

ENDTIMES?

Crises and Turmoil at
THE NEW YORK TIMES, 1999–2009



DANIEL R. SCHWARZ

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1999–2009

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A Note on the Text

As my title indicates, my focus is on the 1999–2009 period when the newspaper industry and particularly the *Times* underwent a major transformation in the face of business challenges and when the *Times* was beset by a series of crises and challenges to its reputation, including the Jayson Blair scandal and its misreporting on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. I looked back at the *Times* from a 2010 vantage point and did some further updating in March 2011.

Since my book was finished before the September 2011 change in editorship was announced, I am not putting Keller's editorship in the past tense or taking account of other 2011 developments such as the most recent New York Times Company's quarterly reports. Nor do I discuss events like the 2011 *Times*'s running stories garnered from Wikileaks, although that source and the *Times*'s use of it change the way news is gathered in comparison to the revelations of the Pentagon Papers.

Unless otherwise noted, quotations not attributed to an article, book, or other source are drawn from my personal interviews with the speakers themselves, on the date indicated.

Daniel R. Schwarz
November 1, 2011

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Introduction

No one really thinks about it as just something to make the money. Its mission is not to make the money, it's a quasi-public institution. . . . The op-ed page [public discourse] is and remains the bulletin board of the world.

—Gerry Marzorati, April 10, 2005

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.

—attributed to Daniel Patrick Moynihan

I. My March 1, 2011, Open Letter to the *Times's* Current Publisher and Its Executive Editor

Dear Arthur Sulzberger Jr. and Bill Keller:

Without neglecting the continuing triumphs of what I still regard as the world's finest newspaper, what follows is my discussion of the problems facing the *New York Times* and my suggestions for how to solve some of them. I have two stories to tell. The first is the story of a great newspaper reinventing itself for the twenty-first century and seeing its mission in the most idealistic terms by viewing itself as what Gerry Marzorati, the former *Sunday Magazine* editor, calls a “quasi-public institution.” Representing a decisive and perhaps final turn in the way newspapers operate and the American audience receives information, full commitment to digital media in the form of the paper's website, nytimes.com, has been the centerpiece of that reinvention.

But I also have a second, sadder story to tell, namely, the story of a newspaper flailing around as it tries to find its place in a world

where digital news has rapidly been replacing print news, where the concepts of truth and verification are up for grabs, and where changing business conditions undermine print circulation and advertising revenue, replacements for which have not been found.

I have been a *New York Times* reader—some would say, addict—since I learned to read. I am not only a product of my times but of the *Times*. I have had a lifelong love affair with the *New York Times*. As a Cornell University English professor, I have recommended the op-ed pages and the editorial pages to my students as examples of well-argued, literate prose that presents ideas in a lucid format and, in the case of op-ed pieces, reveals unique voices.

Proust has his madeleine, I my *Times*. For me it implies satisfying private moments when I recused myself from worries and lost myself in a world beyond my own concerns. Even though it doesn't leave its mark—its ink—on my hands as it used to, it leaves its mark indelibly on my brain and heart.

Reading the *Times* is a catalyst for intellectual energy, and, yes, part of the fun of being alive. I have learned more in my life from the *Times* than from any single written source. My father and grandfather read the *Times* every day unless strikes prevented publication. Much of what they knew about not only national and world events but also cultural developments they learned from the *Times*.

Mr. Sulzberger and Mr. Keller, I admire your courage in protecting the independence of the press and calling the government to account. In many ways, this is an improvement over the complicity between government and press in prior eras. Perhaps once we all were more trusting of our government and, like the *Times* and other media, not only wanted to believe in the ethics of our leaders, but had somewhat greater evidence for our trust than we do now. In the areas of foreign and cultural news the *Times* still outdistances its competitors. In its belated revelations about the Bush administration's domestic wiretapping and, later, the government's overseeing bank transactions—both in the name of national security—the *Times* was in the forefront of national coverage.

The *Times* provides me with a vast store of information, challenges me every day with its columns and investigative journalism, and plays an integral role in keeping me informed. But the *Times* also presents a product that is at times frivolous, panders to every possible audience, buys into reductive identity politics, and puts the interests of the institution ahead of those of its readers. When I am angry or

frustrated with these and other failings, I feel as if I am disappointed in a close friend or family member.

The *Times*, I believe, has drifted from its moorings as it searches desperately to replace and replenish its audience and be all things to all people. Although I applaud your reaching out to younger people, the eclecticism with which you have adjusted to a changing time, and your catholic tastes in culture, I do think on occasion you miss the chance to discuss from a larger perspective what should be included in cultural coverage and why. While appreciating the sheer volume of what you publish each day, I think better editing might provide more examples of great writing. Perhaps too much emphasis is put on the magazine component of the contemporary *Times* and not enough on hard news.

Cordially,
Dan Schwarz

II. The *Times's* Historical Position

For more than one hundred years, the *New York Times* has been a repository of America's historical memories and cultural contexts as well as a record of how we saw ourselves and how the world saw us. Current and back issues of the *Times* are a diary of how our history has unfolded from day to day. People who need or want to be informed still read the *Times* to learn what is going on in the geopolitical world and to be sure they know what other informed people know.

The *Times* once had an identity as the authoritative and accurate newspaper—the paper of record—that readers could depend on to know what was going on in the nation and the world. Now it is searching for an identity, trying to figure out what it will be in the twenty-first century. In the 1970s, Punch Sulzberger and Abe Rosenthal pulled the *Times* through a crisis by making the paper more interesting and readable, in part by introducing the multisection paper with a magazine component. It may well be that the *Times* is in even more of a crisis today, and the question is not only can the paper be saved as we know it, but were Bill Keller and Arthur Sulzberger Jr. the people to do it?

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the *Times* remains the worst newspaper in the world except for all the others. Certainly in many ways the *Times* is much better than it was fifty years ago or even

twenty years ago. Although the *Times's* influence has been somewhat reduced, it still has considerable social, political, and economic influence on America and the world. Yet, in its desperate effort to find new readers and prosper economically in an environment where circulation and advertising revenue are not keeping pace with costs, the *Times*, I believe, has somewhat compromised its standards and is delivering a diluted product that is less an authoritative newspaper than a potpourri of information, some of it cutting-edge material in terms of news and investigative journalism but some merely prolix, soft, magazine-type articles. In part because its readers are aware of major news stories from other sources, the *Times* has become as much a daily magazine as a newspaper, and the magazine articles at their best provide far more useful life advice than they once did on relationships, health, beauty, fashion, dining, money, travel, and alternatives for spending discretionary dollars.

The *Times's* audience also has changed. The Internet and cable TV have challenged the *Times's* relevance as a main source of news. Many more people consult the paper's own website than read the paper itself, and many of those readers access the website for specific information rather than for the full experience of reading the major stories and opinions. It is possible that younger readers have become somewhat anaesthetized to the news and place less priority on being informed about national and international news than prior generations. No doubt the increasingly cynical attitude toward government of most Americans has been fostered by events dating from the Vietnam War and the Pentagon Papers to the bogus claims of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) as an excuse to launch the invasion of Iraq. It is quite possible that our belief that we can know truth and our respect for journalistic authority have changed. Although we should not exonerate recent administrations from both parties from bending the truth, our skepticism if not cynicism also has been exacerbated by an elected national government—namely, the George W. Bush administration—between January 2001 and January 2009 that had little respect either for truth or for the other two major branches of government, the judicial and the congressional.

The Internet is the essential underpinning of the globalization of information and brings conflicting constituencies to the same site. But, mirroring major TV news channels, the Internet blogosphere also creates balkanization, when every subgroup retreats into its own sites

and blogs and reads only what it wants to believe. Thus, conservatives watch Fox and listen to Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck and read pundits who agree with them, and liberals do much the same with MSNBC and Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow. A significant downside, therefore, to the Internet blogosphere and discussion sites is what Andrew Keen has called, in his book of the same name, “The Cult of the Amateur,” where gatekeeping is undermined and what we think of as knowledge is subjective because the “lines between fact and nonsense, between expertise and rant, become blurred.”

III. Specific Challenges to the *Times*

In part, the *Times* is under siege for reasons it cannot fully control. We are living in a divided country—divided between red and blue states, whites and racial minorities, liberals and conservatives, pro-choice and pro-life activists, the well-to-do and those struggling to make ends meet, the educational and professional meritocracy that increasingly replicates itself and those trying to make some steps up the class ladder. We also are in a country increasingly polarized between those who believe that we are part of God’s plan and that there are fixed immutable truths and those who believe that we are shaped by our experiences, psyches, values, and capacities to understand—and that much of what we call “reality” is provisional, and much that we call “truth” depends on cultural and historical expectations.

But in the 1999–2009 period, the *Times* brought the siege on itself by often disappointing its readers and stockholders; the causes are multiple and one part of the subject of this book. Questionable leadership was an issue. The current publisher, Arthur Sulzberger Jr., has enormous faith in his own opinions, to the point of arrogance. Former executive editor Howell Raines was forced to resign after failing to control some reporters and offending many senior staff members. On important occasions, the *Times* has been manipulated or misled by its sources, who often do not want to speak for attribution, and sometimes speak for their own purposes. Although the retiring executive editor, Bill Keller, has brought stability to the newsroom, his judgment in complying with the Bush administration’s request to withhold a vital story affecting the 2004 election is suspect. Moreover, he has at times allowed his section editors the latitude to write prolix and vapid

stories—and on occasion, erroneous ones—to fill enormous space. This dumbing-down of its daily product to include vacuous features produces what I call *Timeslite*; when *Timeslite* focuses in detail on celebrity gossip and misbehavior as well as grim accounts of murders, we have what I call *Timestrash*. On occasion, the focus on sexual promiscuity and experimentation seems as much for shock value as to inform.

In the face of declining circulation as a percentage of the population and declining advertising as a percentage of gross national product, along with stockholder alarm at challenges to its revenue stream and falling stock prices, the *Times* also has diluted the quality of its product, in part by attempting to be all things to all people. Thus, it has invented sections with thin content, such as *ThursdayStyles*, *SundayStyles*, and *Escape*, and the various “T” magazines, with the purpose of attracting specialized advertising.

My book is hardly a history of America, but it does touch on how we have come to be where we are in the relationship between the media and the government, and questions whether the necessary and even desirable gulf between the national government and the press need be as acrimonious as it is. To some extent, I believe that the acrimony during the Bush administration was due to the belief of major political figures that the press—and in particular the *Times*—was dominated by those who wished to bring it down and embarrass it at a time when the country should have, in its view, been united behind its war efforts. Such a belief allowed the Bush administration to believe it had the right, perhaps even the duty, to manipulate the news.

To study the *Times* is to study American culture. Before the cultural revolution in America that began in the late 1960s—and, with some exceptions, for the entire twentieth century—the *Times* presumed that its readers shared a somewhat stable and homogenous culture. The assumptions and values of that culture were for the most part expressed and sustained on its news pages (if not its columns, too), and deviations from those cultural norms were considered oddities.

The contemporary *New York Times* opens a window on who we are and who we expect to be. Covering virtually every aspect of our culture, from books, theater, and dining to health, fashion, and money, it shows us our desires, needs, demands, disappointments, fixations, and obsessions. It teaches us about our culture’s illusions, delusions, accomplishments, and vanities. Indeed, the *Times* enacts some of our own cultural conflicts. Many of us want a world of ethnic diversity

and choices, yet we don't want to abandon certain Norman Rockwell myths of what America is. We cling to a democratic vision and belief in meritocracy, while we enjoy reading about the lives of the rich and famous—the restaurants they eat at, their galas, and the gossip about their love lives.

In this book, I shall be thinking about the historical role of the *Times* in American culture, the way that the *Times* both reflects *and* creates social history, and even more about what the *Times* is now. By means of its selection, arrangement, and presentation of subjects, the *Times* influences cultural changes even as it purportedly reports on them. The *Times* rarely takes the lead in cultural innovation, but once it fully commits to a change in direction, it becomes a leader in shaping who we are. To cite the obvious: the *Times's* recent sexual openness has partly been forced by the AIDS epidemic, just as greater emphasis on women was forced by feminism's resistance to male dominance.

In discussing crucial issues that pertain to the *Times*, I often discuss issues that pertain to America, for the internal life of the *Times* represents cultural issues reflected in the world far beyond the paper itself. On its editorial side the *Times* has become more liberal socially than it has ever been. Setting itself at odds with the Bush administration, the *Times* took a leadership position in many aspects of the cultural wars, including discussion of changing sexual mores, gay marriage, stem cell research, and women's choice on abortion. For example, in the face of creationism advocated by the religious right, it devoted the entire June 26, 2007, *Science Times* section to updating how anthropologists and biologists now understand evolution and what issues remain to be explored.

IV. My Interviews

As an English professor who has written about American and New York City culture, I have relied on my mantra: "Always the text; always historicize." Thus, my methodology for discussing the *Times* comes from close reading of the texts of the articles within the paper and on its website and from an effort to establish a historic context and narrative for the 1999–2009 decade, rooted to an extent in the *Times's* larger history from 1896, when Adolph Ochs purchased it. I supplemented my research with taped interviews—often discussions, really—with