

The Wolf in Reporter's Clothing: The Rise of Pseudo-Journalism in America

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It's a lovely spring afternoon here in Eugene, and today we gather to honor the memory of Robert W. Ruhl, the late editor and publisher of the *Medford Mail Tribune*, with a lecture on ethics. I confess that in my youth, the prospect of a lecture on ethics, particularly on a day like this one, did not exactly make my heart leap. So I thank you for being here.

One reason I was drawn to my chosen career is its informality, in contrast to the real professions. Unlike doctors, lawyers or even jockeys, journalists have no entrance exams, no licenses, no governing board to pass solemn judgment when they transgress. Indeed it is the Constitutional right of every citizen, no matter how ignorant or how depraved, to be a journalist. This wild liberty, this official laxity, is one of journalism's appeals.

I was always taken, too, by the kinds of people who practiced journalism. Like Robert Ruhl, my father, Wallace Carroll, was editor and publisher of a regional newspaper, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The people he worked with seemed more vital and engaged than your normal run of adults. They talked animatedly about things they were learning -- things that were important, things that were absurd. They told hilarious jokes. I understood little about the work they did, except that it entailed typing, but I felt I'd like to hang around with such people when I grew up. Much later, after I'd been a journalist for years, I became aware of an utterance by Walter Lippmann that captured something I especially liked about life in the newsroom. "Journalism," he declared, "is the last refuge of the vaguely talented."

Here is something else I've come to realize: The looseness of the journalistic life, the seeming laxity of the newsroom, is an illusion. Yes, there's informality and humor, but beneath the surface lies something deadly serious. It is a code. Sometimes the code is not even written down, but it is deeply believed in. And, when violated, it is enforced with tribal ferocity.

Consider, for example, the recent events at the *New York Times*.

Before it was discovered that the young reporter Jayson Blair had fabricated several dozen stories, the news staff of the *Times* was already unhappy. Many members felt aggrieved at what they considered a high-handed style of editing. I know this because some were applying to me for jobs at the *Los Angeles Times*. But until Jayson Blair came along, the rumble of discontent remained just that, a low rumble.

When the staff learned that the paper had repeatedly misled its readers, the rumble became something more formidable: an insurrection. The aggrieved party was no longer merely the staff. It was the *reader*, and that meant the difference between a misdemeanor and a felony. Because the *reader* had been betrayed, the discontent acquired a moral force so great that it could only be answered by the dismissal of the ranking editors. The Blair scandal was a terrible event, but it also said something very positive about the *Times*, for it demonstrated beyond question the staff's commitment to the reader.

Several years ago, at the *Los Angeles Times*, we too had an insurrection. To outsiders the issue seemed arcane, but to the staff it was starkly obvious. The paper had published a fat edition of its Sunday magazine devoted to the opening of the city's new sports and entertainment arena, called the Staples Center. Unknown to its readers -- and to the newsroom staff -- the paper had formed a secret partnership with Staples. The agreement was as follows: The newspaper would publish a special edition of the Sunday magazine; the developer would help the newspaper sell ads in it; and the two would split the proceeds. Thus was the independence of the newspaper compromised -- and the reader betrayed.

I was not working at the newspaper at the time, but I've heard many accounts of a confrontation in the cafeteria between the staff and the publisher. It was not a civil discussion among respectful colleagues. Several people who told me about it invoked the image of a lynch mob. The Staples episode, too, led to the departure of the newspaper's top brass.

What does all this say about newspaper ethics? It says that certain beliefs are very deeply held. It says that a newspaper's duty to the reader is at the core of those beliefs. And it says that those who transgress against the reader will pay dearly.

The commitment to the reader burns bright at papers large and small. Earlier today, we honored Virginia Gerst with the Payne Award. Working at the *Pioneer Press* in the suburbs of Chicago, she was ordered to publish a favorable review of a restaurant that didn't deserve it. Her publisher, eager to get the restaurant's advertising dollars, insisted. Unwilling to mislead her readers, Virginia Gerst lost her job after twenty-seven years at the paper.

It was never my privilege to know Robert Ruhl, who died in 1967 after years of service in Medford. I am certain, though, that at least part of the reason he is remembered with such respect is that he was, in the end, a servant of the reader.

I suspect, too, that he would look favorably on those who took a stand recently at the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Pioneer Press* and other newspapers where the reader had been treated cavalierly.

And he would be vexed, I suspect, by another aspect of today's journalistic landscape.

All across America, there are offices that resemble newsrooms, and in those offices there are people who resemble journalists, but they are not engaged in journalism. It is not journalism because it does not regard the reader – or, in the case of broadcasting, the listener, or the viewer – as a master to be served.

To the contrary, it regards its audience with a cold cynicism. In this realm of pseudo-journalism, the audience is something to be manipulated. And when the audience is misled, no one in the pseudo-newsroom ever offers a peep of protest.

If Mr. Ruhl were here, I feel certain he would not approve.

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Last Halloween, I was stuck in traffic on a freeway in Los Angeles, punching the buttons on the car radio to alleviate the boredom. That's pretty much the way we live in Los Angeles, but I'm not complaining because that night I came across a very interesting program. It was a rebroadcast, 65 years after the fact, of Orson Welles' famous dramatization of War of the Worlds.

For those who don't know the story, this radio drama portrayed a Martian invasion so realistically that it prompted hysteria. A study by a professor at Princeton calculated that the program had reached about six million people, of whom 1.2 million panicked, believing that creatures from Mars were actually invading the town of Grover's Mill, New Jersey. Listeners ran out into the streets, jammed police switchboards and gathered in churches to pray for deliverance.

As I listened to the broadcast, it became obvious why people believed the Martians were at hand. It didn't sound like fiction; it sounded like journalism. The actors who described the unfolding events at Grover's Mill had the same stylized cadences and pronunciations as broadcast journalists of the time. Their voices quavered with dread, a sound they had learned by listening to tapes of the Hindenburg airship disaster from the previous year.

This is how the 23-year-old genius Orson Welles learned that journalism can be faked, and that people will react to something that sounds like journalism but isn't.

Some of you may have guessed where I'm going with this anecdote. Yes, we'll talking about Fox News. But not solely Fox News. Rather, I'd like to discuss a broader array of talk shows and web sites that have taken on the trappings of journalism but, when studied closely, are not journalism at all.

Superficial examination might place the modern talk show host within a great tradition of opinion journalists -- that of Lippmann, Reston, Murrow, Severeid and others whose are still held in high regard. They were, foremost, journalists, not entertainers or marketers. Their opinions were rigorously grounded in fact. It was the truthfulness of these commentators -- their sheer intellectual honesty -- that causes their names to endure.

Today, the credibility painstakingly earned by past journalists lends an unearned legitimacy to the new generation of talk show hosts. Cloaked deceptively in the mantle of journalism, today's opinion-brokers are playing a nasty Halloween prank on the public, and indeed on journalism itself.

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Let's depart from the generalizations now to hear some eyewitness testimony -- my own.

Last fall, my newspaper did something rash. Alone among the news media that covered the California recall election, the *Los Angeles Times* decided to investigate the character of a candidate for governor named Arnold Schwarzenegger. That caused consternation among the talk shows.

The recall campaign lasted only two months, so we had to hurry in determining whether, as rumored, Schwarzenegger had a habit of mistreating women. It turned out that he did. By the time we nailed the story down, the campaign was almost over, and we had a very tough decision to make: whether to publish the findings a mere five days before the election.

We decided to do it, figuring that choice was better than having to explain lamely to our readers after Election Day why we had withheld the story. We braced for an avalanche of criticism, and we got it.

What we didn't expect was criticism for things that had never occurred.

Long before we published the story, rumors circulated that we were working on it, and the effort to discredit the newspaper began. On Fox News, the Bill O'Reilly program embarked on a campaign to convince its audience that the *Los Angeles Times* was an unethical outfit that attacked only Republicans and gave Democrats a free ride. As evidence, O'Reilly said that the paper had overlooked Bill Clinton's misbehavior in Arkansas. Where, he asked, was the *L.A. Times* on the so-called Troopergate story? Why hadn't it sent reporters to Arkansas? How could it justify an investigation of Schwarzenegger's misbehavior with women and not Clinton's?

I wasn't employed in Los Angeles at the time of Troopergate, but I do have a computer, so, unlike Fox News, I was able to learn that the *Los Angeles Times* actually was in Arkansas. It sent its best reporters there, and it sent them in force. At one point, it had nine reporters in Little Rock. And when two of them wrote the first Troopergate story to appear in any newspaper, they made the *L.A. Times* the leader on that subject. Not a leader, but the leader. Their story would be cited frequently by as other newspapers tried to catch up.

The bogus Troopergate accusation on Fox was only the beginning.

The worst of it originated with a freelance columnist in Los Angeles, who claimed to have the inside story on unethical behavior at the *Times*. Specifically, she wrote, the paper had completed its Schwarzenegger story long before election day but maliciously held it for two weeks in order to wreak maximum damage.

Now if this were true, I wouldn't be here at the University of Oregon delivering a lecture on ethics. The reporters and editors involved in the story would have given me the same treatment Jayson Blair's editors got in New York. In all likelihood I would no longer be employed.

But it wasn't true. The idea that the newspaper held the story for two weeks was a fabrication. Nothing resembling it ever occurred.

It is instructive to trace the path of this falsehood. Newspapers have always been magnets for crackpots. Hardly a day goes by that we don't get a report of a UFO visit, or a complaint from someone whose head has been rewired by the CIA, or a tortured theory as to why the newspaper did or didn't publish something. I tend to shrug such things off, figuring that nobody would believe them anyway and that it's unseemly for a large newspaper to quarrel with a reader.

But we live in changed times. Never has falsehood in America had such a large megaphone. Instead of being ignored, the author of the column was booked for repeated appearances on O'Reilly, on CNBC, and even on the generally trustworthy CNN. The accusation was echoed throughout the talk-show world. This is how the tale of the two-week delay - as false as any words ever penned by Jayson Blair - earned the columnist not infamy but fame. Millions of Americans heard it and no doubt believed it. And why not? It sounded just like journalism.

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Let us turn now to a mundane subject: corrections. At the outset, I should state that there are corrections, and then there are corrections.

Recently, my newspaper, in an article about a rapper named Lil' Kim, characterized the MAC-11 as a machine gun. It is actually a submachine gun. This might not mean much here in Eugene, but it's meaningful to music lovers in Los Angeles, so we published a correction. It was an easy correction to make - factual, straightforward and not particularly humiliating to the paper.

Here's an example of a more difficult kind of correction:

In 1979, I became editor of the *Lexington Herald* in Kentucky, and I soon became aware of skeletons in the newspaper's closet. As I got to know the staff, we used to joke that someday, along with the routine corrections on page two, we should run the following item:

A CLARIFICATION: It has come to the editor's attention that the Herald neglected to cover the Civil Rights movement. We regret the omission.

We never published that one, though we probably should have made amends in some fashion, for corrections large and small are essential to our credibility.

Like a factory on a river, daily journalism is an industry that produces pollution. Our pollution comes in the form of errors. America's river of public discourse - if I may extend this figure of speech - is polluted by our mistakes. A good newspaper cleans up after itself.

Every fact a newspaper publishes goes into a database. So do the errors. A good newspaper corrects those errors and appends the corrections to the original stories, so that the errors are not repeated. Thus we keep the river clean.

Last year at the *Los Angeles Times*, we published 2,759 corrections. Some of you may be shocked that a newspaper could make so many mistakes. Others may be impressed that the paper is so assiduous in correcting itself.

It has now been six months since Fox and the other talk shows told their audiences that the *Los Angeles Times* did not cover the Troopergate scandal. It has been six months since they accused the newspaper of a journalistic felony by timing its story about Arnold

Schwarzenegger. These are simple factual matters, easily provable. Nevertheless I'm getting the feeling that the corrections are not forthcoming.

As editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, I'm not happy about it, but at least I know the truth. The deeper offense is against those who don't -- the listeners who credit the "facts" they hear on Fox and the talk shows.

In the larger scheme, these two falsehoods represent two relatively minor discharges of pollution into America's river of public discourse. I suspect there are many others, and on much more consequential subjects -- the war in Iraq, for example.

You may be familiar with a study published last October on public misconceptions about the war in Iraq.* One of those misconceptions was that Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction had been found.

Another was that links had been proven between Iraq and Al Qaeda.

A third was that world opinion favored the idea of the U.S. invading Iraq.

Among people who primarily watched Fox News, 80 percent believed one or more of those myths. That's 25 percentage points higher than the figure for viewers of CNN -- and 57 percentage points higher than that for people who got their news from public broadcasting.

How could Fox have left its audience so deeply in the dark? I'm inspired to squeeze one last bit of mileage out of our river metaphor: If Fox News were a factory situated, say, in Minneapolis, it would be trailing a plume of rotting fish all the way to New Orleans.

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If pseudo-journalism is not journalism, what is it? Where did it come from? Will it last? Some view the difference between the talk shows and traditional journalism in political terms, as a simple quarrel between left and right, between liberal and conservative. Those differences exist, but they're not of great consequence.

What we're seeing is a difference between journalism and pseudo-journalism, between journalism and propaganda. The former seeks earnestly to serve the public. The latter seeks to manipulate it.

The propaganda technique that has invaded journalism is of a particular breed. It springs not from journalistic roots but from modern politics -- specifically, that woeful subset known as attack politics.

In attack politics, the idea is to "define" one's rival in the eyes of the public. This means repeating derogatory information so often that the rival's reputation is ruined. Sometimes the information is true; sometimes it is misleading; sometimes it is simply false. A citizen who enters politics these days must face the prospect of being "defined" by smear artists equipped with computers, polls and attack ads.

It is the netherworld of attack politics that gave us Roger Ailes, the architect of Fox News. Having spent much of his career smearing politicians, he now refers to himself as a journalist, but his bag of tricks remains the same.

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It is consoling to note that demagogues on the airwaves have come and gone ever since commercial broadcasting began. Such figures as Father Coughlin and Senator McCarthy have made their sordid appeals to the angry and the gullible and have been duly swept into the dustbin. Over time, I believe, the public will become increasingly aware of the discrepancy between what they're told by pseudo-journalists and what turns out to be the truth. They may even grow weary of the talk show persona -- the schoolyard bully we all know so well.

Recently our newspaper had the good fortune of winning five Pulitzer Prizes. Between us, I'm not sure we're worthy of all that, but we won't turn them down. I wonder how the news of the awards struck the talk-show fans who know the *Los Angeles Times* only for its ethical outrages.

Surely they must have been scratching their heads over that one.

But they probably they didn't worry about it long. My guess is that they sat back on their sofas and consoled themselves with more soothing thoughts, such as the way President Bush saved America from catastrophe by seizing those weapons of mass destruction in Iraq while the whole world cheered.

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Let us conclude by returning to the legacy of Robert Ruhl.

Surely Mr. Ruhl would be vexed by what journalism has become since his departure. He would feel pained, I suspect, by the scandals in the traditional media. Yet I hope he would also take heart, as I do, from the spontaneous revulsion expressed in the newsrooms where they occurred.

He would be honored that his years in journalism at the *Medford Mail Tribune* are still being invoked on occasions such as this.

He would be pleased, I think, to see this crowd of young people headed forth into the world, equipped with good educations and high ideals.

And he would have hopes for you. He would hope – I feel certain – that you'll take up his calling, the calling of journalism, and find it deeply rewarding. And he would hope, I believe, that you will choose the path of real journalism, not pseudo-journalism, and that you will forever regard the reader – or the listener, or the viewer – as a worthy sovereign who must always be served in good faith.

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* Study referred to in text: "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," published Oct. 2, 2003 by the Program on International Policy Attitudes; Knowledge Networks; the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland; and the Center on Policy Attitudes.