

The News Media, the Public Sphere and the Phantom Public

Editors and reporters of print publications can't fairly be blamed for tidal changes in technology, demographics, and ownership that have cost them so many readers. But under these pressures, some editors and reporters are acting in ways that make their newspapers *deserve* the deaths they're dying.

It's not something to shrug off; it's a tragedy, in the strictest classical sense. We still need news organizations that adhere to certain codes and have enough resources and public legitimacy to make those codes stick. How have some journalists who used to know this forgotten it?

Although the first "Sleeper Sampler" piece on this site is a National Public Radio commentary and some others are blog posts and links or references to past appearances on Charlie Rose and PBS' News Hour, my journalism began when newspapers were *the* carriers of democratic hope. From the civil-rights movement's finest hours in the early 1960s through the Watergate exposes of 1973, journalists rode high as tribunes of the people, their newspapers the most trusted resources for fateful public deliberation about national policy and destiny.

Writers such as Walter Lippmann discounted such high expectations as early as the 1920s, doubtful that mass media could generate anything better than "manufactured consent" by busy or gullible audiences. But during the later period I've just mentioned, brave print reporters and editors proved Lippmann wrong, and televised imagery of civil-rights demonstrations and the Vietnam War helped them break through the fog of rationalizations and lies.

Even when the big dailies of the time did "manufacture consent" and behave as sycophants to established power, independent-minded citizens turned to "alternative" weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines for information and interpretations vital to reform (and revolutionary) movements, much as activists now turn to TalkingPointsMemo.com or Daily Kos.

I remember people rushing to newsstands in Boston and New York on Wednesday evenings or Thursday mornings in the early 1970s to buy copies of the *Village Voice* as it tumbled off delivery trucks. I was thrilled to become a writer of *Voice* exposes and interpretations in the early 1980s and, before then, a writer for *The Boston Phoenix* and other alternative weeklies where Joe Klein, Sidney Blumenthal, Janet Maslin, and other national journalists also got started. Half a dozen of those *Voice* and *Phoenix* pieces are on this site.

We veterans of print's glory days have since endured the conglomeration and co-optation of alternative weeklies and watched the souffle-like collapse of proud dailies into witless titillation machines chained together by conglomerate bean counters. So forgive us if we expect that blogsites will face hard fights to stay independent and open to all comers. Let me explain this prediction -- and hedge it a little, with some samplings here from fights I've fought.

When TalkingPointsMemo.com became the first blog to win a coveted Polk Award in journalism (in February, 2008), it was partly a reflection of the internet's instantaneity, linkability, and interactivity, which reward collaborative efforts in news gathering and interpretation. But the award also recognized old virtues which technology can never replace -- courage, persistence, creativity, and a tough-minded optimism like that of TPM's founder, Joshua Micah Marshall, and TPM's other editors and reporters. [Here's a short, useful characterization of TPM as representative of the blogosphere at its best.](#)

Whatever its technology, journalism remains a civic craft, an exercise of vigilance and idea-sharing by citizens determined to keep their republic. Its purpose, as the journalism critic Jay Rosen put it in *What Are Journalists For?*, is to make public life go well, often to the discomfiture of established power. That's why journalism is

the only private industry actually named (as "the press") and protected by the Constitution, in the First Amendment.

Yet journalism is housed in "the media," an industry whose conglomerate-driven bottom lining now short-circuits the arts and disciplines of democratic deliberation. Media marketing strategies dumb down news to boost sales with come-ons that bypass the brain and heart on their way to the lower viscera and our wallets. Impulse buying, not deliberation, is this "journalism's" Holy Grail. Whether real journalists who've fled this circus to blog can outrun and hold out against such constraints and seductions remains to be seen.

1. A creeping coup, a sleeping news media?

[Manufactured Consent](#): The news media's mishandling of the 2000 election and prospects for civil disobedience at the time, *The Washington Monthly*, March, 2001. This piece owes a lot to the good judgment of then-WM editor Nicholas Thompson, even though he fought me out of too many of my glittering comparisons of George W. Bush's ascent to Augustus' in the fading Roman republic of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.

2. Rupert vs. The Republic

Between June, 2007, when Rupert Murdoch's bid for Dow Jones and its *Wall Street Journal* were briefly in doubt, and August, when it was clear that he had won and would take possession by the end of the year, I wrote four columns cautioning, cajoling, assailing, and ultimately despairing of journalists who were becoming Murdoch's apologists.

The most reflective, though also impassioned, of these are "[Rupert vs. the Republic](#)," in *TPMCafe* and, after his victory, "[Murdoch and His Enablers](#)," in online American edition of *The Guardian*. [The harshest of my assaults on an apologist for Murdoch](#) was "Invasion of the Body Snatchers: Another Good Journalist Lost, Along With the *Wall Street Journal*," which dissected a fawning profile of Murdoch in *TIME* magazine.

3. Book Reviewing as Ideological Policing

Reviewing books isn't easy. The journalist Nicholas Von Hoffman once told me he'd stopped doing it because "It's not worth \$250 to make an enemy for life." Editing a book-review section is even harder: You make several enemies a week, not least because, even exercising the best judgment, you can't review every deserving book.

I acknowledged these difficulties in 2007 in an extended broadside against *The New York Times Book Review*, which, under editor Sam Tanenhaus, a self-described "sympathetic observer" of conservatism, had gone off on a campaign of liberal-bashing during the peak Iraq War years of 2004-2006.

Even a book-review section for a general-interest newspaper such as the *Times* is entitled to its preferences, but I tried to show why it shouldn't go as far as Tanenhaus did. (I was equally critical, in 1994, of the *Times Book Review's* enthrallment to political correctness under editor Rebecca Sinkler.) In 2007, my protests in print and cyberspace seem to have had some effect; see the last two posts here.

By constantly showcasing pro-war reviewers such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Brookhiser, Paul Berman, David Brooks, and others from 2004, Tanenhaus let his antipathy to feckless liberals overtake his responsibilities as an editor of a general-interest review, I showed in *TPM* [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

In the online American edition of *The Guardian*, I paid closer attention to Tanenhaus' own writerly and political record. This is a capsule summary of my sense of where American neo-conservatives and some other conservatives have gone wrong politically as well as polemically.

And in *The Nation* I condensed and pointed my criticisms of the war-boosters indulged by the *Times*.

Soon afterward, when Tanenhaus gave a talk at Yale, I told the *Yale Daily News*, that he seemed to be trying to recoup his literary and editorial standing by striving for more "balance" in the Book Review. "The Times should publish terrific conservative writers to keep the liberals honest," I told the *YDN*, but Tanenhaus had gone far beyond that, and he knew it.

A month later, in a special issue on politics, the *Book Review* changed course markedly. Gone from that edition and from the following two months' editions, were the writers of whom I'd complained. (They shouldn't be banished, just published more sparingly.) The range of non-fiction reviewers' political predilections was broader, and I acknowledged and assessed it in [this post](#).

To be honest, a lot of the "new" reviews are decent and fair, but plodding and not very illuminating or inspiring. The selections of books to review are a bit wiser, but it takes a labor of love to sustain the civic republican sensibilities and standards on which good journalism and politics really do depend.

4. Should American Journalism Make Us Americans?

A paper for Harvard's Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics, and Public Policy which I wrote while a fellow there in 1998. Here I argue that conglomerate news media are more interested in niche marketing to new immigrant groups than in [helping and prodding newcomers toward full citizenship](#).

5. Coloring the News

A review for the *Los Angeles Times* of William McGowan's book by that name about the [cookie-cutter "diversity" in corporate newsrooms](#). This pdf may take a couple of minutes to bring up. Please be patient.

6. How Journalists Lost the 2006 Connecticut Senate Primary

[A critique of New York Times coverage](#) of Ned Lamont's challenge to Joe Lieberman (Some of the following are also linked in "Scoops and Revelations")

7. Exposing a journalist's primary colors.

(Note: The pdf for this section, containing two columns, from the *Wall St. Journal* and the *Washington Post*, may take awhile to come up. Please be patient.)

Memory and judgment, not "proof," led me to decide in 1996, months ahead of other journalists, that Joe Klein, then a prominent *Newsweek* columnist and television pundit, was the anonymous author of the novel *Primary Colors*, his *roman a clef* about Bill Clinton and his circle.

I first claimed that Klein was "Anonymous" in William Powers' *Washington Post* [media column](#) (paired in this pdf with a subsequent column of mine on the same subject in the *Wall Street Journal*), and I kept insisting on it even after almost everyone had accepted Klein's vehement denials that he was the author. ("It wasn't me; I didn't do it," he told CBS News.)

For months I couldn't persuade anyone to publish a column I wrote that began, "May I remind Joe 'I didn't do it' Klein of O.J. Simpson's vow that he will 'leave no stone unturned' until he finds Nicole Brown Simpson's killer?... If Klein didn't write *Primary Colors*, let him devote his far-more-considerable investigative skills to finding the author." But when a reporter discovered a paper manuscript of the novel with Klein's handwriting on it, Klein confessed, vindicating my hunch.

Why was I so sure of his authorship, despite his denials? Having read Klein's columns in *New York* magazine in the late 1980s, I noticed and, crucially, never forgot his characteristic locutions and obsessions about liberals and race – tropes he recycled into the novel. When I saw an op-ed column in the *Baltimore Sun* by David Kusnet, a former speechwriter for Bill Clinton, voicing similar suspicions, I re-read the novel, and more of Joe Klein just leapt off the page. It was then that I called Powers, who proceeded to describe the "Kusnet/Sleeper theory" of authorship. Klein left me an exasperated voice-mail message: "Jim, I don't have a patent on the word 'Yikes'!"

We were in a gray area, where I "knew" the truth in my bones thanks only to a good memory, some literary acumen, some political judgment, and compelling but circumstantial evidence. When Klein finally told the truth at a press conference with Random House's Harry Evans, I faced him from the crowd of reporters and, in the *Wall Street Journal* column linked above with the Powers column) offered my interpretation of why he'd lied so vigorously, and at what cost to journalism and politics.

8. An early warning about Howell Raines and the New York Times.

Also in the realm of predictions based on memory and judgment, I found myself writing about journalism itself in a [Daily News column in 1994](#) predicting that the *New York Times'* then-editorial-page editor Howell Raines would bring trouble to the paper and to journalism generally. I said it again at length in 1997 in *Liberal Racism*, in a chapter called "Media Myopia."

But not until 10 years after my *News* column was Raines brought down by the scandalously false reporting of Jayson Blair on his watch as executive editor. Raines is a talented guy with gargantuan flaws, including, though by no means limited to, a penitential Southern anti-racism that gets too tangled up in its own moralism to make sound judgments touching race.

By the time of his editorial demise in the Blair affair I was no longer at the *News*, but I couldn't resist writing an "I told you so" column in the *Hartford Courant* (it follows the *Daily News* column in the link here) that was widely linked and discussed and reprinted, even in the *Jerusalem Post*, which had its own neo-conish reasons for highlighting a crisis at a liberal newspaper.

9. The cheapest kind of flattery.

The Raines flap had another ironic twist that prompts a final observation: Interpretive "scoops" that break new ideas rather than news are [very easily stolen](#). First on this pdf you'll see a *Washington Post* review I'd written of Marshall Frady's biography of Jesse Jackson. Eighteen paragraphs of that review wound up under someone else's byline a few weeks later in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, for reasons that were instructive, if depressing. (See my *Hartford Courant* column on that, the second column [on this pdf.](#))

10. More Misleadership at the Times

[Arthur Sulzberger's Cracked Kristol Ball](#), TPMCafe, 2008 and [At Times Op Ed, the Plot Sickens](#)