

*The Red Smith Lecture in Journalism*  
*John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy*  
*University of Notre Dame*

# WHOM DO JOURNALISTS WORK FOR?

*Ken Auletta*

## **Red Smith Lectures in Journalism**

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# THE RED SMITH LECTURE IN JOURNALISM

Introduction  
By Robert Schmuhl

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By Terence Smith

WHOM DO JOURNALISTS WORK FOR?  
*By Ken Auletta*

## UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy  
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The Red Smith Lectureship in Journalism is sponsored by John and Susan McMeel and Universal Press Syndicate. The Lectureship seeks to foster good writing and to recognize high journalistic standards.

In the words of John McMeel, chairman and president of Andrews McMeel Universal (parent company of Universal Press Syndicate), “Red Smith’s writing continues to offer lessons about stylistic and professional accomplishments that remain valuable to students and to journalists.”

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# Introduction

**B**y intelligent design or coincidental caprice, Red Smith and Shirley Povich were born the same year: 1905. For much of the 20th century, these two wandering wordsmiths filed dispatches from press boxes across America that transported newspaper readers to sporting events, using prose frequently as unforgettable as the athletic feats they described.

While Smith's career encompassed 55 years at several papers, Povich started in the sports department of the *Washington Post* in 1924 and continued writing for the *Post* until his death in 1998, a run just shy of 75 years. One Povich column that's reprinted in *All Those Mornings . . . At the Post* (2005), a collection celebrating the hundredth anniversary of his birth, is a tribute to Smith, who died in 1982.

Titled "The Death of a Friend, The Loss of an Artist," the article acknowledges that "nobody out-wrote" Smith. Proving his point, Povich quotes a short autobiographical sketch his friend composed in the late 1940s, long before Smith became a columnist at the *New York Times* in 1971 and won the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished criticism in 1976.

"Red Smith, christened Walter Wellesley Smith on a cold day in 1905 in Green Bay, Wis., has been bleeding out a daily sports column for the [New York] *Herald Tribune* for about three years. Previous conditions of servitude have included 10 years at hard labor on the *Philadelphia Record*, eight years on the *St. Louis Star-Times* and a year with the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. He admires sports for others and might have been a great athlete himself except that he is small, puny, slow, inept, uncoordinated, myopic and yellow. He is the proprietor of two small children, one large mortgage."

Since 1983, the University of Notre Dame has conducted the Red Smith Lectureship to honor an alumnus (class of 1927) whose work elevated the craft of journalism. Through the lecture series and subsequent publications, Notre Dame seeks to foster traits Smith exemplified: stylish writing of literary merit and professional standards contemporary journalists should recognize and uphold.

To commemorate Red Smith's centenary, the 2005 lecture featured Ken Auletta answering the question "Whom Do Journalists Work For?" and Terence Smith reminiscing about his father in "Red Smith at 100."

Since he began writing the "Annals of Communications" column for the *New Yorker* in 1992, Ken Auletta has earned the reputation of being America's premier commentator on the media. Referred to as "a role model for journalists" and "the conscience of the media" by critical observers of his work, Auletta has chronicled the current communications revolution with profiles and reports scrutinizing the people and forces responsible for the media and their messages.

In article after article, book after book, he explains who's behind the messages, what motivates the things they do, when new technology becomes influential, where consequences occur, why such work is significant, and how we—as citizens—should understand this new information environment.

Titles of some of his books help tell the story of his beat, reflecting both the breadth of his reporting and the unity of his writing: *Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way* (1991), *The Highwaymen: Warriors of the Information Superhighway* (1999), *World War 3.0: Microsoft and Its Enemies* (2001), *Backstory: Inside the Business of News* (2003), and *Media Mogul: Ted Turner's Improbable Empire* (2004).

In 2002, Auletta won the National Magazine Award for profile writing for his *New Yorker* article about Ted Turner. He's been designated a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library, and he was named one of the top business journalists of the 20th century by a national panel. A contributor to the *New Yorker* since 1977, he has also been a columnist for the *Village Voice* and for the *New York Daily News* as well as a contributing editor for *New York* magazine.

Like father like son, Terence Smith is a Notre Dame graduate. He's spent his career chasing the news and capturing major stories across this country and around the world. An award-winning reporter at the *New York Times* and *CBS News*, he's currently a correspondent for *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS.

The Red Smith Lectureship is made possible through the generosity of John and Susan McMeel and Universal Press Syndicate. By sponsoring the Smith Lecture series and endowing the McMeel Family Chair in Shakespeare Studies, the McMeels are making sure that the consideration of writing at its literate best endures—and flourishes—at Notre Dame.

—Robert Schmuhl, Director  
John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy  
University of Notre Dame

# Red Smith at 100

*Terence Smith*

This month is the one hundredth anniversary of Red Smith's birth, which seems to make him very ancient and me semi-ancient. In fact, as a person, my father was always young at heart, and, contrary to many others, he became increasingly liberal in his outlook and optimistic about people and about life.

He died in 1982 at the age of 76 after 55 years as a newspaperman. He considered himself a newspaperman, not a sport columnist or a sportswriter. He was, in fact, an accidental sportswriter. He was working for the *St. Louis Star-Times* a long, long time ago, and they had a little problem. It was discovered that members of the sports department were on the take. So the editor fired the sports department and suddenly needed several new sportswriters. He called my father over and said, "Smith, do you know anything about sports?" and my father said, "Just what the average fan knows."

Then he said, "Well, Smith, are you honest?" and my father said, "I hope so." (It's important to note that my father at this point was making forty dollars per week.)

The sports editor then asked, "What if a fight promoter offered you ten dollars to promote his fight or a fighter?" Long pause.

My father replied, "Ten dollars is a lot of money." The editor nodded and said, "That's an honest answer, Smith, you're hired. Report to the sports department on Monday." That's how Red Smith became a sportswriter.

Later in his career he wrote thousands of columns—at one point seven a week. He worked for papers in Milwaukee, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and New York and claimed with some accuracy that he killed every paper he ever worked for. It is true that most died, but I'm not sure that it was a direct result of his employment. The obvious exception, of course, was his last paper, the *New York Times*, which hired him at the age of 67. His work there rejuvenated him, and he went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished criticism at the *Times*, continuing to write his columns with great enthusiasm and energy even as his health began to fail.

I think he viewed column writing as sort of a contract with life, and he wanted to keep up his end of it. He used to describe retirement as a social disease, and had no interest in it. Indeed, he wrote his last column a few days before he died.

He was often asked why he didn't write books or tackle other subjects, like politics or world issues, matters beyond the sports pages. He usually deflected the question by answering that he was too lazy or not smart enough or didn't have anything to say. But I think there was something else at work. I think by accident he came upon something at which he was very, very good: writing those 800- to 900-word slices of life about the sporting life, using it sometimes as a metaphor for larger issues in life. Intuitively, he knew he was very good at that, so he continued to do that, and there might be a lesson there for all of us.

He loved Notre Dame. He came here as a student and was a member of the class of 1927. You who are students here now and struggle to get in and take SATs will appreciate that life was simpler then. He grew up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and there was an older guy, somebody he admired, Vince Engels, who was four or five years older, who told him in high school that he was going to go to Notre Dame and he was going to go into journalism. Well, that was it. It was simple. That answer was resolved. He went to Notre Dame and went into journalism. That isn't the way things work today, is it?

But it was a less complicated time then. I gather that the students at Notre Dame lived, ate, slept, and studied in the Administration Building. It was a much smaller place. He was not much of an athlete. He used to say with great pride that he played for one of Knute Rockne's teams. Well, yes, he did, but it most definitely wasn't the football team. Apparently in those days, Rockne was required to coach practically every known sport to earn his salary and one assignment was the track team. In those days, there was a physical education requirement, and you either had to take physical education or participate in some sport. My father signed up as a member of the track team, but it was a short career.

In the first event, which I guess was a freshman meet of some sort, Rockne put him in as a miler. Well, he was capable of running the mile. He was just not very fast running the mile, and he finished the mile well behind everybody else. Rockne came up to him afterward and put his arm around him and said, in effect, "We won't need you again, Smith. You've satisfied your phys-ed requirement." That was the end of his athletic career with Knute Rockne, but he did love it here.

The centennial of his birth has gotten me to pondering what he would think of the sports world today. I think that there are things that he would admire, like the spectacular performances of individual athletes, which I think today exceed and go beyond anything he would have known. A Tiger Woods, or a Roger Clemens, or Peyton Manning, or the Williams sisters. I think he would have really admired the excellence of individual performances.

I think he would have greatly admired the growth and emergence of women's sports and their wonderful performances and all the outgrowth of Title 9 that has come since it. I think he would have the thought that was terrific.

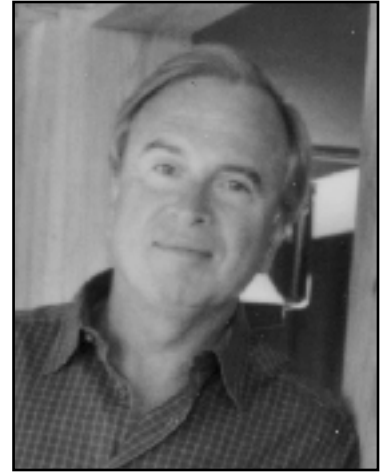
I think he would have been flabbergasted by the money in sports today—the hundred-million- and two-hundred-million-dollar contracts that are written for several years for ballplayers would have been beyond his imagination. But I actually believe, if he were true to his principles, he would have had to defend them. He always tended to take the side of the players over the owners, and he believed that they should be paid whatever the market would bear.

At the same time I think he would have been dismayed by the steroid scandals, which distort sport and change the way we look at it. I think he would have been upset by the overall impact of television on sports. Remember, he came from an era when World Series games were played during the day and when college football games did not have automatic two-minute breaks that neatly fit the commercials. I think he sort of resented, even while he was alive, the way television was taking over sports and changing it.

I'm a guest here at Notre Dame, so I won't tell you what I think he would of thought about Notre Dame's recent history of turnstile football coaches and terminated contracts. He thought that Notre Dame was different from the football factories that it plays on its schedule. But, I am guest here, so I won't go into that.

But one thing is for sure: He would have admired and enjoyed this lectureship because it focuses on writing and on journalism. Those two things were at the center of his life, and they helped shape a long, and richly enjoyed one.





## KEN AULETTA

# WHOM DO JOURNALISTS WORK FOR?

**T**ed Turner, who pioneered CNN and early programming for the cable industry, visited Germany several years ago to address a prominent audience. His staff prepared his remarks, but the always unpredictable Turner—who was once known as “the mouth from the South”—chose to ignore the draft and wing it.

“You know,” he began, “you Germans had a bad century. You lost World War I. You lost World War II. You were losers . . . .”

The audience was shocked. Turner’s staff wanted to dive under the table. But then Turner reclaimed his audience by declaring:

“But I know what it’s like. When I bought the Atlanta Braves, we couldn’t win either. You guys can turn it around. You can start making the right choices. If the Atlanta Braves could do it, Germany can do it.” The audience was now laughing with Turner, not at him.

In the course of preparing a Turner profile, I asked him: “Why did you do that?” He said, “I don’t know. I’m like Zorba the Greek. I just get up and dance sometimes.”

What if I began today by telling you what I don’t like about college students:

- I don’t like that you don’t read.
- I don’t like your movies and Websites.
- I don’t like your docility.
- I don’t like that Notre Dame beat Pittsburgh in football last week, or that all you students seem to care about is sports.

Now that I’ve dug a hole, let me dance out by telling you: I don’t believe in making sweeping generalizations, except to make a point. My point: Beware of stereotypes.

This point was driven home to a roomful of reporters

during the 1980 presidential campaign between President Jimmy Carter and the challenger Ronald Reagan. President Carter’s Soviet Affairs adviser, Dr. Marshall Shulman, was briefing the reporters on how complicated relations between the two countries were when suddenly a reporter asked, “Isn’t the problem with President Carter’s dealings with the Soviet Union that it is too complicated and the public can’t understand it?”

“Ridiculous!” sniffed Dr. Schulman.

“So explain to us, Dr. Schulman,” shot back the reporter, “how you would simply explain Carter’s policy on a bumper sticker?”

“You cannot reduce foreign policy to a bumper sticker!” sputtered Dr. Schulman.

“I insist,” said the reporter.

“How many words am I allowed?” asked Dr. Schulman.

“Two,” answered the reporter.

A devilish smile crossing his face, Dr. Schulman said, “My bumper sticker would read: ‘Accept Complexity.’”

**G**ood journalism must accept complexity. Today I’d like to talk about media caricatures, as well as the business—journalism—Red Smith and I share. Although he was a columnist and free to opine, Red Smith never painted his subjects as if they were cartoons. He reported. And when he reported he did not write to please team owners or athletes. He wrote for the reader. When Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali and proclaimed, “I am the greatest,” or when he denounced the war in Vietnam, Red Smith had to be offended. But as David Halberstam writes in the introduction to *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*, Red Smith’s “ability

to change his mind about Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali when most men of his generation were so offended by Ali's style, theatrics, and politics that they did not deign to see the brilliance of him as a fighter and the originality of him as a man, is part of his enduring legacy."

Smith was also a great storyteller, which is vital to journalism. Among the best pieces of advice I received as a relatively young journalist came from William Shawn, the legendary editor of the *New Yorker*. The year was 1980 or 1981, and I was proposing a story idea. I told Mr. Shawn—everyone called him Mr. Shawn—that when you rode the subways and saw the hostile faces, when you looked at the murder-by-stranger statistics or long-term welfare dependency or the number of homeless people, something different was happening with poverty in America. People were more cut off, more hostile. They weren't just income poor. "I don't know what to call this group, or even the right questions to ask," I told Mr. Shawn. "But I know it's an important story."

"It sounds like a sociological yack piece," Mr. Shawn responded. "You need a vehicle to tell the story." He gave me weeks, months, to find one.

Mr. Shawn understood, as did Red Smith, that storytelling is critical to hooking readers. He also understood that a journalist needed time to gather facts and to comprehend context. A year and a half later, the *New Yorker* published my three-part series—The Underclass—which grew into a book. After the first two installments appeared in the *New Yorker*, we were editing the third part, which focused on what might be done to alleviate the underclass. I was told that for space reasons we had to cut it back 40 percent. I protested that this would gut the piece, that we owed it to our readers to pose possible solutions for the grim reality I had spent maybe 40,000 words describing.

Mr. Shawn politely asked me to give him a half hour to reread the third installment. A half hour later he fetched me and I followed him into the composing room, where he said, "We cannot cut this piece back 40 percent. What are my options?"

He was told he could either cut whole sections of the magazine, like the movie reviews or the arts section. Or he

could add eight pages to the magazine at a cost of about \$80,000. He added the eight pages.

That will probably never happen again. I'm not sure it should. But it does provoke the question I have chosen as my topic: Whom does a journalist work for?

Shawn believed we worked for our readers, not shareholders. My friend Peter Jennings, who died recently, received a fat weekly check from ABC—as does one of your previous Red Smith lecturers, Ted Koppel—but at bottom each believed he served the audience, not the corporate parent. They worked their sources, but they did not trim their reporting to please sources. They, like the rest of us, sometimes compromised. Journalists in television too often chase ratings, while print journalists too often juice up headlines. However, day in and day out Jennings, like Koppel,

tried to offer citizens the information we need to make decisions in a democracy.

They believed, as do the best journalists—or the best public officials—that they are public servants. What flows from this assumption are some pretty startling conclusions. If everyone in journalism, including the folks who sign our checks, truly embraced this assumption:

- Media corporations would worry less about Wall Street, profits margins, and the stock price.
- The definition of news would harden.

There would be less Michael Jackson and Runaway Bride, and more international news.

• There would be more investigative reporting because the press would highlight its watchdog role, the checks-and-balances function that helps prevent the abuse of power.

• The panic within news organizations to locate an audience distracted by so many choices—to make more noise in order to boost circulation or ratings—would sometimes be resisted by editors who remind their bosses that they hold a public trust.

• Journalists would build in more checks and balances to our own abuse of power, welcoming more independent ombudsmen. We would encourage the kind of transparency we demand from government and corporations, and would prominently admit our mistakes.

Pretty radical, yes?

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And what might the CEOs who sign our checks say to this? They would probably insist that this is a cartoon. They would say that employees in public companies, including its journalists, are also concerned about the stock price because their pensions and stock are linked to it. They would say that without money from Wall Street investors, media companies will not be able to raise the capital that buys expensive printing presses or funds overseas bureaus. They would say that journalism that just gives its audience only what it thinks is important will continue to lose audience. They would say the press must abandon its elitist model and give the public more of what it wants rather than what we think it needs. For the public does not just consume news to be educated, they also wish to be entertained. Serious journalists may rail at Michael Jackson coverage, but there's an audience for it.

The CEO who signs our checks probably believes journalists are unmindful of the real world. In the real world you have to listen to your customers, and we know the customers want Michael Jackson, and shorter stories, and less foreign and government news, more infotainment, and more news they can use. Since fewer readers and viewers are buying newspapers or magazines, or watching network news, we have to try new things, they say. What's wrong with survey research and focus groups that reveal what the public is interested in? Isn't a good business supposed to understand its customers? And if we don't invest in survey research, how are we going to learn why young people are not buying newspapers and magazines or watching television news the way their parents did?

The research already tells us: Spurred by the two-way communication made possible by the Internet, the audience wants less of a Voice-from-God journalism than a conversation. They want shorter stories. They want to lend their voice to restaurant or movie reviews. They want to be able to communicate via e-mail with reviewers.

Further, the people who sign our checks will say: If journalists are implacably hostile to the business side of their enterprises, they will fail to create the team culture every enterprise needs. After all, the sales force that sells ads or subscriptions does make possible the salaries of journalists.

These two worldviews suggest perhaps the biggest conflict within journalism: the cultural divide between journalists and their corporate owners. It is second nature for corporate executives to extol synergy, profit margins, share price, lowering walls between divisions, extending the brand, and teamwork.

The clash comes because the journalistic culture is so different. Journalists prize independence, not teamwork; more bureaus and spending on news, not profit margins. We want a wall between news and sales, and we often see synergy as shilling. Journalists worry more about their readers and viewers, and business people worry more about Wall Street. Business people abhor waste and usually want to quantify things. Journalists understand waste is inherent to journalism—waiting for calls to be returned, waiting to get a second source, waiting for plane connections, waiting

to get someone to talk. And journalists know good reporting and writing are hard to quantify. There are business folks who understand this—the Sulzbergers of the *New York Times* do, as do the Grahams of the *Washington Post*, or Ted Turner.

Turner created CNN on faith, not management studies proving CNN would be a great investment. The studies said the opposite. And though Turner became a billionaire and pressed for ever higher profits, he is lionized by many

journalists who worked for him at CNN because he often made decisions that cost money but built the CNN brand. He created the first world news network. He aired documentaries on weighty subjects at a time when CBS, NBC, and ABC had largely abandoned them. He kept his team in Baghdad to cover the first Gulf War in 1991.

Where do I come out in this debate? Let us concede it is wrong to portray our corporate bosses in cartoon-like fashion as greedy capitalists unconcerned with anything but maximizing profits. Most business executives I've covered do not wake up each morning determined to do something bad. They, like the rest of us, want to be proud of their work, even if they don't always do things to merit that pride. Let us also concede that most journalistic enterprises need to make a profit, and to make a profit they must be like supermarkets, offering a range of choices to their customers—international news, weather, sports, business,

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gossip, movie reviews, cartoons, the results of planning board meetings, etc. But too often those journalistic supermarkets have become specialty stores. In news, they too often promote one product to the virtual exclusion of others. Look at what's happened to the network documentary units that once probed poverty or the Defense Department or public education. Now NBC devotes entire hours to "exclusive" interviews with the Runaway Bride or Amber Frey. CBS's *48 Hours*, which once vividly took viewers inside hospital emergency rooms and government meetings, is now called *48 Hours Mystery*. ABC's *Primetime* thinks it's got a "scoop" when they snare actor George Clooney for an at-home interview, as they have this fall.

**W**e journalists are baiting our own trap. Today we are threatened by many forces, none more so than our lost trust among the public. According to a recent Pew Poll, 62 percent of Americans believe the press is biased. Two-thirds of the American people don't trust us. This lack of trust is a dagger aimed at journalism's heart.

It is often said that journalism has an ethics problem. Usually when we speak of ethics we refer to some form of dishonesty—like Jayson Blair of the *New York Times* or Jack Kelley of *USA Today*, each of whom made up stories. Lying is, of course, a serious and alarming problem. But lying is not, I believe, at the heart of what ails journalism.

What most ails journalism are vices that can be captured by five bumper sticker words: *Synergy. Brand. Humility. Hubris. Bias.*

Let's start with synergy. We see synergy at work when:

- TV networks choose to air shows produced by their own studio factories, and then they get their morning news shows to conduct interviews with the stars, forging a great promotional platform for these shows. This past year, ABC's *Desperate Housewives* was featured on ABC's *Good Morning America* every Friday, giving the audience a taste of what the show would feature Sunday night. And again on Monday morning *GMA* featured outtakes or an interview with one of the stars. NBC used to do the same thing when it had *Friends* on Thursdays, just as *The Early Show* on CBS does with *Survivor*.

- Texas-based Clear Channel Communications, the

largest owner of radio stations, pushed on its stations the music performed at the Clear Channel concerts it runs.

- Media companies like News Corporation or Gannett or Tribune—or take your pick—justify their many acquisitions by saying they can achieve "economies of scale." And they do save money by combining finance or human resources or other functions. But they have another synergy in mind as well. News Corp. has as part of its business plan that their Fox News can promote stories from their *New York Post* or *Sky News* or the *Times of London*, just as their book publishing arm can lock up their stars—or give book contracts to powerful figures, like the daughter of China's premier or former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. News Corp. is hardly alone.

Business executives also believe these synergies can build the corporate brand, which brings us to a second vice—the infatuation with brands. Few business buzzwords are invoked more tiresomely, and are less understood.

- Yes, NBC extended its brand by doing an hour-long news special on *Friends*, but at what cost to the credibility of NBC News?

- Yes, *60 Minutes* attracted a lot of notice for their exclusive last September about George W. Bush and the National Guard. But when it came out that CBS rushed its report during the presidential election and made serious mistakes, what did this do to the credibility or brand of CBS?

- Yes, Clear Channel gained leverage over performers, just as Sinclair Broadcasting used its political muscle last year to air an attack on Democratic candidate John Kerry on all its stations. But this exercise of power alarmed citizens, and sparked a movement to curb big media.

- Yes, doing ABC's *Good Morning America* from Disney World promotes the brand and is good corporate synergy. But if ABC News is perceived as shilling for its corporate parent, it loses credibility.

In news—and this is the part business executives often miss—credibility is the brand.

It would be a too-simple bumper sticker to blame all journalistic vices on an imposed business culture. The august *New York Times* printed a long boxed editor's note in May 2004 in which they apologized to readers for not being rigorous enough in reporting on weapons of mass destruction prior to the invasion of Iraq. A major reason, the note declared, was as old as journalism itself. It read:

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“Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper.”

Scoops.

The brand—the credibility—of the great *New York Times* was tarnished—as was that of CBS and Dan Rather—for chasing scoops.

A synonym for credibility is *trust*. Think of the trust CNN gained when Ted Turner insisted that CNN stay on to report from Baghdad as bombs were falling during the 1991 Gulf War. CNN may have lost money producing an epic twenty-hour series on the origins of the Cold War, but how do you quantify what this Ted Turner decision did for CNN’s credibility and trust? Edward R. Murrow lost sponsors when he reported on the demagogic behavior of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, but it is one of the reasons CBS came to be called “the Tiffany network.”

There are more subtle issues that engender trust. Do we, as reporters, always remember that we work for our audience? Think of White House reporters or others who sometimes pull their punches so as not to antagonize a source. Think of sportswriters who worry too much—as Red Smith did not—about how a general manager might react to a story. Think of reporters who turn too many stories into soap operas populated by cardboard figures.

Journalists only gain trust when we are transparent, which brings us to the third vice: lack of humility. Humility is what CBS lacked for 12 days after it aired its report asserting that it had documents proving that George W. Bush got into the National Guard to avoid military service in Vietnam, and did not meet his military obligations. CBS insisted that its documents were real. They were wrong, yet it took them 12 days to acknowledge this.

Humility is the true backstory of good journalism. In many ways, it is the most vital quality possessed by a good journalist. A journalist shines, of course, who can write well, and is accurate, and can think clearly. But before we write a word we must ask questions and listen to the answers. Do the blowhards on cable TV listen? Think of the last time in the weeks prior to an election a talking head was asked, “Who’s going to win?” You can count on

one hand the number of times you’ve heard anyone answer, “I don’t know.”

In journalism today a premium is placed on sharp opinion, on *wow*. It is very easy to get very full of yourself. Appear on TV often and you become a mini-celebrity. Your lecture fees go up. People want to know your opinion, even when your main task as a journalist is supposed to be to gather the opinions of others. I’m always amazed watching some Washington-based shows when they have as a guest the Speaker of the House or a Cabinet member, and they have the official wait as pundits opine on what is really happening in the nation’s capital. The official was there less as a source of information than as a prop for the pundits.

We reporters enjoy First Amendment protections, but we don’t have subpoena power. People don’t have to talk to us. They do for many reasons, among them that they trust we are searching for the honest truth. The less we listen, the less they will talk to us.

They also talk to us, sometimes, because we promise them anonymity, which is why the case of Judy Miller of the *New York Times* is so important. By refusing to divulge sources she had promised confidentiality, Miller is standing up for all journalists. Name a scandal—Watergate, insider trading, Enron, political corruption, Abu Ghraib. How many of these would have seen the light of day without

anonymous sources? Very few. We protect the public’s right to know when we protect sources who want the information out in the public arena, but don’t want to lose their livelihoods. Yet if those sources believe journalists will not protect their confidentiality, we all lose.

Lack of humility often leads to a fourth vice: hubris. There’s a fine line between losing the humility to listen and becoming truly self-important. After she brilliantly exposed Abu Ghraib prison abuses, CBS producer Mary Mapes became so full of herself, I suspect, that she became too convinced of her own infallibility, too zealously determined to prove that George W. Bush cheated. He may have. But journalism is about proving, not asserting, facts.

Howell Raines lost his job in 2003 as editor of the *New York Times* not because he wasn’t a good journalist, but because of hubris. Like Caesar, he thought most of those

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*Do we, as  
reporters, always  
remember that  
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audience?*

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in his employ were inferior. He would abuse and insult them, hold meetings in which the dialogue went one way, be cheap with compliments, and somehow he thought this would raise what he liked to say was “the metabolism” of the paper. Raines helped the paper win a miraculous seven Pulitzer Prizes because of the brilliant job he did as editor after 9/11. But by the time of the Jayson Blair disclosures in 2003, he had wasted all his capital, and the newsroom rose up to demand a less hubristic chief.

Hubris, of course, is common to the business world. The merger in 2000 between AOL and Time Warner failed because of hubris. Executives behind this deal thought they could ignore cultural differences between the companies, thought they could will the two companies to grow by 30 percent per year—and when they couldn’t meet this arrogant goal, their stock collapsed. L. Dennis Kozlowski, the former CEO of Tyco, came to think of himself as an emperor who could charge to the company the cost of an extravagant birthday party for his wife.

Finally, a fifth vice: bias. There is much discussion these days about press bias. And I believe we do see examples of political bias in the press. If you were watching Fox News during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, you could not fail to notice that in the early days Fox often rooted for their conservative commander-in-chief.

If you read the *New York Times* accounts of abortion or gun control or poverty you will sometimes discern a liberal bias. You would see bias at CNN when Ted Turner was in charge and the network ran pro-environmental stories.

But I don’t believe the dominant press bias is political. Deputy White House Chief of Staff Karl Rove said in a speech in April that “the press is less liberal than it is oppositional.” Every president, be he a Democrat or Republican, complains about the press, just as most every mayor and governor does. And what they most often complain about is that we spend unhealthy amounts of time seeking out conflict.

There’s another way to describe this bias for conflict. It is often a market-driven bias—for conflict, for sizzle, for wow, for keeping our audience entertained. And, of course, for getting scoops.

Some believe Dan Rather has a liberal bias. But if

Rather got a story about John Kerry faking his wounds in Vietnam, he’d have run with it. Just as the so-called “liberal” *New York Times* pounced on stories recounting the quick profits Hillary Clinton once made in the commodities markets.

One sees the bias for conflict in press coverage of the Swift Boat Veterans, or of Bush and the National Guard, or of the endless caravan of polls we conduct, telling readers or viewers who’s ahead this week.

At the same time, the press too often downplays vital issues a president must confront. While we gauge who’s ahead in the latest poll, we often ignore what Bush’s tax cuts will do to the budget deficit, or how much Kerry’s promises would have cost. With baby boomers about to retire, we don’t sufficiently explore how our Social Security contract will be fulfilled. We did not pay attention when the president and the Congress cut appropriations to

secure the levees in New Orleans. The media often find these stories boring. In truth, the public probably does as well.

We see a bias for conflict and sizzle elsewhere, in the World War III-like coverage of the Michael Jackson trial, or of a missing teenager in Aruba.

We see it in a preoccupation with ratings and circulation.

These, too, are ethical issues, for the people who sign our checks want more

sizzle, more gotcha stories that attract more customers. They have a market-driven bias that can distort good journalism.

Interestingly, this analysis is shared by many on the left and the right. The left is comfortable talking about market-driven biases, about the excesses of capitalism. In doing a story nearly two years ago on the Bush White House and the press, I was surprised to learn that Bush shared this analysis. Of course, the Bush White House did not condemn capitalism. But they did condemn the press’s search for the sensational, for selling more newspapers or finding stories that would boost the ratings.

Believing that the press is interested in the sensational, which is too often true, the Bush White House goes overboard and treats the press as a special interest, not as people who serve the public interest. Of course, if we don’t represent the public, they don’t have to talk to us. “What about the press’s checks-and-balances function?” I asked

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White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card. “You don’t have a checks-and-balances role,” he said. That is the role of Congress and the courts. This is a major reason the Bush administration has held fewer press conferences than any modern president, and is often so hostile to the press.

**W**hat’s the solution? I don’t have an easy antidote. I do start with this: In journalism, form dictates content. Tell a reporter he or she has only 500 words—fewer if it’s a TV story—and they need a lead and “a nut graph” that gets to the essence of the story right away, and that form almost surely dictates the content of the story. So what would I do?

1. I would give journalists more time, and more space. Too often, journalists are like firefighters. The alarm rings and we race to cover a story. Many of these are false alarms. They are stories we are reacting to, not thinking about. Or we spend our time at the press briefing asking sharp, conflict-oriented questions. Many of these are mindless questions.

Live news has some of the same problems. Technology is a great friend of journalism. We can go live from anywhere in the world. Light, handheld cameras allow us to travel quickly. First faxes, then cell phones, then the Internet, allowed citizens in the most repressive countries to communicate with the outside world, to become our eyes and ears. But journalism is about sifting information, finding different voices, trying to get at the complex truth, offering context. It is not just a bird’s-eye view. Live television or Webcasts—or blogs—can be like fireworks, dazzling, awesome, but soon the sky is dark again.

We see the value of time and space with the contextual coverage of Hurricane Katrina days after it struck New Orleans. We see it in Bob Woodward’s second book about George W. Bush, *Plan of Attack*, where we learned how the president really made decisions. We see it in Seymour Hersh’s accounts of the war in Afghanistan or Abu Ghraib in the *New Yorker*.

2. Journalists and their editors and the people who sign our checks have to be willing to risk boring our audience by reporting on dry but vital subjects like budget deficits or underfunded Social Security. It’s not easy, but good storytellers can find ways to make the turgid come alive.

3. “Objectivity” is a false God. We are human beings, and

we screw up or have biases that are hidden from us. But fairness is possible; balance is possible; not stereotyping the people we write about is possible; conveying complexity is possible. We can be skeptical without being cynical.

Journalism need not seek a false balance. We need not say, “It is alleged that the Bush administration claims it is shrinking the deficit.” We can find out if that claim is true or false. We are not reporting on a Ping-Pong match, where we report the ping and the pong of the contestants. If we are to serve the public, sometimes the press must referee. We are not there to judge who is right or wrong, but we are there to adjudicate facts.

4. As we need many voices and localism in media, so we need diversity in our newsrooms. Big media tend to homogenize, but so does a newsroom that is not made up of diverse races and religions and political views.

5. There are those who believe a partisan press is an answer. They believe different newspapers and magazines and TV networks openly championing a party or a point of view—as was true in America in the 19th century, or is often true in Europe today—will produce a marketplace of ideas. I believe the opposite is true. If you think what I and other journalists report is dictated by partisanship, then we will further polarize

American society. Conservatives will seek facts from their outlets, and liberals from theirs. There will be no common set of facts. The press will be even more distrusted than it is today. And the consensus on which a democracy is predicated will be harder to achieve.

6. Journalists need to better communicate to the business folks who sign our checks. We have to find a language to help them understand that they will not be able to build a valuable journalistic brand without good journalism, which is expensive. This communication chasm between us will be hard to bridge.

7. If we truly shared the same assumption that journalists were public servants and had a public trust, we would better address the five deadly vices. If journalists were constantly reminded of their public trust, we would be humbler. We would make more effort to combat our biases. We would worry less about synergy and brand and more about trust and credibility.

8. Finally, be prepared to be fired.

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*We can be skeptical  
without being  
cynical.*

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I am not alarmed that many of these eight points feed the perception that journalists are elitists. If journalism wants to call itself a profession, and if democracy depends on information, then journalists work for the public interest not by granting the public a vote over what we do. We can't be like a politician who just follows the polls. Our job is not to just shovel at the public what they think they want, because what they want changes. Or is sometimes wrong. Look how it changed after 9/11. Before 9/11, the public was less interested in Islam and international news. After 9/11, they asked why the media hadn't told them more about Osama Bin Laden and Islam. The public wants more Angelina and Brad, more Runaway Bride. But does that mean we must give it to them?

A decade ago in Dallas, I interviewed Intel CEO and chairman Andy Grove at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The Internet was just taking off, and people were predicting that in the future we would not need middlemen, neither editors nor networks. We would program for ourselves. So I asked Grove: "In the future, what will be the value of the editors in this hall?"

He looked out at the sea of 1,000 editors and said, "Zero. In the future we will not need you. We will create our own newspapers online. We will design it ourselves. We will not need an 'intelligent agent.' If I am interested in health news and sports, that is the news I will read. But you will not decide. I will decide. It will be My Newspaper."

Three years later, I was questioning Grove on another public stage and I asked: "You once predicted that newspapers would have little value in the future because the Internet allowed everyone to create My Newspaper. Do you still believe this?"

"No," he said. "I was totally wrong. I did not appreciate the value of serendipity. I could not predict that I would want to know about Sarajevo or Rwanda. I realize that we do need 'intelligent agents' to help us sort out important information."

Ted Koppel said here five years ago that anyone can be a journalist. Bloggers and the Internet and cell phones with digital cameras deputize citizens to act as journalists. This is great, and when the tsunami struck South Asia or Hurricane Katrina struck the American South, the first horrifying pictures came from citizen journalists who turned their digital cameras and e-mails on to describe the giant waves and horrible devastation. But not everyone can be a good journalist. A good journalist is trained to give context, to get all sides of a story, to be fair, to be accurate, to give more than a bird's-eye view of reality.

So whom do we work for? You don't always know it, and sometimes we don't live up to it, but journalists are as much public servants as the people you elect to office.

So the next time you wonder: How do I square my sense that the press screws up with the argument that the press serves a vital public service? How do I square the sensational and the serious, the way the press got weapons of mass destruction wrong and got right the failure of the Bush administration to respond quickly enough to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina? What's the answer to those paradoxes?

I think F. Scott Fitzgerald had the correct answer to this riddle when he said that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."

That, my friends, is a long but pretty accurate bumper sticker.