairness become clear.

FOR THESE AND OTHER REASONS, we have chosen to grapple with fairness in this issue of the *Media Studies Journal*.

In these pages we try to unravel this illusive and paradoxical concept—fairness—which everyone seems to agree on but none can define; whether anyone knows fairness when they see it is unclear, but unfairness is easy to recognize. Fairness seems both the essential core of our media system and the notion most often found missing. We are joined here by both those within the media and others looking in, as well as by the public, as represented in surveys designed to measure the tone of *vox populi*. The result, we hope, will be the beginning of an extended and focused national conversation about what we can rightly expect from our news media and what a universal articulation of media fairness would be.

As a scene setter to begin that crucial conversation on the meaning of the fairness factor, J. Herbert Altschull of Johns Hopkins University undertakes an examination of "Fairness, Truth and the Makers of Image." Altschull, who has written widely on the philosophic foundations of journalism, is no stranger to the debate. "Unhappiness with the media is nothing new," he observes, and the press may deserve their lumps. When passions are inflamed and partisanship is high, many watchdogs exist to question the media's perceptions and conclusions, but what about less prominent or immediate stories—how fair are they?

Leading off our section on "The Critics" is *Time* Senior Writer William A. Henry III, whose reprise of his 1983 cover story, "Accusing the Press: What Are Its Sins?" finds the catalogue of public com-

plaints about the media still largely in force. In "Why Journalists Can't Wear White," Henry categorizes concerns with the media and offers some suggestions for improvement.

Highly visible and vocal among the more organized watchers who dog the media in election years and out is a variety of media monitors. "The battle for public hearts and minds is noisily waged by blatantly partisan, professional media critics who yell epithets of either loony liberal bias or conservative corporate domination," writes Mark Jurkowitz, media critic for the *Boston Phoenix*. Jurkowitz turns his evaluative eye in "A House of Canards—Critiquing the Media Critics" to some of the most prominent (and strident) media watchdogs on both the right and the left. Why, he wonders, does the press accept the hair shirt so uncritically?

Not that there aren't reasons for the media to be self-critical, as *USA Today* editor Betty Anne Williams points out in "Sins of Omission." One measure of fairness in the media is that the public can see itself, its concerns and lives, reflected there. But journalists don't look much like the society they cover, Williams writes, so how fairly can the media reflect their hopes and dreams? The media must offer "a product more reflective of America," she concludes, "more honest, more fair, more consistent with what we think, where we live, who we are."

Concluding this section is a look at the cultural elite. "Elite in the Eye of the Beholder" reviews Dan Quayle's complaints about what he saw as a "cultural divide" so wide that "it sometimes seems we have two cultures—the cultural elite and the rest of us." In October, *Newsweek* senior editor Jonathan Alter took up the elite question and decided, "The vice president is on to something." Accompanying Alter's piece was *Newsweek's* list of those who shape American culture (including Quayle), which we reproduce here.

**J**UST HOW ELITE ARE THE MEDIA? That is the question taken up by journalism scholars David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit of Indiana University in the opening essay of "The Inside View." In "Journalists—Who Are They, Really?," Weaver and Wilhoit report the findings of their comprehensive 1992 national



survey of 1,410 journalists working for newspapers, magazines, wire services, TV and radio. Studying journalists' income, family status, lifestyle, religious and political beliefs leads the authors to conclude that press people are a lot more like Joe Sixpack than they are like Murphy Brown.

In any case, Americans' resentment toward the press may have been overstated, says Donald Kellermann, director of the Washington-based Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press. In "Americans' Love-Hate Relationship with the Press," Kellermann reports on ongoing national surveys of public attitudes toward the media, including one immediately after the Nov. 3 election. In some 50,000 interviews, Kellermann says, Americans make clear that they respect and value the media, however much they may complain. It's a relationship that "plays out very much like a long, sustained marriage," he observes. "It has its moments, its bumps and its ups and downs. But it's a stable relationship."

Elsewhere on the inside, authors Patricia O'Brien and Joann Byrd offer some suggestions for understanding the media. O'Brien, a veteran journalist and author who served as Michael Dukakis' press secretary in 1988, offers her 10-point plan for news consumers in "A Consumer's Guide to Media Truth." "Funny commodity, truth," she muses in offering advice for a public confused over where to find it in the news. From her vantage point as ombudsman for the *Washington Post*, Byrd describes how journalists define fairness in "Fair's Fair—Unless It Isn't." "Journalism has a different definition of fairness than the public it serves," Byrd says. Perhaps a lack of communication between the press and the public lies behind media bashing.

WE THEN TURN to the views of "The Commentators," who reflect, among other things, on the impact of technology on public discourse and on how journalists see and serve the world in which they live. In "Paradox of Democracy—More Channels, Less Discourse," Les Brown, author, *Channels* magazine editor and long-time student of television, muses on how a 500-channel cable system might mean less social discourse, not more. Back when there were only three TV channels, he says, "television made American democ-

racy palpable." Will wider access to electronic expression fragment society? "Where in such a diverse television system will we all be able to get together and talk?" he asks.

Donald W. Shriver Jr., a professor and president emeritus of Union Theological Seminary in New York, sees the question of media fairness as a function of perspective. In "News of the Neglected," Shriver worries that journalists can't write about what they can't see, and the public can't understand others whose lives they don't know. "The media will better serve democracy," he writes, "when they understand how little we all can see from where we stand individually."

THE MEDIA HAVE NOT BEEN UNAWARE of the public's unhappiness with the news product; for many thoughtful editors and producers, the issue is not just a matter of hard economics but of philosophy. In "Remedies," two authors report case studies of efforts by the media to be more responsive to community needs.

Free-lancer Sally Deneen reports from Miami on resentment within the Cuban-American community over reportage in the *Miami Herald*. In the first case study, "The *Herald* and Miami's Cuban Community," Deneen observes that the question is not just fairness, but politics, public opinion and control of the press. In "The Leap of a Passive Press to Activism," journalist John Bare describes how the *Charlotte Observer* and the *Wichita Eagle* asked their readers to help them decide what's news. The result is a press that is more responsive to readers' needs.

Finally, in this volume's book review, "The News Media and Democracy," journalism scholar and educator Edmund B. Lambeth of the University of Missouri tours seven works on press performance and concludes that a more responsible press will require self-assessment "embedded in the doing of journalism itself."

Achieving a framework for a more responsive and responsible press is a goal with which few could disagree. Deciding on a definition of what fairness means—whose version of fairness and fairness to whom—is a more complex task. Even if journalists are not elites, if

large numbers of the public think they are and so dismiss their messages as biased, the result is the same. That so many Americans have focused on questions of media performance, however, is a good thing, an indication of interest in continuing the conversation on the press's role without which deeper understanding of the fairness factor would be impossible.

THE EDITORS