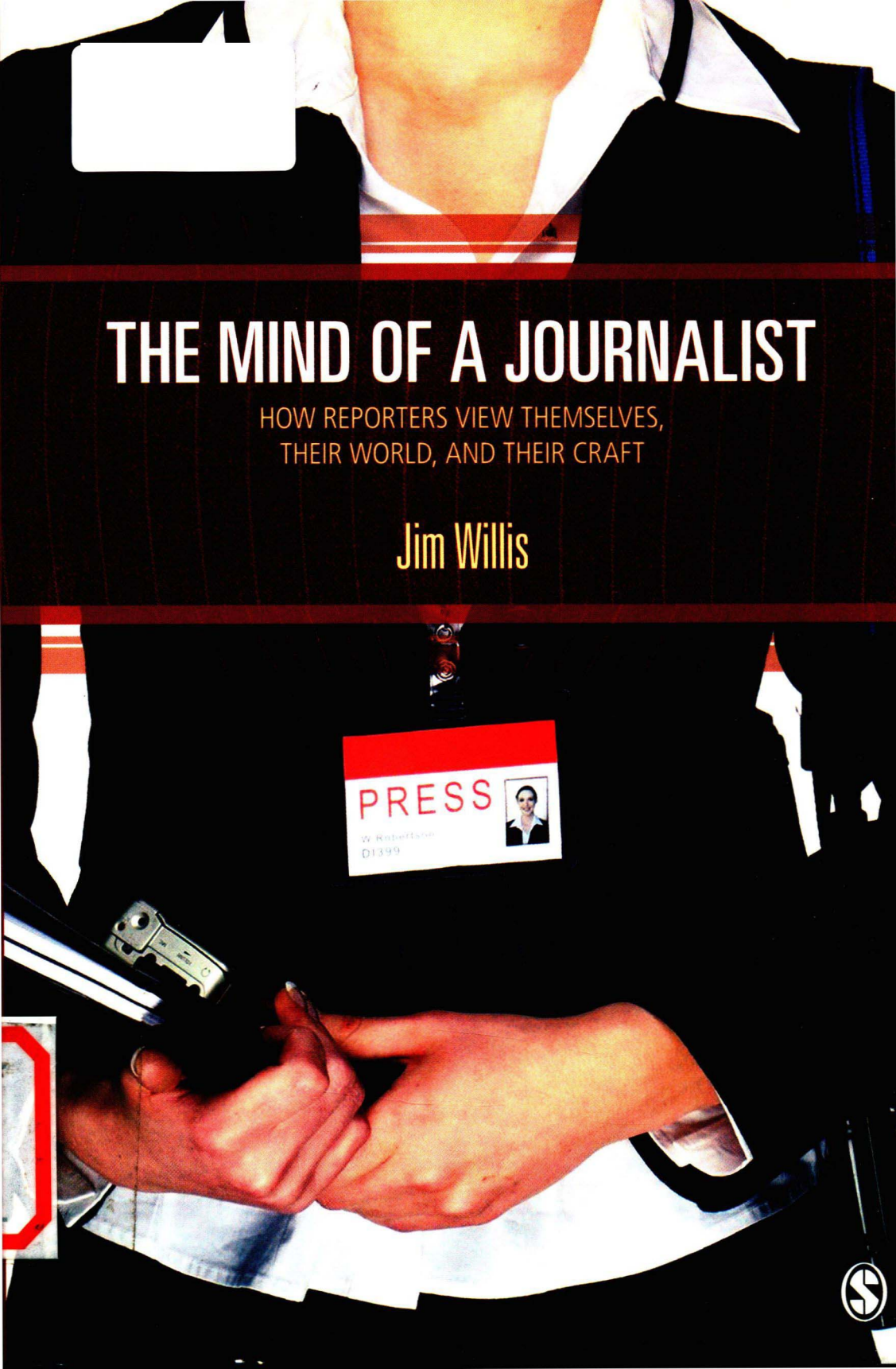




THE MIND OF A JOURNALIST

HOW REPORTERS VIEW THEMSELVES,
THEIR WORLD, AND THEIR CRAFT

Jim Willis

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THE MIND OF A JOURNALIST

Written by veteran journalist and noted professor Jim Willis, with an epilogue by Marilyn Thomsen, this book introduces journalistic decision making into the classroom, alongside discussion of reporting and writing techniques. Students peer inside the minds of a cross-section of print, broadcast, and online journalists by way of exclusive interviews and additional research that provide a deep, broad glimpse into how journalists perceive themselves, their world, and their craft. Ultimately, this provocative text provides insights into how journalists think and why they do what they do.

FEATURES AND BENEFITS

- *Original interviews with contemporary journalists at varying career stages.* Offers a rarely seen, inside look at the world of journalists from media outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe*, CNN, the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal*, KUSA Television in Denver, and *The Oklahoman*.
- *Anecdotes involving how journalists work.* Translates abstract thinking into the reality of everyday journalism.
- *Interviews with several war reporters.* Portrays the impact of covering war on those reporting from the field.
- *An example of how different journalists approach traumatic stories such as 9/11, the Oklahoma City bombing, and Hurricane Katrina.* Illuminates different orientations to conveying truth and dealing with ethical dilemmas involved in such disaster coverage.

SEASONED JOURNALISTS EXAMINE THE FOLLOWING AREAS

- Factors that lure young people into journalism as a career
- The stance journalists take toward the world they are assigned to cover
- Ethical dilemmas
- How close to get to a story or how far to distance oneself from it
- The socialization of journalists and the role their own personal ideologies may play in their work as reporters and editors
- How one's faith might influence the coverage of a story
- The mixing of news and entertainment

The Mind of a Journalist is an appropriate and innovative supplement for a variety of media studies courses, including Introduction to Journalism, News Writing and Reporting, Advanced Reporting, Journalism and Society, and Ethics, among many others.



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Jim Willis

Azusa Pacific University



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

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THE MIND OF A JOURNALIST

*To the publisher, editors, and staff of The Oklahoman, a vital part
of the Sooner State's history.*

Foreword

The Thinking Journalist

Contrary to what many critics of the news media believe, journalists do a lot of thinking about what they do, whether they do it right, how they might do it better the next time around, and what can and cannot be changed about the problems of the media organizations for which they work. In a nutshell, their responses to these and other questions form the focus of this book.

Many journalism books provide good instruction in the art and craft of reporting and writing news and feature stories. There are other books that plumb the ethical dilemmas in which journalists often find themselves. Even more books exist that analyze the role of the news media in our world and the impact of journalism on American society. There are also some fine biographies of individual, high-profile journalists, texts that trace their personal and professional histories. What *The Mind of a Journalist* does is to examine how a cross section of print, broadcast, and online journalists perceive themselves, their world, and their craft. And, in large measure, it lets thirteen of these talented journalists put these perceptions into their own words. The reflections and observations of this nucleus of journalists are joined in the text by many additional observations made by many other journalists over the years. So this text is a combination of both primary and secondary research.

Among the issues the journalists examine are the lure of journalism, the stance journalists take toward the world they are assigned to cover, the ethical challenges journalists face, how close to get to a story or how far to distance themselves from it, journalists and politics, and even journalists and religion. The last issue is interesting because, although I wanted to cover this topic for this book, I wasn't sure there would be enough interest among journalists in discussing it. I discovered just the opposite: that, although many mainstream media are reluctant to cover religion, journalists think about

matters of faith a lot. As a result, the chapter “The Journalist and Faith” became the longest chapter by far in this book.

The observations that the journalists make come from their many years of experience in the news business. Some of these comments are philosophical, but many are anecdotal. Although the remarks may occasionally present ideas often heard about journalism, they are not stereotypes. Veteran journalists know their field better than anyone else because they live and breathe it and often treat it as more of a mission than a job.

I chose a dozen current and former American journalists whom I knew, or knew of, to interview. I asked them about their thoughts regarding the status of journalism and the things about the business they like and dislike. A thirteenth journalist, whom I met later and who had been a key member of the Pulitzer Prize-winning team covering Hurricane Katrina for *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, was added in January of 2008. These are journalists I respect, and they have received the accolades of their peers in the news business. Each responded to a range of questions addressing issues such as their motivation to enter the profession; their stance in the debate about attached vs. detached reporting; their thoughts on journalists and politics, journalists and religion, and the ethical dilemmas in the business; their frustrations as well as gratifications; and so on. These journalists and their observations serve as the foundation for this book, and each of the journalists is profiled in Appendix 2. To their thoughts, I have added observations from other journalists gleaned from a variety of sources; all reflections are arranged thematically in chapters 1–8. In the afterword, I have added my own observations on some of these issues—observations accumulated from my own years as a journalist, which were capped by my experience of covering one of America’s great tragedies, the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

I am indebted to Dr. Marilyn Thomsen, whose work at the Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California, culminated in the interviews of several front-line journalists who covered the war in Iraq. Although these journalists are separate from the thirteen whose comments are spread through chapters 1–8, I chose to include Thomsen’s report on these interviews because it adds an important, contemporary element to how journalists approach their work and the effects that work has on them, both professionally and personally. The subject of how traumatic stories affect journalists who do the reporting is a growing issue, and no story is more traumatic than war.

The book winds up with two appendices, the first of which is a personal look by journalist Michael Perlstein at the coverage of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The second appendix is a series of personality profiles on the panel of thirteen journalists selected to form the backbone of this book.

I hope that, taken together, all these observations will provide current and future journalists with added insight into the various perspectives that

reporters and editors take into this very vital business of covering the day's news in this American democracy.

The thirteen journalists interviewed for this book represent large and small news operations in the print, broadcast, and online media worlds. The group is comprised of both male and female journalists. It includes journalists who have reported from around the world and some who are committed to community journalism. There are Pulitzer Prize winners in the group, managing editors, a foreign correspondent, television news anchors, beat reporters, a past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and a future president of the Associated Press Managing Editors organization. Some are still in the business, decades after beginning; some have left and moved on to other careers. It is interesting, however, that those who have left have moved on to universities, where they teach journalism. Such is my own case, and it speaks to the desire of these journalists to take time to reflect on journalism, discover ways it can be done better, and then pass that knowledge on to students who are majoring in the field.

In the order in which they were interviewed, here are the journalists who form the foundational panel for this study, the news organizations for which they work or worked, and what they do now if they have moved on:

Barry Bearak, Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign correspondent for *The New York Times* and a former national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*.

Jim Redmond, longtime news anchor and reporter for KUSA-TV in Denver and professor of journalism at the University of Memphis, where he chaired the Department of Journalism until the summer of 2008.

Gretchen Dworznik, former reporter for WNWO-TV in Toledo and now an assistant professor of communication arts at Ashland University.

Joe Hight, managing editor for features for *The Oklahoman* and former two-term president of the Dart Center for Trauma and Journalism.

Arlene Notoro Morgan, veteran reporter and assistant managing editor for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, who is now associate dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City.

Otis Sanford, managing editor of *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis and on the leadership team of the Associated Press Managing Editors group, over which he will preside in 2011. Sanford is also the first African American managing editor of *The Commercial Appeal*.

David Waters, producer of the On Faith Web site project of *The Washington Post* and its sister publication *Newsweek* and a veteran religion editor and award-winning religion writer for *The Commercial Appeal*.

Penny Owen, veteran police and feature reporter for *The Oklahoman*, who helped lead that newspaper's award-winning coverage of the bombing of the

Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995 and who stayed on that story for some six years afterwards. She was also an Associated Press reporter in Dallas.

Jim Robertson, managing editor of the *Columbia Daily Tribune* in Columbia, Missouri, long recognized as one of the best community dailies in America.

Peter Bhatia, executive editor of the Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper *The Oregonian*, in Portland. Bhatia is a former managing editor of the *Sacramento Bee* and a past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

Terry Mattingly, syndicated religion columnist for the Scripps Howard News Service, editor of the GetReligion.org Web site, and director of the Washington Journalism Center, a training program for college journalism majors sponsored by the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities.

Michael Walker, former reporter for both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, who now is author of the best-selling book *Laurel Canyon: The Inside History of Rock and Roll's Legendary Neighborhood*.

Michael Perlstein, veteran reporter for *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans who was instrumental in the Pulitzer Prize-winning team coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Perlstein is now visiting professor of journalism at Loyola University in New Orleans.

The observations of these gifted and dedicated journalists are found in two forms within the pages that follow. First, their insights are woven throughout each chapter as they address the focal points found in those chapters. Second, each of the thirteen journalists is profiled in Appendix 2 of the book. When their observations appear in the main chapters, they are not footnoted, although their comments are attributed to them. Their quoted insights all come from the series of interviews I conducted with them either in person, over the phone, or online in the summer of 2007. Michael Perlstein's comments were made in a January 2008 interview, and some of his observations are reproduced with permission from the alumni magazine of his alma mater, Reed College. The full text of the article "Covering Katrina: On Taking It Personally," which he wrote for that magazine in 2006, forms Appendix 1.

My heartfelt thanks go out to each of these journalists, not just for agreeing to contribute to this project but mostly for the talent, wisdom, and dedication they have brought to the profession of journalism over the decades in which they have produced some amazing pieces of American reporting. I would also like to thank the other journalists, from whose wisdom I have borrowed to round out this study of how reporters and editors view themselves, their world, and the craft of journalism. As always, I also want to thank my wonderful wife Anne for her constant love and support and my colleagues at Azusa Pacific University for letting their department chair divert his focus to his publishing ventures yet again.

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Jim Redmond, Former Anchor/Reporter, KUSA-TV, Denver

Arlene Notoro Morgan, Former Assistant Managing Editor, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

Peter Bhatia, Executive Editor, *The Oregonian*

Penny Owen, Features Reporter, *The Oklahoman*

Michael Walker, Author of *Laurel Canyon* and Former Reporter, the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*

Jim Robertson, Managing Editor, *Columbia Daily Tribune*

Gretchen Dworznik, Former Reporter, WNWO-TV, Toledo
Michael Perlstein, *The Times-Picayune*
Terry Mattingly, Religion Columnist, Scripps Howard News Service
Otis Sanford, Editor for Opinions and Editorials and Former Managing Editor,
The Commercial Appeal
Joe Hight, Director of Information and Development, *The Oklahoman*
David Waters, *The Washington Post*

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