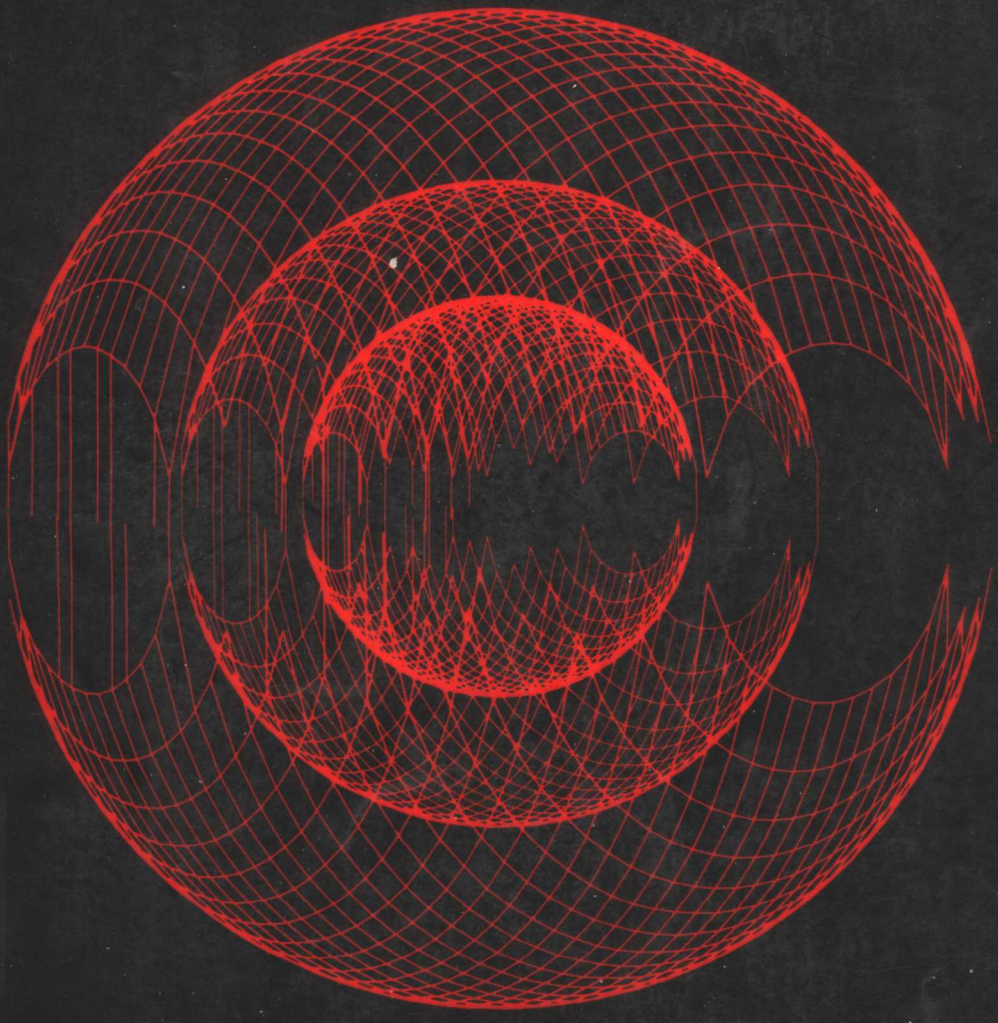
MEDIA ETHICS

In the Newsroom and Beyond

CONRAD C. FINK



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IN THE NEWSROOM AND BEYOND

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For twenty-five years, Conrad C. Fink was a reporter, editor, foreign correspondent, and media executive. After a start in small-town journalism, he moved on to cover crime stories for the Associated Press in Chicago and handle other assignments in New York, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, and many other countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. He was vice president and secretary of AP at headquarters in New York City and also worked in newspaper and broadcast station management. In 1982, he opened a new career at the University of Georgia's Henry W. Grady School of Journalism and Mass Communication, where he has been cited for superior teaching of advanced reporting and newspaper management and strategy. Fink says *Media Ethics* is a book "field-tested for twenty-five years, then classroom-tested. The ethical questions raised in it include many I have encountered personally on assignments from New York City to New Delhi."

FOREWORD

There is a lot of discussion these days about ethical standards and the credibility of the media in the nation's newsrooms.

As a journalist with nearly 40 years of experience as a reporter and editor, I know that newspeople today are better educated and better trained than ever before. The public is better informed—and better served—than it was even a decade ago. The media are more responsible and more responsive to public needs today than ever before.

Yet there is plenty of evidence around that the media of this country are undergoing a credibility crisis. Journalists have declined in public esteem. The public questions the believability of newspapers, magazines, and broadcast news. There is obvious public dissatisfaction with our performance in an increasingly complex society. The public perception is that journalists are often arrogant, irresponsible, unfair, biased, and unethical; that we have no standards.

Still, studies also show that the public believes in a free press; that it believes a free press is essential if American democracy is to realize its potential. People recognize that the media have substantial power; that they have a great deal of freedom under the First Amendment and that they have great responsibilities. It is how we use that power and exercise those responsibilities that rightly concerns them. As it must concern journalists.

Conrad Fink, an experienced newsman and educator, brings these issues into clear focus in this new look at media ethics. This book is an important tool for journalism students to build a strong individual ethical base for their careers. Students must start now, in class, thinking about their values and ethics and learning about the difficult judgments they will have to make as writers, photographers, or editors. It is important that they are ready to meet the ethical challenges that lie ahead. It is as essential to a student's career as improving writing, developing editing skills, sharpening graphics techniques, or learning

about newsroom management. Professional skills are empty without a clear set of ethical values to guide beginning journalists.

But Professor Fink's book is not only an educational tool for embryonic journalists. He reminds those of us already in the profession that we must have high ethical standards; that we have obligations to perform our jobs with intelligence, accuracy, objectivity, and fairness; that we must make clear distinctions between news and opinion. A unique aspect of Professor Fink's book is that he asks us to look not only at our individual ethics but at those of the corporate organizations for which most journalists work today. He explores our need to consider bringing the publishers, general managers, advertising directors, and circulation directors into our ethical discussions. He reminds us how vital it is for us to consider the impact of the bottom line on newsroom ethics. It also is vital to ask to whom the media are accountable when they misstep, violate their own high public trust. If government should not oversee the press, should anyone? How well does the press monitor itself?

Most journalists are opposed to adoption of any ethical codes or standards that apply equally to all. Similarly, most are opposed to any system of outside performance evaluation, such as press councils, that make judgments on an individual journalist's or news organization's ethics. It is extremely important that those who will lead the media in the years ahead examine these concerns and explore accountability issues fully. Are there acceptable alternatives to media self-policing? Are press councils dangerous to a free press?

I am convinced that journalists must set high ethical standards in our newsrooms, adhere to them tenaciously and enforce them fairly. If we fail to embrace high ethical standards, we will lose our integrity. If we do not have integrity, we have no credibility. And, if we have no credibility, we journalists have little to offer the American people.

Media Ethics: In the Newsroom and Beyond touches on these most critical and sensitive issues. It is a timely and welcome addition to our journalism libraries.

John R. Finnegan, Sr.
Sr. Vice President/Editor
St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch
Former chairman, Ethics Committee,
Society of Professional Journalists,
Sigma Delta Chi

PREFACE

For we who teach print or broadcast journalism and mass communication, serious issues of media ethics and social responsibility arise frequently in dialogues with students. Whether we teach stand-alone ethics courses, introduction to mass communication, reporting and writing, management, media and society, or other courses, we confront with our students numerous questions of right and wrong, good and bad, in the conduct of newspaper, magazine, and broadcast journalism.

This book is designed to assist teacher and student in the dialogue—not by presuming to answer those terribly complicated questions (which often defy clear-cut answers) but, rather, by illustrating what is being done in the communications industry today and what others who came before us have done in matters of ethics. The goal is a contemporary framework for discussion and, it is hoped, much introspective thought by aspiring journalists. Of course, our growing concern in the classroom over ethics reflects wider societal discussion of the media and increasingly heated debate among working journalists. So the book also is designed to contribute to current ethical debate in the print and broadcast industries—and to bring into the dialogue other teaching disciplines and members of the reading and viewing public concerned about the crucial role of the media in our society.

In the parlance of ethicists, this book's approach is not one of "metaethics," the study of abstract principles, but, rather, one of "normative ethics," a discussion of specific, present-day media behavior in search of what is correct and what isn't. Attempting to even point at possible answers to ethical problems creates enormous risks, of course. Who, after all, truly knows what is "right" or "wrong" about how newspapers and television operate? This book draws

heavily on what individual journalists do when *they* meet ethical challenges. Teachers will note this is done throughout the numerous case studies, quotations (labeled "Viewpoint") from working journalists, and anecdotal illustrations of what happens when ethical ideal meets media world reality.

Case studies are, first, real-life, not fictional. Each is selected carefully to shed light on major ethical questions confronting the media today. Second, case studies present briefly the facts working journalists actually faced in each situation and then ask questions to stir classroom discussion and present how journalists actually handled each situation. Obviously, not even media "pros" always solve ethical problems satisfactorily, particularly under the deadline pressures and space and time limitations of daily journalism. So this text is written for teachers to use in challenging students to create their own responses to some of the pressing ethical questions of our time.

Importantly, this book is structured to assist teachers in illustrating that the ethical strains and doubts confronting journalists don't always begin and end in the newsroom, that they in fact arise during three stages of a career in the newsroom and beyond—as a beginning reporter-writer, then, as a representative of a media institution—an editor, news director, or manager—and, finally, as a representative of the media as a whole in society.

Teachers will note discussions of newsroom ethics are cast against a wider corporate backdrop. Too often (in both industry and academia), we ignore the impact of profit, "image," and other corporate concerns on the ethical conduct and reporting techniques of the man and woman with notebook and pencil or camera and mike in hand. But it is useless for teacher and student to belabor the question of, say, an individual reporter's fairness in covering a story unless we also examine whether that reporter has been given sufficient corporate support and resources to be fair—money and time to chase all sides of the story, the necessary newsprint or airtime to report a balanced account.

Nevertheless, corporations don't solve ethical problems, individuals do—reporters, editors, news directors, publishers, network executives. So, although we will examine the wider corporate or societal context, *individual responsibility in ethical matters is a fundamental teaching theme of this book.*

The book breaks down into three parts:

Part One: Ethics in the Pursuit of News: There is no precise rule book on conduct for journalists, no widely held single code of ethics, so Chapter 1 sketches a philosophical framework for a teacher's initial discussion of professional conscience in the newsroom. We look quickly at a 2,500-year-old mainstream of ethical debate leading into an examination, in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, of how each journalist inevitably meets, early in a news career, serious ethical issues. A teaching theme is that each journalist must build a *personal* approach to ethics within the context of his or her relationship with a supervising editor or news director and the reading or viewing public.

Part Two: Ethics in Pursuit of Profit: Newspapers and television, their credibility questioned, are challenged severely by other media—and public indifference—in the drive for increased advertising and circulation revenues. Managers must examine *corporate* attitudes toward ethics. Whether written or simply laid down by example, ethical codes increasingly guide advertising departments and business offices, as well as newsrooms. Throughout Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8, teachers will find many examples of how newsroom ethics are affected by what happens in the "countinghouse." A basic teaching theme is that profit, not ethics, often motivates corporate management but that journalists can learn to operate ethically and responsibly within profit-driven newspaper or television news operations.

Part Three: The Media in Society: Public perceptions of the media are changing in fundamental ways. There is serious discussion among influential people of whether, in times of peace as well as war, the Fourth Estate can be permitted to barge about in public and private affairs, to operate independently of legal and societal restraints that govern conduct of other major institutions influencing American life. Public relations—and the ethics of that industry—plays an important role in all this. A fundamental teaching theme in Chapters 9, 10, 11, and 12 is whether society will write new rules for the increasingly powerful media.

Each chapter opens with a "window," bringing into focus questions and issues to be discussed. Summaries for each chapter will stimulate teacher-student discussion.

For those teaching stand-alone ethics courses, assigning students front-to-back reading will facilitate orderly progression from basic newsroom ethical concerns onward to corporate social responsibility and the media in society. However, chapters are written as self-contained units which can be assigned students in other courses such as reporting and writing, introduction to mass media, media management and strategy, and so forth.

Extensive endnotes for each chapter will direct students to deeper reading in scholarly works and research journals and to more contemporary writing in print- and broadcast-industry publications. As aids for teachers and students desiring to stay atop current industry discussion of ethics, the author recommends reading each year's ethics report by the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi and periodic reports on ethics in the American Society of Newspaper Editors *Bulletin* and the Associated Press Managing Editors *Redbook*. Important periodicals include *Broadcasting, Washington Journalism Review, Columbia Journalism Review,* The American Newspaper Publishers Association's *presstime, Editor & Publisher, Advertising Age.*

Teachers will note that efforts to make this book a comprehensive teaching and discussion resource include reproducing at the end of this book the Statement of Principles, American Society of Newspaper Editors; Code of Ethics, Society of Professional Journalists/Sigma Delta Chi; Code of Broadcast

Ethics, Radio/Television News Directors Association; Code of Ethics, Associated Press Managing Editors; Conflict of Interest Policy, Dow Jones & Company; The Advertising Code of American Business; Declaration of Principles, Public Relations Society of America; sample letter requesting information under Freedom of Information Act.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Memory is vivid of that day during the Vietnam war when I heard, while reporting in India, that Larry Burrows had "bought it." He was on assignment for *Life* magazine when his helicopter was shot down in flames on a U.S. Army raid along the Cambodian border. Later, another colleague, Dennis Lee Royle of the Associated Press, went down on an RAF copter in the North Sea. I had been deeply impressed by the enormous talent of both men and their willingness to repeatedly risk so much to get the story and get it right. Their deaths—and those of others who ran out of luck while chasing the story—were turning points for me. Since then, I have thought a great deal about those who give their careers—sometimes their lives—to covering the news.

Reading and viewing publics little know, perhaps little care, but many who seek the news, in far-off jungle or closer to home in state capitol or city hall, often do so with amazing selflessness, high ideals, and dedication. Not all do, of course. Among us are rampant careerists for whom everything, truth included, must give way before personal gain; for others, journalism simply is a job, devoid of higher motives or ideals, to be performed as quickly and painlessly as possible.

So, a distinction: My inspiration comes from those men and women who try so very hard, who give so very much to get the news and get it right. To those who follow the principled path, I dedicate this book.

For recognizing there was a potential book in all this, my deep thanks to Phillip A. Butcher, editor in chief, Arts and Sciences, College Division, McGraw-Hill Book Company. Barbara L. Raab, a conscientious and discerning editor, was of immense assistance. Dr. Alan Wurtzel, a former university professor now an ABC Television executive and McGraw-Hill consultant, was very helpful and supportive.

My sincere thanks go to those colleagues in academia who reviewed this book in manuscript form: Maurine Beasley, University of Maryland; James L. Hoyt, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Maclyn H. McClary, Humboldt State University and Patrick S. Washburn, Ohio University.

At the University of Georgia's Henry W. Grady School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Dean Tom Russell and Dr. Al Hester have been supportive in my switch from the communications industry to academia. Valuable guidance and support have come from Warren Agee, Scott Cutlip, George Hough, Kent Middleton, and others. Profs. Agee and Cutlip were helpful particularly in giving me guidance on Chapter 11, "Public Relations, the Media, and Society."

As for so many years, in so many places around the world, Sue has been my main support.

Typist Vera Penn has my thanks for splendid assistance on my writing projects.

Finally, in the spirit of openness that I think should characterize any reporter's ethical relationship with readers, I must note that I worked for two companies mentioned in this book. For twenty-one glorious years, I worked in the United States and abroad for the Associated Press, in nearly every job from police reporter to vice president and secretary of the corporation, trying in my own way to add to that organization's principled devotion to the goal of creating the best, most ethical news coverage possible. Then, before turning to academia, I worked three years as executive vice president of Park Communications.

Conrad C. Fink

INTRODUCTION

There is under way in this country a debate over media ethics and credibility that has moved sharply into the public arena. Journalists heatedly convene over whether the public trusts reporters or "likes" the media. Politicians jump into view with strong opinions on newspaper performance and television coverage. Even private citizens choose sides with an intensity customarily reserved for Super Bowl weekends.

Yet, I fear the noisy debate not only loses sight of key issues involving the media, but in fact serves to disguise them. Crucial questions of ethics *do* confront journalists; fundamental changes *are* under way in the relationship of media to society. But the dialogue often misses those questions and changes, and ineffectually wanders astray.

This book is written in the hope it will help focus the debate for young, aspiring journalists, working journalists, and for members of the public concerned with the role of the media in our society. Above all, this book is a call to students of journalism to start, now, their own urgent examination of ethical conduct in American newspapers, magazines, and broadcast news and begin, now, constructing their own personal codes of ethical conduct. Ethical challenges come in many forms, frequently offering no clear-cut distinction between right and wrong. Often, a journalist's only course is a compromise between equally distasteful options. So, I urge students to start deciding now what for them is right and wrong in the practice of journalism and, furthermore, what they personally will do and won't do, in an ethical sense, when they join the ranks of working journalists.

I counsel all due haste. As always, there is the historical, philosophical imperative to improve ethical standards in the media because that is the *right* thing to do. But today, improving standards of professional performance is something the media also *must* do, for the media operate in an increasingly hostile social, legal, and economic environment and, I believe, unless they clean

their own house there is in this republic a real and present danger that other institutions will try to do it for them—very likely in a manner not best suited to preserve the crucial role the free media play in our democracy. I suspect, then, there has arrived—in disguise and perhaps generally unnoticed—a watershed era for the media. As institutions of enormous social, political, and economic power, the media are entering an extremely critical new stage in their evolving relationship with the public and other institutions in our society.

To explain: The spirit and basic position of the media today in the American scheme of things arise from a colonial newspaper culture that, if not particularly high-minded or professional, certainly was free-spirited. From that arose libertarian attitudes that newspapers should function as businesses publishing news and opinion, being specially watchful of government and safeguarding personal liberties—but not feeling particularly constrained by performance standards or a sense of responsibility to any individual or group, including the public. Libertarian journalism assumed the citizenry would find the truth if enough news and opinion were published. However, in the 1930s and 1940s, the media began evolving into a second developmental stage, "social responsibility." Many newspapers resisted the concept, but broadcasters were forced by government regulation into at least a show of public responsibility, and the media as a whole came under increasing public pressure to be something more than self-centered, profit-making concerns. Attitudes arising from that hold the media responsible for practicing sound, professional journalism and exercising press freedom wisely in the public's interest. With the rise of the attitude of social responsibility came wider awareness in the media of ethical codes and emphasis upon principled use of media power.

The media now may be evolving toward a third stage, which I choose to call "ethical-reactive," and I regard it as full of dangers to the media and the democracy they serve—thus, my feeling of urgency. Ethical-reactive journalism is defensive, in large part a reaction to societal criticism of the media that arguably is harsher and more determined than any this country's news media ever have faced. For example, when international controversy erupted in 1986 over the Reagan administration's arms sales to Iran, leading American editors quickly warned reporters to consider how history would view their coverage, to avoid excesses that drew so much public criticism following Watergate in the 1970s. As Reagan/Iran began to unfold, a *New York Times* survey found editor James Squires interrupting a news-planning session with his *Chicago Tribune* staff to say that "when history looks back at this event" he wanted *Tribune* coverage to be "cautious, fair, and honest from the beginning." Squires didn't put up warning flags deep into the story, after the press had been in hot pursuit or found guilty of excesses. He voiced caution *one* day after one of the earliest and biggest news breaks in the entire story—charges that payments from Iran had been diverted to Nicaraguan rebels. Squires, a conscientious, highly regarded editor, was a White House reporter during the Nixon era. He told the *Times* his caution stemmed in part from what he regarded as his own excesses on Watergate. Other editors similarly were cautious up-front on Reagan/Iran. Dan

Rather, managing editor as well as anchor of CBS's *Evening News,* said he learned from his own mistakes in covering Watergate, and now "often" talks with his staff about the tone of their coverage and need for accuracy and fairness. Editor William F. Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* said the press indulged in gloating and self-aggrandizement after Watergate and, "This time we have to avoid all the appearances of being after somebody. What I'm talking about is appearing to like it too much." Ben Bradlee, architect of the *Washington Post's* prize-winning Watergate coverage, said that for a journalist the Iran incident was a "wonderful story" but, "We don't want to appear to be gloating, and anyone who thinks this thing through sees problems (for the media) at the end of it." *New York Times* media reporter Alex Jones noted Bradlee warned his staff to keep a low profile and "avoid such things as television appearances."

Thus, even in the earliest stages of Reagan/Iran, many editors were burdened by memories of public backlash over Watergate coverage. From the first, they looked beyond covering the story to *how the public might react to the way it was covered.*

It all led the *Columbia Journalism Review* to comment in January 1987 that journalists had begun to "fear that the public would believe that the press's real goal was to bring down the president. Editors worried that people would think that reporters were merely having a lark. Most curiously, journalism's establishment repeatedly vowed to avoid what it had done in Watergate." The *Review* suggested "political prudence" was motivating such agonizing self-appraisals, that the press perhaps felt "such pledges of good behavior are obligatory, given the press's sensitivity to accusations that it is unpatriotic. . . ." The *Review* added, "But having thus stated their honorable intentions, reporters and editors should get on with the job at hand."

In a spirited defense of the media and their role in American society (*The War Against the Press,* Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1987), *Time* senior correspondent Peter Stoles declares, "To a far greater extent than many of them are willing to admit, editors and publishers and news executives are avoiding the kinds of investigative stories that make headlines while making people angry. Some are turning their editorial pages into mixtures of bland mush, avoiding strong positions for fear of offending someone—readers, advertisers, rivals."

Could the media's concern during Reagan/Iran simply have been commendable caution on a tremendously important story? A sign of professional maturation? Not so, says Hodding Carter III, media commentator and former U.S. State Department spokesman. Carter says many news organizations have been gripped by "insane tentativeness" since Watergate—not due to excesses during coverage of that story, but, rather, owing to an unrelenting campaign since those days by conservatives to paint the media as unfairly liberal. Says Carter: "They've had their brains beaten in on the whole notion of a liberal press."

(The *Washington Post's* Bradlee was accurate, incidentally, in predicting problems for the media over Reagan/Iran. In January 1987, after the story had been actively reported for about two months, a Gallup poll survey showed many

Americans, particularly conservatives, felt the story had been overreported and, as a result, news organizations had lost substantial public esteem and credibility.)

Clearly, the ethical-reactive disposition has two parents: external criticism and pressure, and internal turmoil and self-doubt among journalists themselves, who have a growing preoccupation with whether what they do is ethical, fair, balanced, or constructive—worthy even. It is to some extent an overreaction to criticism that could severely distort the news-reporting process as we know it and, indeed, shift relationships between the media and other institutions of power and influence in this country. Simply put, journalists who once perceived their mission as covering the news and getting the story now spend much time in heated discussion among themselves on self-imposed *rules* for covering the news. Great newspapers that once gloried in their often critical relationships with government and other institutions now stutter in self-doubt, burdened by concern over corporate "image" and profit success in the marketplace. Together with television, they conduct survey after survey on whether they are "liked" by the public or "disliked," respected or not. John Perry, veteran editor of the *Rome (Ga.) News-Tribune,* puts it this way: "No other profession on the American scene today does more public daisy-petal plucking than journalism: 'He loves me. He loves me not.' Concern about what the reader thinks of the writer was never more prominent in the consciousness of the journalists. A stranger to the journalism trade press would think he had come upon a litter of adolescent puppies, hand-licking and floor-wetting, falling all over themselves in their eagerness to be wanted, to be understood, to be loved—to be credible."

It all raises the question whether a journalistic tradition unique worldwide in its independence and vigor is inhibited by self-inflicted wounds.

RISE OF THE MARKETING CONCEPT

In part, the ethical-reactive disposition arises as the media, particularly newspapers, strive to put their business affairs in disciplined, profitable order by employing the marketing concept in media management. Marketing orientation was present in television from its birth and was basic corporate philosophy in other industries before that. But it is relatively new in newspapers. The concept regards newspapers and television news as products to be created in response to marketing research, to be promoted and sold just as any other products are. If the concept is permitted to run unrestricted through management ranks, what news products are created—and for whom—is decided by marketing experts whose goal is not fearless coverage of the news on its merits, but, rather, attracting the right affluent readers and viewers who in turn will attract advertisers. There was a day, not too distant, when experienced editors made such decisions based on their best instincts about what was timely, topical, and important news—and what wasn't. Then, newspapers proudly and confidently thundered out their editorial views; today, most are the only paper in town and, sobered by that responsibility, more likely will *react* to all viewpoints in their

market by following a middle-of-the-road course. For example, *USA Today* is a newspaper designed in direct response to market research of reader *wants* (not needs), and it avoids any editorial page endorsement of political candidates. Clearly, many editors and managers believe it is good business to straddle issues, to react to public consensus, rather than to lead.

Within a management context, it must be argued that the marketing concept should be extended into the newsroom. After all, newspaper and television *are* businesses that must succeed financially if they are to serve readers and advertisers as well as shareholders. But neither the marketing concept nor any other internal or external business consideration should warp the news process. Men and women who accept the challenge of being journalists in this country and who devote careers to collecting and disseminating news and opinion have a higher responsibility than the bottom line.

There is need, then, for journalists to react urgently *but* thoughtfully, discerningly to the notions so widespread in our society that something is wrong in the way the media operate. Grevious ethical lapses *have* occurred; problems *do* exist and they *must* be met—but with calm, balanced corrective efforts, certainly not mindless stonewalling or frenetic, unthinking fawning before the latest survey on how to court public favor. Ethical-reactive journalism cannot be permitted to overpower the historic responsibility of doing on the front page and in the 6 P.M. news what, in the judgment of professional journalists, *must* be done.

THE HOSTILE PUBLIC ENVIRONMENT

Opinions differ within the media on whether there is anything new in the current level of public and institutional attacks on the media. Some experienced editors and publishers say the media always have been somewhat unpopular—just stay cool and get on with the job without worrying too much about public perception of how it should be performed.

However, the media do operate today in an increasingly hostile public environment, and if this isn't corrected, the role of the free media in our democracy will change. Along with surveys reporting the media have serious credibility problems comes the occasional poll suggesting, to the contrary, that the media enjoy "believability" among the public or that journalists are more popular than, say, lawyers or U.S. senators, and that things aren't so bad after all. But how, then, to explain such wide public acceptance, for example, of unparalleled White House orchestration of news and image during most of the Reagan administration? How to explain during the "Irangate" story in 1987 unmistakable public feeling that the media had overreported the story, relied too much on rumors and unconfirmed reports, had in fact simply given too much coverage to the story? And, closer to Main Street, how to explain public acquiescence as legislatures, school boards, and city councils chip away at the First Amendment or conduct public business behind doors closed to the media? How to explain private citizens wielding libel law with unprecedented success—

not only to defend name and honor, but to attack and punish the media? Isn't all that in part a reflection of worsening societal attitudes toward the media, a signal that although we can differ on how serious is the problem the media face, there can be no doubt a problem exists?

It is obvious mounting external pressures are contributing heavily to a defensive, reactive posture by the media. For example, the *Washington Post's* Bradlee, secure in journalistic history for his role in uncovering Watergate, ruefully points out that any newspaper forced to spend more than $1 million to defend itself in a single libel suit, as the *Post* was, today must look twice at any story, whatever its news value, if it is likely to draw heavy legal fire. The public has moved off the sidelines, into the fray—and has found weapons, in court and out, to effectively influence the outcome.

With $1 million lawyers' bills feared in newsrooms and public clamour about the media rising, there is considerable danger the resultant noisy palaver may camouflage two important factors: First, much criticism of the media is *not* designed to engender ethical, fair, and balanced behavior; rather, it is designed to win a narrow point on behalf of an individual or special interest group—and never mind being fair. Second, a worsening public climate emboldens special interest critics to attack a newspaper or network with studied indifference to wider damage thus done to the media's historic, unique, and important role in our democratic society. It can be argued the importance of that role should transcend individual and relatively insignificant transgressions by the media. Yet, the public attitude toward the media increasingly is adversarial or, at best, indifferent as special interest groups attempt to weaken the media and force their basic repositioning relative to other institutions in our society. Small wonder government and other institutions feel free to manage the news, to pull even more tightly the reins of power.

Too often, at such moments so dangerous to the future role of the media, arguments rage within the media themselves: Is it press or television that is most responsible for the "credibility gap?" The proposition that television belongs under the First Amendment umbrella would not gain unanimous support today even among journalists. It's eyeball-to-eyeball for media versus critics—and too often the media are blinking or, at least, looking in the wrong direction.

It is imperative the media themselves resolve such credibility questions, for the alternatives are unlovely to contemplate. If the media ignore serious ethical issues now on the public agenda, they can expect, at best, disenchanted readers and viewers; at worst, the media will face deeper intrusion into the news process by government and other institutions of power in our society, which truly could jeopardize the First Amendment and the concept of a free media in the United States.

All this creates, of course, an additional burden for anyone picking up the already heavy responsibility of participating in public affairs as a reporter, editor, or media manager. But that burden must be accepted by any journalist during a career in the media.

In a sense, students of journalism are on their own in searching for a course to