

RICHARD REEVES

WHAT THE PEOPLE KNOW

FREEDOM

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A N D T H E

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P R E S S

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What the People Know

FREEDOM AND THE PRESS

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RICHARD REEVES

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

1998

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reeves, Richard.

What the people know: freedom and the press /
Richard Reeves.

p. cm.

— (The Joanna Jackson Goldman memorial lecture
on American civilization and government)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-61622-7 (alk. paper)

1. Reporters and reporting. 2. Journalism—Data processing.

I. Title. II. Series.

PN4781.R375 1998

070.1'72—dc21 98-22572

Designed by Gwen Nefsky Frankfeldt

*This book is for Dick Harpster, Danny Blum,
Abe Rosenthal and Artie Gelb, Clay Felker,
Alice Mayhew, and Mr. Shawn,
the distinguished faculty
of my journalism
school.*



What the People Know

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Contents

Introduction	1
1 Covering the Naked Emperor	7
2 Technology Happens	29
3 If You Can't Beat 'Em, Buy 'Em	47
4 "The Tribe"	67
5 "Give Them What They Want!"	87
6 News as Entertainment	101
7 What's the Story?	113
Notes	133
Acknowledgments	141
Index	143

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Introduction

In the late 1960s, when John Lindsay was the mayor of New York, I was the City Hall bureau chief of the *New York Times*. One day, like most days, we were knocking His Honor around at a press conference, taking apart his numbers and just about everything else he had said in his efforts to defend one policy or another. “What do you think he’s thinking when this is going on?” I asked another *Times*man, Maurice C. Carroll to his readers, “Mickey” to his friends. “What he always thinks,” said Mickey. “If you guys are so goddamn smart, how come you’re not stockbrokers?”

Mickey, it happened, had gotten me to New York. He lived in New Jersey and had seen a couple of stories of mine in the *Newark Evening News*. He was with the *New York Herald Tribune* in those days, when *Trib* writers like Tom Wolfe and Jimmy Breslin were heroes to young reporters like me. One night at a party, he’d come up to me and said, “How would you like to come to the *Trib*?” I’d answered that I would swim the Hudson every morning and work for free.

I was scared, of course, and with good reason. Only two

. What the People Know

years before that, I had been working for the *Phillipsburg Free Press*, a weekly paper I had started with another guy in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, where I was an engineer for a company called Ingersoll-Rand. I'd gone from the *Free Press* to the *Newark Evening News*, the state's biggest paper, because I'd realized that I hated being the boss. I just wanted to be a reporter.

I had stumbled upon an important fact: you become a reporter by saying you're a reporter. No qualifications. No license. Almost no training. "I became a newspaperman . . . I couldn't find honest employment"—that, famously, from Mark Twain. The employment I found at the end of 1963 was sitting up all night listening to the police radios of a couple of dozen towns in North Jersey. Sixty dollars a week. Thirty dollars in expenses if you used your own car. Ten dollars for each photo they used, fifteen if it was used on page one.

The *News* loved animal pictures. Dogs, lost and found. Kids and bunnies. Pet raccoons. Anything like that was usually fifteen dollars in the bank. One night, I hear a report from Succasunna—that's a town. An old lady's cat is up a tree. I'm on the phone to the cops before you can say "static."

"Hey, Sarge! Dick Reeves. *Newark News*. What are you going to do about the cat?"

"Nothing!" he says.

"What?" said I.

"Kid," he says. "You ever look up when you walk?"

"Yeah."

"Ever see any cat skeletons hanging from trees?"

Take that, Internet! Those were the days, my friend. We thought they'd never end. But they did. Talking about them

is Old Fartism, to borrow the phrase of Jon Katz, a newspaperman who leaped to the “new media” and then wrote this: “Unable to embrace change or face the future, they have opted instead to romanticize the past.”¹

The future began, I guess, with television and suburbs, along with better roads and shopping centers, creating new American lifestyles. Those changes killed a lot of newspapers, particularly “evening” papers. But, if truth be told, for more than thirty years television news was part of the good old days, at least in the news business, because the people running TV news had been trained in print. More often than not, the network news was paper news decorated with moving pictures and talking heads. Soon reporters covering City Hall were paid more and dressed better, because we got on the screen ourselves now and then.

But that’s ending, too. Pictures meant more than words to the next generation of television makers and their audience. The new guys parodied their elders. Their work looked like news, but after a while you realized it was actually a new mix of entertainment elements—celebrities, blood, fire, sports, sex, mixed with stories to make you feel good about yourself and bad about your government. The American press is tougher on government than on business for obvious reasons that should be regularly repeated: corporations own newspapers and television stations, government does not; corporations sue newspapers and television stations, government does not. And, or so, reporters know a lot more about government than they do about business.

We made more money and some of us became famous, but the changes of the late twentieth century were not kind to

. What the People Know

the carriers of the old torches of journalism. Our business, our craft, is in a crisis of change and redefinition. Was it only twenty years ago that for most Americans “the Press” meant network television news and their local newspaper? Now there are new words—“media,” “communications”—floating in a confusion of realms: local and national newspapers; the tabloid titillators of both press and television; local television news linked by satellite to global sources; talk shows and more talk shows; web sites; prime-time news as entertainment; even things called “infomercials.”

The dictionary, as always, is revealing. Webster’s definition of “journalism” begins: “The occupation of reporting, writing, editing.” (Webster’s unabridged 1996 edition contains something like a personal attack on strivers like me. Its sample sentence for the word is: “He calls himself a historian, but his books are mere journalism.”)

The definition of “communication” begins: “The act or process of communicating; the fact of being communicated.”

I prefer A. J. Liebling’s definition. The great *New Yorker* critic wrote:

Communication means simply getting any idea across and has no intrinsic relation to the truth. It is neutral. It can be a peddler’s tool or the weapon of a political knave, or the medium of a new religion.

Q: What do you do for a living?

A: I am a communicator.

Q: What do you communicate? Scarlet fever? Apprehension?²

In a value-added world, journalists are still out there selling “values”—our own, of course. They are almost as simple

as in this description by sociologist Herbert Gans: “The two that matter most in the newsroom are getting the story and getting it better and faster than their prime competitors—both among their colleagues and at rival news media. Personal political beliefs are left at home.”³

All of this sounds more tribal than professional, and it is. When I use the words “press” and “reporters,” I am describing my tribe, the nomads who hunt for truth, or at least facts, and gather branches and twigs to create some firelight.

Who needs this? A couple of years ago J. Randolph Murray, editor of the *Anniston Star* in Alabama, asked the question of the day at one of the many conferences journalists schedule to remind one another that they are alive, if not growing much anymore:

Editors have been given the authority to make sense out of all this information by publishers, who can do that because they own the means to manufacture the product that distributes the information. When customers can take ownership of this information by sitting down at a keyboard, will they give the same authority to editors? And is there any evidence out there to indicate that the public will give or accept the authority editors now have? Why should they? Is it just a conceit of editors that we will do this because we have done it in the past?⁴

Eli Noam, a professor of economics at Columbia University, has a sensible answer to those questions. He has written on the future of book publishing and the romantic attachment of men and women to books, using an analogy that seems to apply to the old press as well: “Consider ‘bread,’ another word loaded with positive connotation. Consump-

. What the People Know

tion of bread has declined, and its centrality as a food item is nowhere near what it used to be.”⁵

Well, we journalists have always been a crusty bunch. We certainly were when I made it to John Lindsay’s City Hall. The culture gap between us and them showed at Christmas. The mayor, a man of patrician manner and Yale degrees, followed the tradition of giving each reporter a bottle. But instead of being filled with the usual Scotch whiskey, these bottles contained red wine, a beverage many regulars in the press room thought was served only in church. Today the papers have wine critics, and reporters are not quite sure where they fit in anymore.

Covering the Naked Emperor

Journalism has become too important to be left to journalists. We went too far, and technology has come too far, and now we are in trouble, much of it of our own making. “We,” the press, are a likable bunch, working for newspapers and magazines, radio and television, and now “new media.” We hate that last word. We are central to a critical paradox of our times. “The media” grow and multiply in leaps of bounding technologies, while journalism becomes more essential to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But at the same time, journalism is becoming a smaller and smaller part of something bigger and bigger: the delivery of all kinds of information and entertainment to paying customers.

Individual reporters, editors, and correspondents have more access and more influence, but to the movers and shakers of spreading information technologies, old and new, one manipulable digital picture may be worth a thousand ladies and gentlemen of the press.

And, strictly as business, a thousand reporters may be a pain in the assets. To our patrons, the lords of profit centers

. What the People Know

and purveyors of commingled fact, fact-based fiction, and semi-nonfiction, we may dwell someplace within a shrinking triangle of adolescence, obsolescence, and irrelevance. We, the press, may be going the way of blacksmiths. Same job: pounding hot stuff into useful but old-fashioned forms, like horseshoes. Or we could end up as bank tellers pushed aside for automatic teller machines—ATM journalism with slots to deposit or withdraw news.

Those are sad endings for men and women who see their labor as God's work. The cynicism that others see in us, we see as prolonged innocence (or adolescence) and idealism. It's fun being the one shouting that the emperor has no clothes. That is also the shout of real power, the old Fourth Estate role noted in London in 1828 by Lord Macaulay: "The gallery in which the reporters sit has become a fourth estate of the realm."¹ He put the quill-pen boys right up there with king, clergy, and Commons. It was a nice historical promotion. In revolutionary France, thirty years before, the Fourth Estate had been the mob shouting outside the palace in the filth of the streets.

In political terms, we did become the institutionalized mob. Sensationalism begins with the guy who shouts, "Look! Look at the emperor!" The bareness of public leaders was just one more fact we believed the public had a right to know. We are legends in our own minds, seekers of daily truth, watching the emperor and all others cloaked with power—excepting only ourselves from scalding scrutiny. Our power is exercised in the name and benefit of citizens busy with their own affairs—or so we like to think. I am ~~partial~~ partial to the self-description used by the *Express*, the weekly paper in the little Long Island town where my family has lived off-and-on

. Covering the Naked Emperor

for twenty years: "Reporting on Sag Harbor's births, deaths, politics and scandals, every week for the past 139 years."

But horseshoes and headlines may not make it against digital data. One of the country's most important newspapermen, Ron Martin, editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, says the days when reporters went out and gathered stories and "wrote them up" are gone forever. Maybe he's right. What are we selling? What value are we adding? The official answer, quoted here from William Keller, managing editor of the *New York Times*, is: "We apply judgment to information."² Nice. But we may be talking to ourselves here. Maybe journalism is no more than the mission or the calling or a lifestyle celebrated by romantics like me. Perhaps it is just another endangered job description—the shared experience of a tribe who created their own traditions and values, and had a hell of a good time doing it. Maybe it's just habits and tricks passed from hand to hand, or mouth to mouth.

The questions are painful for all of us who believe in what we do. There seems to be a real chance that what we have learned and practiced could get lost in the chase and race of this end-of-the-century round of spectacular and profitable technological shuffling.

Like the automobiles and mass production that doomed smithing at the end of the nineteenth century, the exploding new technologies of our times should prove to be a boon to humankind. But the initial exploitation of the technology has been creating new words and meanings, many hidden in dehumanizing little digits and definitions. "Media," above all, with its many refinements and manifestations; and then "the product," "data," "content," "platform," "niche," "brand," "server," "market research," "profit center."

. What the People Know

We prefer older words and legends. Though it was published before my time, I have always been charmed by a defining passage written in 1932 by Stanley Walker, the city editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*:

What makes a good newspaperman? The answer is easy. He knows everything. He is aware not only of what goes on in the world today, but his brain is a repository of the accumulated wisdom of the ages . . . He is not only handsome, but he has the physical strength which enables him to perform great feats of energy. He can go for nights on end without sleep. He dresses well and talks with charm. Men admire him; women adore him; tycoons and statesmen are willing to share their secrets with him . . . He hates lies and meanness and sham, but keeps his temper. He is loyal to his paper and to what he looks upon as his profession; whether it is a profession, or merely a craft, he resents efforts to debase it. When he dies, a lot of people are sorry, and some of them remember him for several days.³

Thus the troops define themselves. But the officers of the commanding new technologies and distant corporate generals saw this all quite differently. With the wind at their backs as economics triumphed over politics in American life during the 1980s and 1990s, journalism was invaded and occupied; some would say rationalized or put in its place. At the same time, professors of journalism and other academics were taking our name and whatever heritage we had and turning schools of journalism into schools of “communications”—a *tabula rasa* that meant whatever served their purposes. Inside newsrooms, our old forts, we underrated the attacks and overrated ourselves. We were at our self-

..... Covering the Naked Emperor

congratulatory worst in the heady hearing rooms and dining rooms of Washington, where the rough charm of the old tribe was beginning to transform itself into the mumbling chants of a priesthood. Then we overreached, misjudging the mission and our own capabilities.

The misjudgments did not begin with the temporary victory of journalists over politicians in the political battle called Watergate, but that struggle was probably the signal event in the rise of self-destructive journalistic hubris in the 1970s and beyond. There was a power vacuum at the top in the United States of the 1960s and 1970s—a slide accelerated by a bad war and good new technologies and by the decadence of shared power worship in the capital city. The slippery slope of capital power was lubricated by wandering streams of perceived public opinion, gauged almost hourly by new polls, by surveys and focus groups. Looking at the numbers, most any numbers, politicians and elected officials were less and less inclined to risk using the power given them by the voters of the republic. Politicians understood that their business, getting elected, was not about making friends but about avoiding organized enemies. If polls showed they were going to get into trouble by being decisive, they decided not to decide.

War, race, and the unclothing of Richard Nixon checked political leadership. An unpopular war in Vietnam, a reluctance to get involved in racial disputes like the integration of public schools, and then the disgrace of the thirty-seventh president drew the courts and the press into using or trying to use power they had never had before. Judges took over school districts and schoolbusing, prisons and hospitals. Re-