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High Hopes and Dire Warnings: In Search of a Credo for Today's Journalist

Aren't these rather strange words for a journalist to choose? A "*credo*?" Well, besides the fact that I'm a preacher's kid, I chose the phrase because I think, in today's journalism world, we need something to believe in. And I don't mean an ethics code. There are plenty of those, and they're all well and good, but they don't stir the blood. I'm talking about something to hang onto when the wind is stiff.

I'm sure I don't need to tell most of you that the wind IS stiff these days. As the Project for Excellence in Journalism's *State of the News Media 2004* put it, "Americans think journalists are sloppier, less professional, less moral, less caring, more biased, less honest about their mistakes, and generally more harmful to democracy than they did in the 1980s."

Or take this quote from a recent story on "fake news" in the *New York Times*. "The premise of any joke delivered by oddball newscasters is that they're making fun of the **media's treatment** of news as much as they are the **subjects** of the news...And if there's one thing that everyone can agree on, it's that, right or wrong, they hate the press."

Now, I'm not here to catalog all the ills of the media today. Or to recount all the different complaints people have about the press. For one thing, I don't have time. They're too numerous.

No, what I have decided to do is to look at two of the distinguishing characteristics – indeed, two of the very underpinnings -- of American media: The first is our commitment to the ideal of objectivity. And the second is our reliance on

commerce for our support. Each of these, to be sure, has given us enormous strength over recent decades.

But I want to argue tonight that these two so-called underpinnings, much as they do for journalism, are in fact (as currently applied) also to blame for many of our woes. I want to argue that our commitment to objectivity and our reliance on commerce have us hobbled and undernourished and that, unless we wake to these problems and respond effectively we -- and this democracy we in journalism exist to serve -- will indeed be in trouble. Call that a dire warning. The good news is that I shall end on high hopes, for I do believe that there are solutions -- and indeed that we are beginning to undertake them, at least here and there.

But first, the problems. Let us start with objectivity.

I want to read you a couple of things. Here is a report from the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switz., last year:

"The world isn't run by a clever cabal. It's run by about 5,000 bickering, sometimes charming, usually arrogant, mostly male people who are accustomed to living in either phenomenal wealth, or great personal power. A few have both. Many of them turn out to be remarkably naive --especially about science and technology. All of them are financially wise, though their ranks have thinned due to unwise tech-stock investing. They pay close heed to politics, though most would be happy if the global political system behaved far more rationally -- better for the bottom line. They work very hard, attending sessions from dawn to nearly midnight, but expect the standards of intelligence and analysis to be the best available in the entire world. They are impatient. They have a hard time reconciling long term issues (global warming, AIDS pandemic, resource scarcity) with their daily bottomline foci. They are comfortable working across languages, cultures and gender, though white caucasian males still outnumber all other categories. They adore hi-tech gadgets and are glued to their cell phones."

Not the usual economic summit report.

And now for a report from Iraq, just a couple of weeks ago:

“I leave when I have a very good reason to and a scheduled interview. I avoid going to people's homes and never walk in the streets. I can't go grocery shopping any more, can't eat in restaurants, can't strike a conversation with strangers, can't look for stories, can't drive in any thing but a full armored car, can't go to scenes of breaking news stories, can't be stuck in traffic, can't speak English outside, can't take a road trip...One could argue that Iraq is already lost beyond salvation. For those of us on the ground it's hard to imagine what if any thing could salvage it from its violent downward spiral. The genie of terrorism, chaos and mayhem has been unleashed onto this country as a result of American mistakes and it can't be put back into a bottle.”

Now, if you're like me, these don't sound like newspaper reports to you. Yet each is from a respected newspaper *reporter*. The first, from Davos, was written by Laurie Garrett, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning science reporter from Newsday. The second is by Farnaz Fassihi of the Wall Street Journal. But here's the catch: these words were not IN Newsday or the Wall Street Journal. They were e-mails, sent by each woman to friends – and in each case, to the consternation of their writers, they began bouncing all over the Net.

But the point is: They're very powerful, right? How do they differ from the news reports these two made? The Houston Chronicle said about the Fassihi e-mail: "Though the missive apparently does not contradict her reportage, it is blunt, bleak and opinionated in a way that mainstream coverage generally avoids."

Another observer said this: "Exactly what mistake did Farnaz Fassihi make? She simply told the truth."

I come down closer to the last observation, yet I recognize that these personal e-mails, while they have enormous power, and tell us some things we don't get from “traditional” journalism, don't tell us all we need to know to behave as responsible citizens.

Now let's think for a moment together about objectivity.

The History

It's not exactly biblical, you know. We only began using the term, really, at the beginning of the last century. It arose in part as a commercial goal – publishers felt they could reach a larger market if, instead of hewing to the partisan lines they had previously hewed to, they became instead “impartial.”

Not that the idea of impartiality had never been heard of before that. Way back in 1797, in something called the *Porcupine's Gazette*, an editor named William Cobbett referred to claims of impartiality. He called them “perfect nonsense.”

But a century ago, with papers seeking mass circulation and in an era of progressive thinking about public engagement, the notion met wide acclaim – as it did, pretty much through the 1950's.

Then came Vietnam. In that controversial war, the notion that journalists could be entirely neutral trustees for the public interest was seriously undercut. As one journalism historian put it: “Reporters in the field may have spoken truth to power, but reporters in Washington too often accepted power as truth.”

So with Vietnam, and then with Watergate, a so-called “new journalism” was born – one with a more personal voice. And in mainstream journalism, the notions of investigative reporting, interpretation and analysis took shape, freeing journalists from (quoting the historian again), “a rigid pattern of reporting that trusted far too naively in the statements of government officials.”

But DID it free us?

Don't these phrases still sound familiar? “Accepting power as truth?” “Reporting that trusted far too naively in the statements of government officials?” The historian was writing well before 9/11, and certainly before the Iraqi war, but only recently we have been hearing this tune again, and from leading newspapers in America -- that they had had some, shall we say, AUTHORITY problems in their journalism? Here's the New York Times last May: “We have found a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been. In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged. Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged — or failed to emerge.”

And the Washington Post, in August: “From August 2002 through the March 19, 2003, launch of the war, The Post ran more than 140 front-page stories that focused heavily on administration rhetoric against Iraq. Some examples: ‘Cheney Says Iraqi Strike Is Justified’; ‘War Cabinet Argues for Iraq Attack’; ‘[Bush] Tells United Nations It Must Stand Up to [Saddam Hussein] or U.S. Will’; “Bush Cites Urgent Iraqi Threat”; “Bush Tells Troops: Prepare ...” You get the drift.

The problems:

It’s important to note that, to this day, journalists in the United States express a high level of support for this principle: 91 percent said objectivity was “very important” – the highest of five Western countries surveyed in 1990. Yet the fact is that objectivity – this notion that we simply report what is going on around us – has made journalists easily manipulable. We live in an era of permanent campaigning, with spinmeisters galore, and press releases and pseudo-events overtaking the news. Incumbency is more powerful than ever. The executive branch overwhelms other sectors of government. And those in power control the news. As the sociologist Herbert Gans has argued, “The economically and politically powerful can obtain easy access to, and are sought out by, journalists....Those who lack power...are generally not sought out until their activities produce social or moral disorder news.”

A whole lot of regular people just don’t feel like they’re in the paper – or on the air.

Paradoxically (and perhaps it’s because journalists RESENT the manipulation, at least subconsciously) today’s interpretive reporting model also causes us to be unusually adversarial. Much of political reporting is written as if we have a permanent sneer on our faces, said Alan Murray, when he was Wall Street Journal Washington bureau chief. One of my favorite comments when I was ombudsman at the Washington Post came from a fellow who, complaining about one of those leads that explains everything while informing little, said: Just give me the facts. I can supply the cynicism.”

Yet (speaking of cynicism), our vaunted allegiance to objectivity doesn’t seem to keep journalists from expressing opinions – when they go on the tube, that is. In Washington, at least, where so many leading reporters are invited on television shows, they are seen giving their opinions right and left – all with a handy little label identifying them as reporters for this or that newspaper. This in turn leaves

the public feeling even more left out – of centers of power where journalists and politicians all seem to be “in it together.”

If our objectivity model doesn't keep some of us from mouthing off, it's also abundantly clear that it doesn't succeed in persuading the public of our fair-mindedness. Indeed, the pledge of objectivity is regularly used as a kind of bludgeon against journalists – from both the left and the right, as I needn't tell anyone in this room. The New York Times' Public Editor Dan Okrent wrote last week about the endless complaints – often from both sides of the aisle in relation to the same story. And it gets more venomous every day. As Okrent wrote: “When a reporter receives an e-mail message that says, ‘I hope your kid gets his head blown off in a Republican war,’ a limit has been passed.”

Some of the critics are raising substantial concerns. And some of course are raising balderdash. Matt Drudge the other night linked to a claim by the Media Research Center that NBC News had placed the word “lie” next to President Bush on its news program. Well, the letters were there and briefly seen -- as part of a Bush-arranged backdrop reading “tax relief for working families”

The bludgeoning, though, has a real effect. I heard the nation's main news anchors acknowledge, on a panel together recently, some degree of pulling back from the controversial simply in anticipation of the wearisome uproar.

And the uproar may come, no matter how accurate the story. My husband, the Washington bureau chief for McClatchy newspapers, went on a reporting trip to Egypt and Turkey before the war. As you can imagine, the opinions of both leaders and the public in those two countries were NOT fifty-fifty about the wisdom of the war that was already inevitable-seeming on the horizon. But the war-ready publics reading McClatchy newspapers complained nonetheless about the “imbalance.” This definition of “balance” is what gives us such ill-advised reporting as stories on global warming that balance what 98 percent of scientists say with what the other 2 percent say – and call it objectivity.

One final complaint about objectivity before I move on: It produces a dulling sameness. “There is an orthodoxy to our thinking, said Thomas Edsall of the Washington Post, explaining recently why he thinks blogs can enliven journalism by busting up groupthink in the newsroom. The journalism scholar Tom Patterson notes that this groupthink or pack journalism “is due in large part to the objective model of journalism that prohibits news reporters from inserting their own

partisanship into news stories. Guided instead by a set of professional values that they share, journalists tend to find significance in the same things.”

So am I clamoring simply for a return to the old days of a partisan press? No. I want a rich, broader landscape in journalism, and I can tell you, with high hopes, that I see it coming just now over the horizon.

But first for one more bit of gloom:

Media economics

Newspaper economics are actually doing just fine, though my publisher friends never think so. It’s a cyclical business, and so always presenting new challenges. But it provides profit margins that few in business can dream of – typically 20 percent and often considerably higher. Without going into the dreary details, I can tell you that most in the newspaper business are not treating it as a long-term investment. An addiction to these profit levels has developed that reminds me of a saying by a friend of mine: Being a cash cow IS a strategy.

The trouble is, it’s a strategy that isn’t terribly good for the public. Again, from State of the News Media 2004 : “Something is changing in the news media. Faced with declining audiences, many major news institutions have changed their product in a way that costs less to produce while still attracting an audience. The public senses this and says it doesn't like it.”

Listen to how “Taking Stock” -- a recent book from Iowa State University Press about the impact of public ownership -- puts it: “News was the product around which the business was shaped. The news was selected, presented and package in appealing and therefore profitable ways, to be sure, but the central focus of the newspaper has been the publication of news. Dramatic change is now afoot, however. Today, the business of news is business, not news....News has become secondary, even incidental, to markets and revenues and margins and advertisers and consumer preferences.”

Or consider this line from longtime newspaper editor Harold Evans: “The problem many organizations face is not to stay in business, but to stay in journalism.”

Nor is it only newspapers. Indeed, broadcast organizations are under even greater pressure -- and have generally gone further down the road toward commercial success, and away from journalistic responsibility. Don Hewitt, until recently of 60 Minutes, has said that when he got into the biz as a young producer, the ethic was "Make us proud." Today, it's "Make us money"

There has been a "dramatic decline in investment in news. Again, citing the State of the Media report: "Newspapers today have about 2,200 fewer full-time professional newsroom employees than they did in 1990...In network news, the number of correspondents since the 1980s has been cut by a third... Correspondent workload has increased by 30 percent... and the number of foreign bureaus... is down by half. In local television, the Project's surveys suggest that the average workload increased 20 percent from 1998 to 2002. Fully 59 percent of news directors reported either budget cuts or staff cuts in 2002....In radio, from 1994 through 2001, the number of full-time radio newsroom employees declined 44 percent and part-time employees declined 71 percent."

In addition, there are failures to invest in training, salaries, and newshole or airtime. Foreign news coverage has declined dramatically, as have national and state government news. A recent report noted that, even as arts are flourishing in communities throughout the nation, arts coverage is stagnant or declining. And on and on it goes.

To the public, it becomes ever clearer that we are behaving like just another business, albeit the only one protected under the First Amendment. Turning again to the Project for Excellence in Journalism: "Journalists believe they are working in the public interest and are trying to be fair and independent in that cause. The public thinks these journalists are either lying or deluding themselves. The public believe that news organizations are operating largely to make money and the journalist who work for these organizations are primarily motivated by professional ambition and self-interest."

Indeed, the operation of media companies too often is determined entirely by the degree of profit that will be produced. We build up parts of the newspaper that appeal to advertisers (who after all, pay 80 percent of the freight) and we decide against serving customers whose demographics do NOT appeal to advertisers.

And in the end, we starve the public through this unfortunate ethic of underinvestment in what the people in a democracy need to govern themselves. And many in journalism grow despairing about their future.

But there is hope. A recent book called “ Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet” takes a look at two fields to see how well they provide the circumstances in which good work can be done. One field is genetics. The other is journalism. As the authors note, both these fields face new challenges constantly. But, the authors found, the two professions offer sharply contrasting – “virtually polar opposite” – examples when it comes to providing an environment for good work. Genetics, it seems, is a “well-aligned” field. But journalism? You guessed it. “In misaligned journalism,” the authors tell us, “the threat to carrying out good work is ubiquitous.”

But you thought I said something about hope? Yes. We find the seeds of it right here in this awful indictment of misaligned journalism. Because, as the authors go on to say, “Blatant misalignment may actually have a beneficent dimension; such disequilibrium clearly exposes the threats to good work and may mobilize people to struggle productively, to confirm the essence of their calling, embrace high standards and reaffirm their personal identities.”

Well, I think this may be happening. There is a great deal of ferment on the media scene, as I’m sure you’d agree, and much of it is wonderful. Let’s start with some hopes to counter my gloom about disinvestment. Many different media owners are making many different decisions – some of them very much to the public good.

The New York Times pulls in just over \$1 billion of ad revenue each year banking on the notion that a highly educated readership will want a substantial product – and that advertisers will pay to reach them. The so-called “British invasion” – the concentrated entry into the American market of the BBC, the Financial Times and the Economist – is another indicator of how well substantial journalism can do in this country.

Charles Eisendrath, director of the Knight-Wallace journalism fellowship program at the University of Michigan – likened this British invasion to what happened to American auto manufacturers here when Japanese carmakers carried out their own invasion in the 1970s – bringing their well-made, reliable and long-lasting autos into a market grown fat on selling shoddily made cars to a near-captive public.

The Financial Times’ United States managing editor, noting his paper’s American circulation is five times what it was in 1997, added: “How did we do it? We had an

owner who was willing to make a big bet -- putting millions into the American and Asian economies during an economic downturn.

How terribly un-American! Journalism observer Tom Rosenstiel said at the recent Knight-Wallace “Quality Pays Conference” that an unwillingness to take short-term profit declines is why most news organizations ignore research showing a direct relation between investment and long-term gains in circulation or viewership. But the British invasion and the evident success of the New York Times and other high-quality papers point in another direction. So, too, does the existence of a growing variety of ownership models that increasingly enrich the journalism landscape.

Take the story of Chuck Lewis who left 60 Minutes, the respected CBS news show, because he was “tired of shooting people tight, waiting for them to cry.” He founded the Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit institution that does terrific watchdog reporting – the kind too few papers any longer invest in.

Think, too, of such non-profit news institutions as PBS and NPR and Minnesota Public Radio. And of newspapers such as the St. Petersburg Times in Florida and the New London Day in Connecticut, which benefit from unorthodox ownership situations that enable them to invest in their news products.

More and more research is being done to show links between good journalism and good business. And more and more of us media critics are calling for responsible corporate governance among media companies. Among the steps we have urged on owners and C.E.O.s: Consider having on your boards of directors members with experience on the editorial side of a news organization. Designate a director -- or directors -- to have special responsibility to monitor the company’s editorial performance. And tie incentive compensation for corporate officers in significant part to achieving journalistic quality goals.

Now, if diverse media ownership is going to help address the problems caused by commercial pressures, a diversity of media is also a hopeful development in addressing the problems caused by our current interpretation of objectivity.

What do I mean by a welcome diversity of media? Would it include the openly opinionated? In a word, yes. If opinionated journalism or advocacy journalism has no honorable role, you should tell it to Tom Paine and to Ida B. Wells, to Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell, to Upton Sinclair and Rachel Carson.

And it would include the value-laden voice. Consider indeed what kind of media ARE growing in this climate: Online, ethnic and alternative media. All share a point of view. Like those e-mails from abroad that we began with, these media let you know what their authors think.

“Mainstream media” are beginning to notice these feisty newcomers. Listen to CNN Washington bureau chief David Bohrman: "I'm intrigued at the way that bloggers and blogs have forced their way into the political process on their own; that's why I want to incorporate the blogs into our coverage," he told the New York Times.

I have always, even in my more objectivity-devoted days as a journalist, had some yearning for the freshness of direct opinion. I remember leaving sessions with all the different presidential candidates at the Des Moines Register, when I was editor there. The post-session conversation among us would be lively indeed – how someone bristled at this question, how comfortable they were with that issue, how unctuous in using this phrase, how masterful in closing that point. Then the political reporter's story the next day would come out: Objective as all get out. And boring as hell.

I think of who it is in the Washington Post that I have turned to first, after each debate of late. Tom Shales, the television columnist. Others may tell me how many times Bush said “weapons of mass destruction.” But only Shales will tell me that Kerry “often looks like Eustace Tilley, the dandy who peers at a butterfly through a monocle once each year on the cover of the New Yorker” And oh, how right he is!

Humor, of course, is another delightful new entrant on the media scene, with “fake” news shows like the Daily Show among the liveliest players.

No question about it: News with a view is very successful. It's not a coincidence that Fox News won more viewers than any other network and more than ABC and CBS combined on the final night of the GOP convention. I think it's time we acknowledged that these changes we are seeing can “bust up our orthodoxy,” sharpen all our skills and bring more people into the media tent.

But I say that with some caveats:

If we are to welcome this richly diverse landscape, we must ask that the players present themselves honestly. There must be truth-telling about what role each one plays. Just as a good newspaper labels all stories other than straight news reports –

as analysis, criticism, editorial, etc. – so a medium that plays an untraditional role should let its consumers know what role that is. We are all ill-served by the current topsy-turvy atmosphere in which perhaps the leading innovator in this more-partisan landscape is the ONLY one to make the overt claim of being “fair and balanced.”

In a media landscape where the admirably openly named “fake news” plays alongside the enlivening near-anarchy of the blogging world and the 24-hour-a-day up-to-the-minute but repetitious cable news, the choices can become clear -- and so can the differentiation among the various kinds of media. The great complaint of late is that the media, rushed by 24-hour-a-day schedules and co-opted by entertainment values, are all going to hell together. The old mainstream media therefore tend to fear the newcomers, even as they seem to grow more like them. This is exactly backward. Traditional journalists can admire bloggers and “comedy news” and cable TV and partisan journalism for what they bring to the table – and recommit to being the very different media that THEY are.

And how does that happen? That is a very large question, of course. But I do have a couple of ideas.

One is transparency.

First, the transparency I’ve just mentioned – a kind of transparency of intent. If your commitment is to be as fair and balanced and thorough and comprehensive as you can be, then say so – and act on that commitment as faithfully as possible. Label everything but straight news. Give people plenty of direct language from newsmakers, in their own words. Adhere to all your ethics codes – including the one about getting people on the record when AT ALL possible. Invest in news and in news personnel, pay them well, train them well and give them the resources to do their job.

Explain your processes and practices. Tell people why you’ve made an untraditional choice, when you do. Invite readers into your newspapers and into your newsrooms. Thus can you differentiate yourself from shout shows or fake news or “all Laci Peterson all the time” cable TV.

The second idea is accountability. In a wonderful example of the above quote about things getting so bad that good inevitably comes of it, the New York Times has done a remarkable turn-around on the accountability front. When their famous recent scandal broke -- the one about the young reporter Jayson Blair and the

executive editor Howell Raines – Publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. said: “We are enormously powerful, and we are very scary. And we only know that when actually we’ve been covered. How do we open ourselves up, make ourselves more accessible and make ourselves more accountable? We’ve got to do it.” And they did. They conducted a rigorous self-examination, wrote at length about it in the paper, and hired a public editor – an ombudsman, of sorts. This after years of vociferously leading the opposition to ombudsmanship.

Every good newspaper ought to have an ombudsman, though only some 40 out of 1500 or so daily newspapers do. And every state ought to have a news council, though only this one has a real one, with representatives of all sectors genuinely participating.

There is also good media accountability in alternative publications, and from online sources such as “Grade the news” which does just that for Bay Area media consumers.

There also should be a sense of overall accountability in journalism, and I think this could best happen with a real, nationwide alliance of journalists, which doesn’t truly exist today. This alliance would speak out, for example, against growing government secrecy. Against weakening of the Freedom of Information Act. Against the jailing of reporters who are doing what they ought to do – protecting their sources. And also, in my dreams, they would speak out against journalists when they abuse the necessary tool of anonymous source use by granting it improperly and with such profligacy. But that is another speech.

Let me close by saying that there is no better journalism in history than the best journalism available today. The citizen who wishes to be well-informed has an astonishing spectrum of choices. And that, in the end, is the ultimate media policy: the one you choose to exercise, every time you pick up a newspaper, turn on the television or radio or sign onto the Internet. Don’t let yourselves off the hook. With market-driven journalism the norm, YOU are in the driver’s seat.

Now, speaking of the public, I want to make good on my promise of a credo by reading to you one paragraph from my favorite one – “*The Journalist’s Creed*”, written early in the last century by Walter Williams, who founded the world’s first journalism school, on whose faculty I now am proud and honored to serve:

“I believe in the profession of journalism. I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their

responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of lesser service than the public service is a betrayal of this trust. . . .”

Thank you.