

Outline of Opening Remarks for March 12, 2009

Columbia University Conference

Enlarging the Space for Watchdog Journalism:

Countering Threats, Supporting Innovations

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My role is to set the table for this conference. I am honored.

We are here to speak of Watchdog Journalism – also known as Investigative Journalism -- which at its most general level means informing the public about the performance of its Government and other centers of power.

This subject will be exhaustively, constructively, even inventively addressed by experts over the next two days. I know it will be time well spent, for the future of watchdog journalism is fraught with danger. And, as a result, so too are the prospects for our Democracy.

The timing of this conference couldn't be better. Newspapers are filled with stories of their own demise. From California to the New York high lands, from the Rocky Mountains to the City of Brotherly Love, indeed, all over this land, evidence abounds that the profit-seeking model for sustaining a vibrant, honest, fearless and relevant enterprise in watchdog journalism isn't working.

For proof, this audience needs no listing of examples. Even the nation's newspaper of record is at risk. Moody's has downgraded debt of the NY Times to junk (Baa3 to Ba3). On top of this, the Times raised cash through a sale-leaseback (perhaps, more accurately called a subprime mortgage) on its shiny new headquarters. And then, remarkably, given his reputation, the paper turned to Carlos Slim, the Mexican billionaire, for a \$250 million loan paying 14% plus warrants enabling Slim to triple his ownership to 18%.

Pew reports that 15,000 journalists lost their jobs in the US in 2008. To put that in perspective, the esteemed Pro Publica, largest and best funded NGO practicing watchdog journalism, reportedly has only 28 journalists.

These facts bespeak a problem. For the linkage between an informed public and a Democracy that works has never been more powerful. An ill-informed public can be duped by a determined Government. Examples abound, as the paradigm case of the Bush Administration and its promotion of the war in Iraq makes clear. Here's just one example: An authoritative poll taken in January 2003 found that a majority of the country still believed Iraq played an important role in 9/11.

When it comes to matters of common sense, however, the public can't be so easily duped. In fact, sometimes the public gets it precisely right. As it did in a Gallup Poll taken in the fall of 2003. Responding to the question -- how best to keep America strong -- 94% put "Honesty in Government" at the top of 16 plausible possibilities. Gallup didn't follow up by asking how best to assure Honesty in Government. But for those, like Jefferson, Madison, John Adams and, I suspect, everyone in this room, Honesty in Government is maximized through constant scrutiny by the Fourth Estate. Brandeis got it right. Sunlight is the best disinfectant.

If the profit-seeking model for sustaining newspapers is broken, sustaining the public watchdog function within that model is, as lawyers like to say, an a fortiori case. Investigative journalism takes more time and human resources than most other journalistic offerings. Here, network news is the canary in the coal mine. There has been a sharp and continuing decline since the 80's in the scope and number of investigative reports. Original, hard-hitting, truth-telling, audience-generating stories of corruption and abuse of power – one thinks of "The Mother of All Heists", CBS's 60 Minutes report on the disappearance of \$500 million in Iraq – have almost disappeared, replaced by shows about crime, celebrity profiles and voyeuristic behavior.

Depressing as these changes are, they force us to admit this: It was crazy to have the reporting of public affairs be and remain a disposable byproduct of the advertising industry.

So, we lack the model for a product that will nourish and sustain Democracy instead of weakening, and eventually, destroying it. Am I being too extreme?

The beloved physicist, Richard Feynman, tells of having been taken to see a Buddhist temple in Hawaii. In the temple a man said: "I am going to tell you something that you will never forget." And then he said: "To every man is given the key to the gates of heaven. The same key opens the gates of hell."

Feynman observed that, not too long ago, people thought the human potential was not fully developed because everyone was ignorant and that education was the solution, that if people were educated, we could perhaps all be Voltaires. But it turns out that falsehood and evil can be taught as easily as good. Education is a great power, but it can work either way.

Similarly with communication. What is communicated can be lies as well as truth, propaganda as well as real and valuable information. Communication is a strong force, also, but -- and here's the point -- a force either for good or evil.

So, much about our nation's future turns on whether we can sustain and grow an investigative journalism that expresses truth -- truth about all society's centers of power -- truth that is at once vibrant, honest, fearless and relevant. This is a heavy burden, made more so by the burgeoning alternatives enabled through technology.

What's missing today is a national conversation about the ripple effects that the declining quantity and quality of watchdog journalism will have on our Nation's well being. Even the absence of this conversation goes unmarked.

Perhaps Paul Starr will start this conversation through his superb article in the March 4 2009 issue of The New Republic, entitled The

End of the Press (Democracy Loses Its Best Friend). In it he makes this powerful point:

“News coverage is not all that newspapers give us. They have lent the public a powerful means of leverage over the state, and this leverage is now at risk.”

We are having plenty of conversation these days about matters of high importance. But, really, is the impact of Chapter 11 filings by GM and Chrysler more affected with the public interest than the impact on the quality of Government that results from similar filings by the four owners of 33 daily newspapers that have recently sought Chapter 11 protection?

To be perfectly clear, I’m not suggesting watchdog journalism should be saved by the Government. Being fed by the hand one is trained to bite won’t work. Numerous examples of why Government largess is not the answer can be found in the records of PBS, NPR and NEA.

But all the more reason for there to be a national conversation about the need for some new model of sustainability. A global glut of auto-making capacity explains the Darwinian threat to survival of the least fit to manufacture that product. But there’s no glut in top-flight watchdog journalism, either here or abroad. As supply shrinks so too does demand, or so it would appear. In time could we, as a nation, forget about the vital link of watchdog journalism to Democracy? It could happen here, unless....

Unless we can devise one or more models that will work going forward, as the future forms around us. This I hope will be the central focus of our conference.

So, the table is set. I close by offering one possible idea, consider it an amuse bouche to stimulate the appetite.

Yale’s David Swensen and Michael Schmidt recently suggested in a NYTimes op-ed that newspapers turn into non-profits endowed with funds sufficient to sustain watchdog journalism. “Enlightened philanthropists” were summoned to the task. For a news operation

like the NYTimes, costing around \$200 million a year, they suggested a \$5 billion fund.

What a great idea! Alas, perhaps due to space constraints, they didn't tell us how to do it. My answer is education, which could begin with the national conversation I claim today is missing. And here's a way to get it started. Let's invite a group of our leading private universities and colleges to create, fund and operate a non-profit demonstration model for investigative journalism. Through this act of leadership and the exemplary work product that would be achieved by this model, the public would become truly and well educated. Philanthropists and foundations would become enlightened as to the importance of investigative journalism. The model would inspire as well as educate. It could trigger a blessed revolution.

A.J. Liebling called journalism "the weak slat under the bed of democracy." This initiative by leading institutions of higher learning would strengthen that slat. Journalism and education are taproots of the same tree – the tree of democracy. They both seek truth. To achieve their missions, they both share a need for independence and the elimination of interest conflicts. In other words, academic freedom and freedom of the press. A quick review of the chartered purposes of many leading universities confirms that carrying forward this idea fits neatly and well within their missions.

I found it interesting and important to discover that the Hutchins Commission's Report, issued in 1947 under the title A Free and Responsible Press, linked educational institutions and nonprofits, calling upon them to "help supply the variety, quantity, and quality of press service required by the American people." So, there you have it.

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