9-1-2005

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarship.law.unc.edu/falr/vol4/iss1/2
WHO IS A “JOURNALIST”?

HOWARD FINEMAN

In 1971, I decided to do what I call a “kosher roots” project. I wanted to go to Russia and explore the places where my grandparents and great-grandparents had come from. It was my goal to visit the little town in the Ukraine where my grandmother was born – the town from which she fled when she was only five years old. After purchasing a Volkswagen bus and obtaining the proper visas, I drove through what was then known as the Soviet Union, through Checkpoint Charlie, the old dividing line between East and West Berlin, through Poland, and onto Kiev. I made my base camp in a little hotel on the outskirts of Kiev.

In Kiev, there was a radio on the table in my hotel room. The radio, from the communist Soviet Union era, had only two knobs. One knob was for volume adjustment and the other was to turn the radio on and off. That was it. I will never forget that radio because it symbolized everything about the totalitarian state. You could listen, or you could exist in silence.

The question posed today is who is a “journalist”? Journalism in the United States is changing. We do a lot complaining about our recent failures in journalism, but we should thank destiny or God or whomever or whatever for the

* Chief Political Correspondent, Senior Editor and Deputy Washington Bureau Chief, NEWSWEEK, Keynote Address at the University of North Carolina School of Law’s First Amendment Law Review Symposium: The First Amendment and Press Coverage of Elections in the United States (Apr. 15, 2005). With the speaker’s permission, this transcript has been edited by the First Amendment Law Review.

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unbelievable cacophony in which we exist. Now is the most important time to be a journalist. And my short answer to the question of who is a “journalist” is that we all are journalists. We should all go to journalism school, if only to enable us to be semi-sophisticated consumers of the news and to be our own “do it yourself” editors.

First of all, it has never been more important to be a journalist. We have never been more confused about who we are and what our role is. However, we have never been less powerful and deserving of special status, including the legal protections of confidentiality of sources that states attempt to provide with shield laws. In the famous free speech case of Schenk v. United States, Oliver Wendell Holmes said that even “the most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic.” Today, we are all in the “theater,” and everyone is shouting “fire” all the time. The technology of the media has put the public in a dangerously crowded “theater” at all times, and combined with the events of September 11, 2001, this has had an effect on our psychology. By combining the instantaneousness and vividness of technology, we have a matrix-like alternative reality in which people totally submerse.

In addition to the issue of instantaneous access to information from multiple sources, most of the people “talking” in the “theater” are not trying to inform, but they are trying to incite, entertain, and do business. A lot of the issues today are emotional issues that have to do with faith, allegiance, and politics; thus, it is

1. Shield laws are statutes enacted in some states which declare that communications between news reporters and informants are confidential and privileged. More than thirty states and the District of Columbia have passed shield laws, and they generally provide that the confidential information can not be revealed unless the party seeking the information can establish that (1) there is a compelling need for the information; (2) the information can not be obtained by other means; and (3) the information is highly relevant and material to the case at issue. See Douglas Lee, Overview: Shield Laws, http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/press/topic.aspx?topic=shield_laws (last visited Nov. 7, 2005).


3. Id. at 52.
not just "fire" in the theater anymore, but there are blow torches that are fueled by money. The case of *Buckley v. Valeo*\(^4\) is one of the most important political cases of all time in America. *Buckley* essentially equated money with speech, and it has produced the world that we have now.

The problems listed above lead me to think that we live in a "MapQuest" culture. I have two kids, neither of whom could read a map if their lives depended on it. They do not know where anything is located in relation to anything else, and if they want to get anywhere, they use MapQuest to get a specific route. I think that analogy holds true for the media today. We all use a MapQuest route to map out specific destinations and to map out which media, "red" media or "blue" media, we want to use to get to our specific destinations. In doing so, we lose track of the larger picture and are focused *only* on the end destination.

As a result, I believe this explains why the theory of deconstructivism is popular today. Deconstructivism says that no such thing as beauty or great literature exists independently from the propaganda of the powerful people who run society – usually white males. This attitude has pervaded popular culture. I believe that people are skeptical because they understand that reality can be manipulated.

Part of the reason for this is the public’s perception of bias in the media. We have had a problem with "fake" journalists. James Guckert (also known as Jeff Gannon) received press credentials on a daily basis from the White House and sat smack in the middle of the White House Press Corps for months. Now, he *proudly* discusses his exploits. This is damaging to the media as a whole. Also, cable television programs, specifically news shows, are all about conflict. Often, professional wrestling programs are the highest rated shows.

Many years ago, I was asked to be on the Bill Buckley Show. The host Bill Buckley was a conservative; however, the show

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5. MapQuest is an online directory resource for locating physical objects and getting specific directions from point A to point B. *See* http://www.mapquest.com (last visited Nov. 15, 2005).
also had a liberal interlocutor who asked questions. The producer called me and asked me to fill in as the interlocutor, but the first thing he asked me was “You are a liberal, aren’t you?” At that point, my desire to be on television came into conflict with my view of myself as a journalist who is striving to be objective. Thus, I never gave them a straight answer on that. In human affairs, there is no such thing as pure objectivity. Objectivity is like the point at the end of a sidewalk off in the distance on the horizon. You will never reach that point, but you should always be striving for it.

I like the notion that your grandmother might be your most trusted journalist. It makes me think of my own grandmother who was a little girl herself, fleeing the Ukraine. She died in 1970. She died at home, sitting in her favorite chair, having just read the Forward. The Forward used to be a Yiddish language publication, and it is still published today in English on a weekly basis. She read that paper like it was the very Torah itself. Everything in her life and all of her understanding of American politics came through that publication. Was she ill-informed because the Forward was her only news source? I do not know. Was the Forward really objective? No. Did it have a special point of view? Yes, but I think she was well-informed.

Consistent with the idea of bias and alternative media objectives, the media industry calls viewers “eyeballs.” They are not even referred to as people; they are just “eyeballs.” The eyeball is connected to the wallet without passing through the brain. So the idea is to get enough “eyeballs” in order to get enough money for advertisements. With the ability to purchase on-line over the internet, eventually we will all be watching super-vivid, enhanced, DVD-quality video while directly connected to the internet and will be able to buy things that we have seen on TV. One day we will be able to click an icon while watching a movie and buy that same

6. The Forward, published in New York, New York, began as a Yiddish language daily newspaper in 1897. See About the Forward: Our History, http://www.forward.com/main/our-history.php (last visited Nov. 9, 2005). The Forward “fought for social justice, helped generations of immigrants to enter American life, broke some of the most significant news stories of the century, and was among the nation’s most eloquent defenders of democracy and Jewish rights.” See id.
product right then and there. Now look at how this could play into politics, in terms of purchasing a candidate from the comfort of your own home. Some powerful people already do this.

Another reason that now is an important time for journalists is that the profession has had some recent failures. There is some good news – we don't live in a society with just an on/off switch on our media. However, we have failed with some important things. We failed on WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. We were not skeptical enough about it. We could say that the CIA was saying one thing, that George Tenant was saying go for it, and even that Colin Powell was supporting the case before the United Nations. Having lived through this time and having been in the middle of it, there was a lot of skepticism at the time. However, this was during the relatively immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, and I think too many of us suspended our disbeliefs and skepticism, and we were a little too prejudiced. There were some people shouting from the rooftops that Ahmed Chalabi was a fraud. Mark Hosenball, one of the best investigative reporters at Newsweek, knew Chalabi was a fraud and ran up and down the hallways of the magazine saying so every day. Furthermore, the failures of the 2004 Presidential campaign are well documented. There were some good moments at our magazine [Newsweek] and elsewhere, but by and large, we did not get behind it, we did not follow it, and we did not follow the Woodward and Bernstein rule, which is to follow the money. There is always a good story in the money.

The media has also had its successes. I do think that the free press – in addition to Pope John Paul, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, the anti-communist labor movement, and a host of

7. Ahmed Chalabi was part of a three-man executive council for the Iraqi National Congress, an opposition group during Sadaam Hussein's tenure as president. Chalabi led the INC in providing a major portion of the information on which the U.S. intelligence based its condemnation of Hussein, including reports of weapons of mass destruction and alleged ties to al-Qaeda. See Profile: Ahmed Chalabi, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/not_in_website/syndication/monitoring/media_reports/2291649.stm (last visited Nov. 11, 2005).
other reasons – enabled Soviet citizens to bring down the Soviet Union and communism.

The major question, then, is who is a “journalist”? In 1972, while I was in journalism school at Columbia, I wanted to be Teddy White. Teddy White was a great political journalist who wrote *The Making of the President, 1960*, about the John F. Kennedy campaign. I read this book when I was twelve years old, and it opened my eyes to the world. I wanted to be where Teddy White was. I wanted to report history. I wanted to be on the inside. I wanted to see history being made. Reading that book clinched the deal for me, and I went to Columbia wanting to be Teddy White. However, I left Columbia wanting to be Woodward and Bernstein. Watergate occurred while I was at Columbia, and it totally transformed the psychology of journalists and journalism. Woodward and Bernstein became the new ideal of who a journalist was supposed to be.

The investigative impulse that Woodward and Bernstein had inspired in other journalists lost its way during the Clinton years. I am not excusing Clinton’s behavior, by any means. I think he acted irresponsibly, and in many ways he deserved what he got. However, the media still worked itself into a corner with the Clinton ordeal, and it did not feel right to anybody. It did not feel like the noble exercise that Watergate felt like. To me, Watergate was the beginning of the end of the so called “mainstream media.” This might sound paradoxical, because it was said that this was the high point of the media, but Watergate turned the “main stream media” into a political adversary for the President. It almost created a kind of political party. The media did not intend to do that, but Richard Nixon would have thought otherwise.


So we have now come to the present, and we [journalists] are no longer Teddy White. We are no longer Woodward and Bernstein. So what are we? Who knows? I start my day by looking at websites – many, many websites. I write for *Newsweek*, and I covered the entire democratic convention for this major magazine by writing a diary on my BlackBerry, which I called my “BlogBerry.” I think that blogs¹⁰ are revolutionary. One reason is that they are a link. Blogs are something that a newspaper or a magazine can not do because blogs can link you to other people, to other blogs, to primary sources, and to pictures of original documents, like the Republican [Terri] Schaivo memo. Blogs are revolutionary, and I believe they are a good thing. For this reason, we all have to become journalists in a way.

The notion of “professional” journalists is to me somewhat oxymoronic. If I am right that we all are “journalists,” it is something that does not require unique training. Even though I went to Columbia journalism school, I do not believe that you have to have an advanced degree to practice journalism. Anyone can be a journalist if they have the dedication to get the facts, write the story and speak coherently. As citizens and journalists, we all have to try to maintain a balance of the forces that try to enslave us. Those forces, in my view, are the State, the market, the tribe (which is our ethnic identity), and the church. If we allow any one of these four forces to take over, then that can lead to mob rule, totalitarianism, or theocracy. So our duty as journalists and citizens is to try to maintain that balance of these forces. This will take another era of confronting power in the way that we have in the past. There will be a new burst for that confrontation, and it is not

¹⁰ “Blogs” refers to “weblogs,” which are publications on the Internet “consisting primarily of periodic articles (normally, but not always, in reverse chronological order). . . . Blogs range in scope from individual diaries to arms of political campaigns, media programs, and corporations. They range in scale from the writings of one occasional author (known as a blogger), to the collaboration of a large community of writers. Many weblogs enable visitors to leave public comments, which can lead to a community of readers centered around the blog; others are non-interactive.” *Blog, Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weblogs (last visited, Oct. 17, 2005).
going to come from what is left of "mainstream media." It will come from the Internet, and it will come from us all in our role as journalists.