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1

American Carnival

The event that convinced me of the need to reassess both the transformation of professional journalism and my changing role as a teacher did not take place in 2004, when I first heard official confirmation that the U.S. invasion of Iraq had been based almost entirely on cooked-up evidence largely unchallenged by the nation's news media. Neither did it stem from revelations that same year that the government increasingly was in the business of broadcasting propaganda disguised as journalism through the airwaves of willing local television news stations. Nor was it related to any of the notorious reporter scandals involving plagiarism and fabrication that have bedeviled America's top news publications over the past few years. While all these events certainly served as important signposts along the way, I realize now that my journey actually started on a rainy morning back in April 1998. That was the day one of my former graduate students told me an eye-opening story about her life on the job as a local television news reporter.

She was in her late twenties then, a young woman with a passion for news reporting and writing who dreamed of working as an on-camera national network correspondent. Like many television news aspirants, she was paying her career dues by starting out in a smallish city in the

West, with hopes of advancing to a big-city market such as Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York.

I admired the young woman's skills: she had been a terrific student during her two years at the University of California at Berkeley, with a talent for interviewing sources and researching court records and a commitment to professional values such as accuracy, fairness, and the importance of maintaining a moral conscience about right and wrong. When I heard she was visiting the Bay Area, I invited her to speak to a large undergraduate lecture class I was teaching that semester. Since the class focused on the role of the news media in democratic society, I thought it would be great for my 120 students to hear how she went about collecting and reporting the news each day in the "real world."

During her visit to my class, the young woman showed video clips of a few of her news stories, including a serious one about a murder investigation and a feature about the spring weather. As she answered the students' questions, she was as informative and captivating as I had expected. Her talk was a real hit.

But afterward, as we talked in the hallway of North Gate Hall, she told me another story about her job, one that was quite different from the inspiring anecdotes she had shared with the students just a few minutes before.

Several months earlier that year, in January, the Monica Lewinsky scandal had broken, bringing with it a national frenzy for news related to the presidency and the brewing constitutional crisis between Congress, the judiciary, and the White House over President Bill Clinton's sexual affair. In my lecture course that semester, I had been referencing the Clinton scandal and the front-page headlines it was generating, using it as an educational wedge to inform students about a wide variety of issues, from the impeachment process, the history of special counsels, and the grand jury system to the perils of anonymous sourcing and the growing influence of new, Web-based, non-mainstream information sources.

But my former student had been doing something far different in connection with this story, she told me, something that in many ways said more about the values and pressures of news reporting today than all my lectures put together. She said that her boss, the station's news producer, was eager to capitalize on the scandal's ratings draw by finding a sexy local angle that paralleled Bill Clinton's political travails. Her reportorial mission? To go out into the town she was covering and try to hunt down a married man who, like the president, was carrying on a sexual

dalliance; to interview him about his double life and its effect on his marriage and family; and to try to get a reaction from the mistress as well.

The assignment was not the sort of thing my former student had bargained for when she chose professional journalism as a calling. At a cost of more than \$70,000, she had attended grad school at Cal, full of high ideals about the role of the press in a democracy and dreams of doing stories that really mattered for the public. Now she was being ordered to use those hard-earned and valuable skills to do something that veered sharply from the mission and purpose of journalism as she understood it.

But what could she do? Refuse to do the story? Quit in protest? Who would hire her in television news again? Who would pay the student loans she took out to finance her professional schooling? So she carried out the assignment, she told me, no questions asked. Using her investigative skills and the station's precious labor time, she eventually did track down such a subject, who was persuaded to do an on-camera interview with his face blurred out and his voice scrambled to protect his identity. She had succeeded. But she didn't feel much satisfaction. Neither did she tell this startling story to my undergraduate audience, she explained, because she didn't feel professionally comfortable discussing the assignment or secure enough in her job to speak publicly about it.¹

That anecdote was among the first and perhaps the most memorable of a growing number of disquieting dispatches I have received from young people working in the field of professional journalism that have caused me to radically reexamine how I view the news industry and how I prepare my students to enter it. Although there has always been something of a gap between classroom theories about the function of journalism in a free society and the gritty day-to-day reality of the American newsroom, I've witnessed this gap widen considerably in the comparatively few years I have worked as an educator. My student's story was just one example of questionable, disturbing, and at times outrageous acts by news media organizations that each year hire young people leaving colleges and professional school programs like mine, brimming with enthusiasm and high regard for the calling, only to see their ideals twisted or crushed by the weight of conflicting institutional demands and special interests.

I don't think I was ever naïve enough to believe that the American news media were as clean and saintly as the professional standards adopted by governing organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and the Radio-Television News Directors Association might have implied. These cher-

ished codes of conduct, which stress principles such as editorial independence, accuracy, and truth seeking, were developed over many decades in response to systemic bias, inaccuracy, and sensationalist excesses. But neither was I fully prepared to accept, as I listened to some of my former students relate their disappointing experiences, the reality of how the news industry's values and practices were being weakened by the relentless assault of outside political interests, profit pressures, and the manipulation of advertising and public relations.

One former undergraduate student, for example, who was working at a weekly newspaper in Northern California, told me how her managing editor had blatantly pressured her to write favorably about a controversial commercial development project whose chief backer was a close associate of the publisher. What about the idea we taught in college that a paper's business interests should never be allowed to conflict with the independent mission of reporting?

Another alum, working for a large, publicly traded family of newspapers in California, messaged me in despair when he heard that his newspaper's news and editorial staff would soon face another round of layoffs and budget cuts because the annual 25 percent profit promised to shareholders by the corporation's CEO had fallen 5 percent short of the target. In an age of stagnant or declining circulation and advertising revenues, executives at this newspaper were looking to cut costs to improve the company's bottom line. And journalists and editors, costly to keep, were likely target number one. My student wondered: What was so unsatisfactory about a 20 percent annual profit for newspapers? What about the notion that good and effective *journalism*, not shareholder pressure, should be the strongest and most important engine driving a news organization's success or failure?

Another young reporter with several years' experience covering major professional sports teams and an excellent record at culling sources was flabbergasted when a network television sports reporter suddenly appeared on the scene of an important news story on his beat in nearby Oakland and miraculously managed to get an exclusive on-camera interview with a source at the center of the story. The young local reporter and his colleagues were certain that the rich network had paid a considerable sum of money to the source, who refused to talk to anyone else in the media afterward. It wasn't the first time that this network had been suspected of paying for interviews, the beat reporters claimed. What about the caution against checkbook journalism that teachers always preached in graduate school? What about our warnings that if we treat

the news as if it is for sale, lies will flourish, and only the rich will be able to own and control it?

Assigned to her first reporting beat to cover the public relations industry for a national magazine in Los Angeles, another alum wrote harrowing messages to me about her intense on-the-job education in how deeply PR specialists and advertisers working for corporate and political clients had inserted themselves into the news-gathering process—and how complicit news media organizations have been in the corruption of their civic responsibilities. Over the past decade, for example, PR firms have become increasingly effective at churning out print and broadcast advertising that looks and sounds just like the mainstream journalism the public is used to reading, hearing, and viewing. Their aim, however, is not to present news and information gathered under professional rules of ethics; instead, they intend to sell a product or a political message. This deceptive marriage of two separate and conflicting missions in the form of “advertorials,” “video news releases,” and other techniques employing the latest in high-tech digital tools has grown into an industry worth hundreds of millions of dollars annually over the past twenty years. Increasingly, it is difficult for the average citizen to tell the difference between what’s real news and what’s fake.

Not coincidentally, this phenomenal growth in propaganda cleverly disguised as news has occurred while many news organizations are cutting back on staffing. America’s television news networks, for example, employ fully a third fewer correspondents today than they did in 1985. The nation’s radio newsroom staff shrank by 44 percent between 1994 and 2001. Cuts have also occurred in local television news and newspapers across the country.² Headline after headline on business pages in 2005 alone reported staff cuts at news services, magazines, and newspapers across America:

September 22: A 15 percent staff cut in the newsroom of the *San Jose Mercury News*, with a loss of fifty-two full-time professional journalism jobs.

September 24: A 15 percent cut in the newsrooms of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News*, and a loss of forty-five professional journalism jobs at the *New York Times* and thirty-five at the *Boston Globe*.

December 26: A cut of nine hundred editorial jobs at the Tribune Company’s prestigious family of newspapers, which includes the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsday*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the

Chicago Tribune. That news sparked a Christmas week demonstration outside the corporation's headquarters in Chicago, where protestors charged that the company's cost-cutting endangered the public's right to be informed.³

The Project for Excellence in Journalism reported in early 2006 that, all told, America's newspaper and magazine industries had lost more than thirty-five hundred newsroom professionals over the previous five years alone, a drop of 7 percent.⁴

These corporate trends signal only the latest chapters in a compelling and longstanding story of major shifts in news consumption by Americans over the past half century, shifts that have intensified as the New Media challenge the dominance of newspapers and other traditional media in American life. But even before the advent of the New Media, the landscape had begun to change. From 1960 to 1995, the American population grew from 180 million to nearly 260 million—but total daily newspaper circulation in the United States remained roughly steady, at 59 million, according to Claude Moisy. As Moisy points out, this extraordinary one-third drop in per capita readership will only accelerate, since the rate of readership among the young is even weaker.⁵ A 2004 survey of Americans between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four found that 44 percent relied chiefly on Web-based portals such as Yahoo! and Google for their news and information, with just 19 percent ranking newspapers as their primary source. The survey also found increasing numbers of young people abandoning traditional broadcast news media.⁶

Television news long ago replaced newspapers as the chief source of news and information for most Americans. But here, too, the job losses among professional journalists locally, nationally, and overseas have been acute. Longtime CBS News foreign correspondent Tom Fenton, in a scathing analysis of the decline of foreign news reporting since the Cold War, cites data showing that foreign coverage by broadcast and cable networks has shrunk 70 to 80 percent since the early 1980s, largely replaced by celebrity news, "tabloidism," and "junk news."⁷ Since 1995, ABC and Fox have closed what were once full-time bureaus in Moscow; CBS has closed bureaus in Paris, Johannesburg, Beijing, and Bonn; and CNN has closed operations in Manila, Belgrade, Brussels, and Rio de Janeiro. Latin American correspondents are rare; and the entire continent of Africa, apart from a skeletal operation run by CNN in Nairobi,

is completely bereft of a full-time, professional American news reporting presence.⁸

Closer to home, one troubling event that proved emblematic was recorded in a little-noticed story about the closing of Chicago's legendary, 105-year-old City News Service. CNS was a place where generations of young journalists and other writers, from Seymour Hersh and Ellen Warren to Mike Royko and Kurt Vonnegut, learned their craft by reporting on crime and other city beats for a consortium of Chicago newspapers. The news service functioned as a tip sheet for print and broadcast outlets. But a new owner, the Tribune Company, decided to close CNS shortly before Christmas in 2005, partly to save costs. A more important factor, however, was that the company's news competitors, instead of using the service as a tip sheet, were simply posting City News articles on their own Web sites and thus undermining the service's value to the Tribune. The closure stood as a stark cautionary tale about the wider ramifications of the power of the Internet and its effects on traditional professional journalism. Nineteen jobs, most of them filled by young people just starting their careers in Chicago, were lost.⁹

One consequence of this shrinkage in professional content in the nation's traditional news systems is that many news organizations now find it commercially advantageous not only to deliver easy, inexpensive fluff about celebrities, health, and decorating but also to disseminate fake reporting in order to fill the breach of actual news-gathering. The product may not be real journalism, but it *looks* like real journalism to the unassuming American citizen. Most important, fake journalism is practically free and helps to fill airtime in the relentless twenty-four-hour news cycle, in contrast to the high cost of actually paying professionals to report the news. In effect, public relations specialists and crafty advertising hucksters masquerading as professional journalists have become significant competitors for the journalism jobs my students are seeking after graduation.

In an e-mail message, another former student, who now covers the public relations industry for a Los Angeles-based magazine, described the pervasiveness of PR, advertising, and propaganda in all their forms in contemporary journalism. "Being in the 'real world' has shown beyond a doubt how much of journalism is colored by bias, by organizational limitations. . . . It has shown me that a large portion of our news is crafted by public relations companies." She recalled that the only time she'd heard PR discussed in journalism school was in a generalized con-

struct, with journalists as gatekeepers of truth and PR as simply an entity to avoid. “But that isn’t reality,” she continued. “The truth is that sophisticated public relations professionals guard almost every beat—from politics to business to entertainment—and rarely can you truly circumvent them. These are people you have to deal with day in and day out on any beat, and I think it is a disservice to young journalists to ignore that fact.”

In addition, some young journalists express deep disenchantment over what they view as growing indifference by the news industry to the long-term goal of hiring newsroom staff who reflect the full range of intellectual, political, gender, and racial diversity in American society. A leading African American producer at a national network television news show wrote:

[This is] the most important grossly under-reported issue in journalism today. I can only speak for the field I am in right now, network news, but the lack of minorities in key editorial decision-making positions is appalling. If one were to do a census survey of the editorial staff of the network morning shows, network evening news shows, and network news magazines it would be shocking to say the least. Yet little or nothing is written or said about the reality of this situation because no media organization is innocent and thus none of them feel comfortable raising this issue. This is a major, major concern, and this is why people of color continue to leave this profession. There is no one to mentor young broadcast journalists of color and there are so few role models. It’s very depressing. This has been a problem for a long time but there is still little progress and the argument could be made that the problem has gotten worse.¹⁰

Another graduate, who reports on business and finance news for a top national newspaper, added this observation about the challenges and ironies of working in an era when astonishing new technological tools allow journalists to produce more and more, to work longer and harder, and to become proficient in many different media, even as they continue to receive incommensurate compensation:

There was a point [in recent times] when I could honestly say I knew no young journalists . . . who were happy in their profession. Perhaps this says more about the commonalities of journalists’ personalities than anything else. After all, we are a complaining bunch. But I found the state of affairs particularly telling. Reporters and editors I knew contemplated careers in music, modeling, real estate, education, public relations—almost *anything* but the grind of daily journalism. What is scariest about that is the people of whom I write were good, solid journalists on the fast track at their respective news organizations. They were beaten down by the unrelenting stress and pressures of the profession and discouraged by newsroom poli-

tics. Didn't we get into journalism to avoid corporate culture? How naïve we all were.

Journalism has always been a demanding, stressful, and far from lucrative way of life. We who chose this career path accepted these realities as part of the civic bargain. Most people who practice journalism full time do so mainly for the love of the craft and the sense of purpose and professional fulfillment that discovering, reporting, and writing about the world can bring. But it's that very quality of professional purpose that seems threatened. The distress I hear from young people struggling to maintain their faith in journalism has as a backdrop a litany of widely publicized ethical scandals that have plagued the news industry over the past fifteen years. The moral failures we know about have ranged from the subtle and devious to the downright perverse. In hindsight, some of the earlier incidents now seem almost misdemeanor-like compared to the larger scandals that dwarfed them shortly after the turn of the millennium. In 1992, for example, when producers at NBC News rigged incendiary devices to two GM trucks to make sure they caught fire during collisions that were being staged to dramatize an investigative story about the trucks' vulnerability to explosion, the incident illustrated the degree to which fakery as a communication tool had infiltrated an enterprise purportedly dedicated to truth.¹¹ More recently, however, the Bush administration has paid millions of dollars in taxpayer money, through contracts with giant PR firms such as the Ketchum Corporation and the Lincoln Group, to syndicated columnists and other media commentators to editorially promote White House policies and other Republican initiatives. These revelations suggest that forces outside professional journalism recognize that journalists and economically besieged news media organizations appear more and more willing to facilitate their own degradation.¹²

In 1996, when the *Los Angeles Times* published a gala Sunday magazine issue devoted to the opening of a sparkling new multimillion-dollar sports arena, it allowed a major corporate advertiser and the arena's sponsor to play an active role in designing and producing the magazine's editorial content in a \$600,000 profit-sharing deal—but without informing either the paper's news staff or the public about the deception. This incident marked a distressing new chapter in the relationship between business and journalism, two interests often diametrically opposed to each other and traditionally intended, at least theoretically, to be kept separate. The *Times* case was a clear and troubling signal of how syner-

gistic this relationship was becoming even at some of the nation's most respected news organizations, with advertisers and shareholders clamoring for the upper hand.¹³

And when trained professional journalists such as Stephen Glass of the *New Republic*, Jayson Blair of the *New York Times*, and Jack Kelley of *USA Today* were unmasked as serial liars and fabricators, the scandals revealed systemic failures in editorial oversight.¹⁴ These cases also ignited wide debate about a range of emotionally charged issues, from contemporary race relations in America's newsrooms to the moral character of the modern journalist to the brutal demands of the twenty-four-hour news cycle and the increasing pressures on reporters to entertain, enthrall, and sensationalize.

Plagiarism, fabrication, and similar ethical crimes have appeared almost as regular features of contemporary journalism. Even the biggest lies told by anonymous sources, government insiders, and morally wayward reporters have been accepted uncritically and disseminated as gospel by the press for many reasons: poor verification procedures, the nonstop pressure to be first with the news, even an institutional bent to believe authority at the expense of healthy intellectual skepticism. On the most benign level, such dishonesty has led to an explosion of often-mirthful hoaxes and other comparatively harmless New Media mischief in which both press and citizens have been snookered. On a more serious level, a fabrication during the 2004 presidential campaign helped to end the careers of longtime CBS News anchor Dan Rather and several high-ranking producers.¹⁵ And, worse, this systemic dishonesty played a considerable role in manufacturing support for the march to war in Iraq in 2003 and the loss of tens of thousands of innocent lives.¹⁶

THE SHOW

As I monitored these disparate occurrences in my role as a teacher of professional news reporting and writing, working in a realm far removed from the world of daily journalism and the revolutionary technology sweeping it, and as I tried to piece it all together as part of a larger common fabric, I kept coming back to a single descriptive term—*fraud*—for the complex body of transgressions I was witnessing. I began to see more work in the news media that masqueraded as professional journalism but that in fact was quite the opposite. It was this idea of fraud, coupled with

a desire to figure out a way to talk to my students about the forces seeking to undermine professionalism, which led me in time to believe that these problems were not distinct or separate entities but rather were interconnected parts of a wider and singular phenomenon.

Our civics books tell us that journalism occupies a central role in a society predicated on the power of the people. Its purpose is to exercise its constitutional obligation to inform us truthfully about our communities and the world around us, to hold our elected leaders accountable, and to do so as independently as possible without fear or favor. We have long taken as an article of our national faith that an electorate thus empowered with truth is the surest defense against tyranny, corruption, and oppression.

First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and freedom of the press are certainly no guarantee that democracy will be fair, that the people will be truthfully informed, or that the press itself will be competent, objective, or effective. Journalists, after all, are intended simply to be messengers in a democracy, not instruments of change. Their function is to provide information and context so that citizens and leaders can make decisions to improve society. There is no certainty that an electorate thus empowered with the truth as the news media finds and reports it will translate it into correct decisions and a more just and peaceful society. Nonetheless, this ideal is recognized and shared by journalists and citizens—a standard of excellence, professional mission, and social responsibility in which journalism plays a central and beneficial role in democratic society. It's an ideal worth striving for, one that is today codified with refined rules of practice that were written after centuries of trial, error, failure, and professional evolution.

But such traditional ideals seem almost quaint and somewhat naïve today—anachronisms, or at least afterthoughts, at a time when other motives appear to hold sway in the news media. In fact, the rules are increasingly ignored. Journalism is a profession filled with paradoxes. We seem to hear more about fabricators and plagiarists today than ever before because the news media and the public help to uncover them, often with the aid of technology such as digital databases (to which, ironically, the wrongdoers may have turned to commit their wrongs in the first place). According to a now-familiar pattern of scandal, the wrongdoers are discovered, their crimes are investigated by editors, and then the miscreants are fired. The dismissals, whether at the *Sacramento Bee*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Baltimore Sun*, or the Associated Press, are announced with much self-righteousness by officials who apologize to the public for the individuals' lapses. Credibility, the gate-

keepers vow, is our most sacred stock in trade! Yet we hear little about the similarly sinister frauds committed on institutional levels, the booming business in advertorials pretending to serve as real “news” or the well-paid fakers who sell all manner of products and political causes in the guise of journalism—often with the complicity of the news industry—precisely because a presumed credibility is the journalist’s most valuable asset.

I began to picture significant parts of the news industry, in its myriad forms, as a kind of old-style traveling carnival show packed with entertaining illusions, misdirections, and masquerades, where more and more the show itself is the most important end, a theater of thrills and spills and wonders driven by sensation, myth, propaganda, and stereotype, and not necessarily by the truth. In my mind, this show features updated versions of everything from the dog-faced boys, sword-swallowing midgets, and bearded ladies of old to three-card-monte penny arcades, freak shows, and distorting fun house mirrors. Practically every corner of the lot provides plenty to marvel at, with more acts joining the show each year.

And amid it all are the members of a deeply fragmented American public—perhaps leery of trickery, deception, and lies—bent on simply disbelieving or disregarding large parts of the show, preferring instead to take stock in whatever they *want* to believe in, or be entertained or comforted by, whether it’s Fox News, Comedy Central, or Moveon.org.¹⁷

Today there is “Republican” news, “Democratic” news, third-party news, alternative news, and, with the rise of the Web and the “blogosphere,” new forces in the realm that only accelerate this societal fragmentation. Multitudes of self-publishers on the Web, representing an infinite range of political viewpoints, present rambling blogs, some pretending to be journalistic, that generally attract only like-minded souls who similarly are paddling their own virtual rowboats in the middle of Lake Me.¹⁸ As a society, we seem to be losing the sense that most citizens of the commonweal share knowledge and basic facts generated by trustworthy and independent journalism. This fractured, self-segregating quality of our news and information environment often seems to best serve only the interests of ideologues, as they pander and push to divide us according to “left” or “right,” “conservative” or “liberal,” “dissenter” or “patriot,” not unlike the partisanship that characterized eighteenth-century journalism in American democracy’s unruly infancy.

Many, however, believe that blogging and citizen-based amateur journalism sites on the Web hold great civic promise. The general idea is that the more options we have for news and information of all kinds, and the less control the traditional news media exert over defining what is valuable and true, the better for society, since so many of us are so dissatisfied with what the traditional news media deliver to us. We as citizens can do a better job of reporting and determining what is credible and what is not.¹⁹ This sentiment is a central tenet of what futurists like to describe as our modern New Media news “ecosystem.” At the 2005 conference on blogging, journalism, and credibility described in the introduction, participants optimistically affirmed that “the new emerging media ecosystem has room for citizens’ media like blogs as well as professional news organizations. There will be tensions, but they’ll complement and feed off each other, often working together.”²⁰

All this may be true. But this view also presumes that professionalism in journalism doesn’t matter as much in the New Media age as it did in prior decades, that high standards are not as central to the process of informing the people, and that there is not much qualitative difference between the mission of a free press in the twenty-first century’s news ecosystem and that of the press in the nation’s early years when news came by way of broadsides nailed to tavern doors in the town square by rabid party faithful. In such a new and still-evolving order, governed less and less by professionalism—or at least incognizant of the need for standards—it becomes far easier for objective truth and basic facts about important issues to become debatable notions in civil society and political discourse. The diminishment of standards also means that journalistic crimes like libel and slander, which spurred the development of careful standards of practice in the news media in the past, have become less serious transgressions when committed on the Web, where egregious cases abound.²¹

In such an age of transformation and disintegration, I believe that it becomes, in the end, far more difficult for people to reach agreement or even civilly discuss topics vital to society and even easier for leaders of every political stripe to ignore objective reality altogether for the sake of pursuing initiatives based on expedience and falsehoods.²² A modern democracy exercising so much power in the world should be able to command a stronger, better, and more informed consensus about what is truthful and what is not. In fact, it deserves better.

If there is a serious disconnect between the practices of the media

today and their role in sustaining the healthy functioning of democracy, it is perhaps reflected best by the attitude of the people. Almost routinely, public opinion polls inform us that Americans distrust the news media and the integrity of journalists. In 2002, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that 56 percent of the 1,201 Americans surveyed said that news organizations “often report inaccurately.” In the same survey, 62 percent thought that the media “[tried] to cover up mistakes,” and 53 percent considered the media “politically biased.”²³ A similar poll conducted by Pew in 2003, assessing public attitudes toward media consolidation, found that 71 percent believed that the media were “often influenced by powerful people and organizations,” a rise of 18 percent from 1985, when the organization first asked this question.²⁴

Journalists themselves are concerned that the news media are failing the people. In 2004, Pew researchers reported that more than half of 547 journalists interviewed around the country believed that “journalism is going in the wrong direction,” with significant majorities believing “that increased bottom line pressure is seriously hurting the quality of news coverage.”²⁵ Such pressures have also produced damaging episodes of business chicanery by top-level executives at news media corporations, eroding the trust of both the public and Wall Street. Recent years have seen a spate of scandals in which executives at respected newspapers around America have been accused of inflating circulation figures and engaging in other unethical practices in an effort to boost advertising income in tough economic times, leading in some cases to lawsuits being filed against media conglomerates by advertisers and shareholders who allege fraud.²⁶

That deceptive and unethical practices by the news media are fueling the public’s cynicism perhaps should not be surprising, given the general tenor of American society today. In many ways, we live in an age vividly defined by fraud, which has touched nearly every trusted institution in American life. Millions believe that our presidential elections have been tainted by electoral fraud. Widespread, long-term scandals have swept through our religious life, as trusted moral leaders have been led off to jail for crimes including rape and child sexual abuse. We have been shaken to discover that those we entrust with our life savings have been practicing fraud at the highest levels of the banking and accounting industries, cooking books, fabricating data on profits, thieving from pension and mutual funds. In athletics, fans have hardly been able to tell who is genuinely skilled as a baseball slugger or a track and field sprinter or a Tour de France cyclist and who is instead merely dependent on

performance-enhancing chemicals. Enigmatic, deceptive expressions like “plausibly live” and “virtual reality” have become integral to our cultural lexicon, all aimed at convincing us that fiction is just another version of truth.

In our academies, even leading scholars such as Stephen F. Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin have been compelled to admit plagiarizing portions of their work from other scholars. The problem of intellectual dishonesty and fraud in academia and scientific research has become so troubling that a new peer-reviewed academic journal devoted to this subject, *Plagiarism: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Plagiarism, Fabrication, and Falsification*, was founded in 2006. One of its first articles examined scholarly misconduct in public health research in the wake of the scientific fraud perpetrated by South Korean researcher Hwang Woo Suk, who lied about advances he had made in human cloning.²⁷ On the Web today, one of the fastest-growing educational enterprises is dedicated to investigating whether high school and college student term papers have been plagiarized—particularly in light of other popular online enterprises dedicated to facilitating fraud by selling term papers to students. Investigators, some of whom charge up to twenty dollars per page, claim that at least 30 percent of all student papers submitted for verification of originality prove to have been plagiarized either in whole or in part. Educators are also concerned over students’ use of smuggled graphing calculators, two-way pagers, personal digital assistants, and other technological tools to aid them in cheating during classroom exams.²⁸

Indeed, the emblem of our age of advanced technology, the personal computer, every day attracts a relentless stream of e-mail solicitations from con artists the world over, all of them “phishing” for our bank account and social security numbers. And a contemporary high-tech crime in which a citizen’s very existence can be stolen and exploited by criminals—identity fraud—has become one of the most telltale felonies of our time, claiming nearly ten million new victims in America in 2004 alone.²⁹

That we have become a people accustomed to encountering fraud in nearly every corner of society was illustrated not long ago by a comparatively mundane but revealing episode involving *Newsweek* magazine and Martha Stewart, the homemaking tycoon who has made millions of dollars in a multimedia empire spanning television, books, and magazines. Convicted of insider trading and other fraud charges in connection with her stock dealings, the media diva was hauled off to spend nine months at a federal reformatory in West Virginia in 2004. In anticipa-

tion of Stewart's scheduled release in March 2005, *Newsweek* editors, surely eyeing big newsstand sales based on a Stewart cover, concocted a photo of the sixty-three-year-old celebrity, smiling broadly, entering a stage from behind bright yellow drapes, wearing a pink sweater and shiny jewelry, looking fit, trim, unwrinkled, and beautiful. The headline just below the *Newsweek* nameplate in the March 7, 2005, issue read boldly, "Martha's Last Laugh: After Prison She's Thinner, Wealthier and Ready for Prime Time."

Of course, there are no clean yellow drapes in federal prisons, no pink sweaters and jewelry, and the photo wasn't shot anywhere near Stewart's clink in the Appalachians. The magazine's editors instead had used high-tech digital tools to fabricate a very convincing cover shot, using a headshot of a smiling Stewart from happier times long ago and blending it atop the slender body of an anonymous model, while resorting to other photo retouching fakery to craft the rest of the homey scene. Inside the magazine, in a credit line in tiny type on page 3, the editors pointed out that the cover image was something called a "photo illustration."

Here we had a public figure convicted of perjury and acts of fraud in one institutional corner of American life, high finance, being heralded shortly before her release from jail by an act of fraud in another institutional corner, the press. Leaving aside the fact that few professional journalists, much less millions of American citizens, know what the deceptive and enigmatic term "photo illustration" means, the fakery committed by *Newsweek* and the later defenses offered by the magazine's editor underscore how inured we have become to such media chicanery.

After *USA Today* first reported on the deception, National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* program caught up with Lynn Staley, assistant managing editor at *Newsweek*, to interview her about how and why the cover was concocted and whether the magazine had intended to dupe readers:

Robert Siegel: Lynn Staley, if it's not a simple photograph of Martha Stewart, what is it?

Ms. Lynn Staley: (Assistant Managing Editor, *Newsweek*): It's a photo illustration, which is how we designated it on our table of contents. And it's our practice to identify our photography, our photo illustrations, in that fashion . . .

Siegel: Well, let's deconstruct this a little bit. Is this on the cover of *Newsweek*—is that the body of Martha Stewart?

Ms. Staley: It is, as far as I know, not the body of Martha Stewart. She was unavailable to us.

Siegel: Because she is in prison.

Ms. Staley: That is right.

Siegel: Is it the head of Martha Stewart?

Ms. Staley: It is, in fact, the head of Martha Stewart.

Siegel: In prison, or from some other time?

Ms. Staley: I'm not exactly sure when that picture was taken, but it was not within the last five months.

Siegel: So it's an old picture . . .

Ms. Staley: Yes.

Siegel: . . . of Martha Stewart's face stuck on somebody else's body. Fair game? I mean, don't we look at this and think that's a picture of Martha Stewart?

Ms. Staley: Well, it appears that there are enough people who have believed that we've somehow managed to orchestrate a photo shoot with Martha in the prison, which we did not. And we had no intention of trying to fool anybody or trick anybody into thinking that we had.

Siegel: Where are the boundaries here? I mean, you could have taken a picture of Martha Stewart with the body of a figure skater or the body of a professional women's basketball player. I mean, you could have done any number of things to make Martha Stewart appear to be doing something. Where do you transgress?

Ms. Staley: Well, I would have to say we did not feel that this was a transgression. The piece is about Martha's emergence, and we wanted to look ahead to what her future was likely to be. And so the illustration was meant to reflect *Newsweek's* angle on the story and was crafted to reiterate that take.

Siegel: But isn't the point here also that—I mean, this cover—this is Martha Stewart I'm looking at. It's not an artist's rendering of Martha Stewart; it's a picture of Martha Stewart, which is somehow more—it conveys a sense of greater objectivity than a painting.

Ms. Staley: Yes, and—I mean, I'm not going to try and say that there's no gray area here because, of course, the joke is richer. But in fact, without the intention to deceive, which we clearly—I mean, we could not have been more explicit about how we labeled this . . .

Siegel: . . . do you have any regrets at all about it?

Ms. Staley: I think that, you know, we have to be a little careful. I mean, maybe the worst thing I could say is that we were possibly just a little too successful here.

Siegel: A little too convincing, a little too realistic.

Ms. Staley: Yeah. A little too successful, yes.³⁰

In replies amounting to truly acrobatic feats of convoluted logic, the *Newsweek* editor explained to the public that the magazine's journalists certainly had "no intention" of deceiving citizens by concocting and publishing the phony image as if it were the real thing and insisted that the only wrong to which she was willing to admit was not an ethical "transgression" per se, but more a minor error in judgment. The editors were simply "a little too successful" in deceiving the public. (Successful in more ways than one, by the way: that week's issue became one of the biggest sellers of the year for *Newsweek*.)

In the following week's issue, the magazine's editors apologized for the misleading effect of such "photo illustrations" on reader perceptions and promised to use clearer language on the cover to identify a composite when it resorted to such fakery again. And resort to it the magazine would, the editors implied, since such practices, by Staley's own admission, had become standard and accepted in their editorial processes. In short, the editors told readers that the next time the magazine purposefully committed such fraud, they would abide by a newer and tougher ethical standard for the sake of reader credibility: they would *announce* it.³¹

The Stewart controversy was reminiscent of a similar furor over *Time* magazine's doctoring of a photo of O. J. Simpson for a cover published the same week the football star was arrested and charged with the murder of his wife and another man in June 1994. *Time's* photo editors had taken a copy of Simpson's mug shot, which had been snapped by Los Angeles police, and significantly altered it, darkening his skin color from tan to near-black and deepening the shadows around his eyes and forehead. The editors performed this doctoring for aesthetic effect, to make Simpson's image appear much more threatening and fierce and in the process enhancing the cover's potential for sensation and newsstand attention. But it disturbed journalism ethicists and especially outraged many African Americans, who had long been sensitive to white racism and the subliminal association of dark skin with crime, lawlessness, and evil intent. *Time's* managing editor issued a full-page apology in the magazine's July 4, 1994, issue. "To a certain extent our critics are absolutely right," he wrote. "Altering news pictures is a risky practice, since only documentary authority makes photography of any value in the practice of journalism."³²

But more than a decade later, such doctoring through the use of sophisticated digital tools continues apace as an accepted news industry practice, largely because the business of selling magazines often assumes much higher priority than protecting the honor of the journalism the magazines produce. Indeed, while the Martha Stewart controversy may

have represented a comparatively minor blip in the cavalcade of news media misdeeds in recent times, it nonetheless highlighted a significant economic fact about the contrasting values many news organizations place on truth and artifice today: a top photo retoucher and airbrush specialist who is expert at using digital skills to enhance, manipulate, or fabricate imagery can easily command more than \$10,000 for creative work on a single magazine photograph, and more than \$20,000 if that photograph appears on a magazine cover. This latter figure, earned for several hours of doctoring, is barely \$7,000 less than the median *annual* starting salary of an American newspaper reporter with an undergraduate degree in journalism, \$4,000 less than the median annual salary for a local television news reporter, and \$3,000 less than the median annual salary for a radio news reporter.³³

MADAMS AND CUSTOMERS

The *Newsweek* controversy also points to more serious problems with photojournalism in general and its role in a rapidly changing and complex world. Nowadays anyone with a computer and image editing software tools can easily manipulate, fabricate, and disseminate faked images and documents for whatever purpose, from practical jokes and hoaxes to political provocation. Examples abound, including efforts to undermine the bid of presidential candidate John Kerry by publishing a doctored photo dating from his days as an antiwar activist in the 1960s and an attempt to sway British opinion of the war in Iraq by having a leading London daily publish fabricated and staged photos of British soldiers torturing and urinating on Iraqi prisoners.³⁴

But when respected publications and journalists themselves commit such deceptions and later defend them before the public as accepted operating procedure, citizens are left with very little to trust or believe in. Why should we trust them? If journalists observe no higher ethical standards than your run-of-the mill political provocateur, snake oil advertiser, or political propagandist, how can journalists claim to be our gatekeepers of truth?

Most journalists who are unmasked as fabricators and con artists these days are hounded out of the industry, especially if they are low-level practitioners with no friends in high places. But it can be astonishing to witness the double standard that protects the powerful. Consider the career of Rick Kaplan, who occupied the top post at MSNBC News until his resignation in June 2006. Back in 1994, as executive editor of

World News Tonight with Peter Jennings at ABC News, Kaplan orchestrated a sleight of hand straight out of a carnival barker's handbook when he hurriedly ordered correspondent Cokie Roberts to don a winter trench coat one cold January night on deadline and to stand shivering, microphone in hand, before an image of the U.S. Capitol projected on a wall behind her in ABC's warm and cushy Washington studios. The intent was to fool millions of viewers into believing that the reporter was actually on the scene as she delivered a live news report on congressional reaction to that night's State of the Union Address by President Clinton.³⁵ Today, Roberts has outlived the ethical embarrassment and remains a high-salaried correspondent for ABC. Kaplan, too, advanced to a powerful news position as president at MSNBC after a similar stint at CNN, where he survived the so-called Tailwind scandal in 1998. In that instance, the news network, under his charge, broadcast a report that the United States had used nerve gas in Laos during the Vietnam war. But the evidence turned out to be fraudulent, and that scandal cost news correspondent Peter Arnett and two producers their jobs.³⁶

Historians with broad perspective on the storied and certainly colorful past of journalism on this continent tell us that in fact little of today's bounty of mischief is particularly new. Doctoring of photographs and other forms of image fakery go back as far as the invention of photography in the early nineteenth century. During the heyday of the sensationalist tabloid newspaper era in New York City, in the 1910s and 1920s, it was not uncommon for photo editors at the *Daily News*, the *Mirror*, and the *Evening Graphic* to stage or fabricate images in the hunt for readers and circulation boosts. A typical example was the *Evening Graphic's* cleverly crafted front-page photographic composite, made from a psychic's description, of an angelically robed Enrico Caruso, the singer, greeting romantic actor Rudolph Valentino in heaven shortly after the latter's death in 1927.³⁷

This tradition of tricked-up photography continues today, most often in the grocery store tabloids like the *Mirror* and the *Star*, which regularly present arresting images such as "monkey-boys" dwelling in caves on Mars and Adolph Hitler's return to life as a hardware merchant in Dublin, Ohio, serving as a secret mentor to Osama bin Laden. Yet episodes of photo doctoring also regularly occur in the mainstream press, despite prohibitions against it in nearly every journalistic code of ethics. Much of this doctoring is cosmetic, such as the intensive digital work performed to make runway models and movie stars appear radiant. But

at times the doctoring is extreme and touches on deadly serious issues. One of the more notable controversies during the Iraq war involved a *Los Angeles Times* photographer, Brian Walski, who was fired after admitting that he had digitally altered the dramatic quality of an image of a British soldier guarding Iraqi civilians by combining features of two different photos. The faked photo was published on the front page of the *Times* and featured prominently in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Hartford Courant*, among other newspapers, testimony to the ease of deception in the digital age.³⁸

It's also not a news flash that in the history of American journalism, publicists, PR hacks, advertisers, and other outside political and business interests have long played influential roles in determining the kinds of news we get and when, where, and how we get it. Although Thomas Jefferson once famously claimed that if he had to choose between having a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, he "wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter" as a bulwark against tyranny, he is also well known for some of the more damning quotes about journalism ever penned: "Advertisements contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper," he wrote in 1778. "Journalists and ad men agree that this is a half truth, but are unable to agree which half is truthful." A famous image by cartoonist Art Young, published in 1912 in the socialist magazine *The Masses*, vividly depicted a newsroom as a whorehouse, with the bald-headed editor as a "madam" in a fetching nightgown, a fat-cat advertiser as the "customer" at the newsroom entryway, puffing on a cigar, and legions of reporters and other editorial employees as prostitutes in various poses of undress beckoning for the mogul's attention.³⁹

Press critic A. J. Liebling believed that the news we receive daily is largely dictated by the whims of downtown "dry goods merchants." It was Jef I. Richards, an oft-quoted advertising professor at the University of Texas at Austin, who once said in defense of the honor of the public relations and advertising professions, "There is a huge difference between journalism and advertising. Journalism aspires to truth. Advertising is regulated for truth. I'll put the accuracy of the average ad in this country up against the average news story any time." And it was a contemporary journalist, Alexander Cockburn, who once derided his profession's tendencies to reinforce ignorance and bias and commit deceit when he observed that "the First Law of Journalism is to confirm existing prejudice, rather than contradict it."⁴⁰

From the days of Upton Sinclair's *Brass Check*, an early twentieth-century critique of the U.S. media that depicted journalism as a slut servicing public relations, political, and advertising powers, there has been

no shortage of critics and cynics decrying the profession's failures, its systemic corruption, and the harm its unethical practices have inflicted on democratic society.⁴¹ In fact, we are not so far removed from the days when it was common for tabloid reporters to masquerade as surgeons, nurses, cops, or private detectives or to use hidden cameras in order to get scoops and when political and advertising payola greased the news industry even more blatantly than it does now. Not long ago, in a lovely reminiscence about his father, the legendary *New York Times* sports columnist Red Smith, who died in 1982, journalist Terrence Smith described how his father got his first newspaper sportswriting job in 1920s-era St. Louis:

My father told a story, which may even be true, of how he ended up in sports by happenstance. When he was a copy editor for *The St. Louis Star* (it's gone now; my father always claimed to have killed every paper he worked for but the *New York Times*), there was apparently a scandal after it was discovered that three reporters in the sports department were on the take. The three were fired and the editor called my father over. As my father told it, the following conversation ensued.

Editor: Smith, what do you know about sports?

Smith: Just what the average fan knows, sir.

Editor: Are you honest, Smith?

Smith: I hope so, sir.

Editor: What would you do if a fight promoter offered you \$10 to write about his fighter?

Smith: (long pause) Ten dollars is a lot of money, sir.

Editor: That's an honest answer, Smith. Report to the sports department.⁴²

As citizens and professional journalists, we presume that we are far removed from those days. Journalistic standards and codes of ethics are far more advanced now than they once were, industry leaders repeatedly assure us. But what of the abuses we witness? Journalism's evolution and standards of practice should not be cyclical like the highs and lows of the economy, subject to changing performance and expectation depending on market forces. Is it too much to expect that the advances in professional journalism should be as lasting as advances in engineering or science or medicine? Shouldn't we demand that the industry that gives us news and information be scrupulous about reporting the truth independently without reverting to the bad practices of the past, just as we expect that the airline industry will not revert to producing propeller-driven biplanes made of canvas, glue, and hand-carved sheets of spruce? Journalism has progressed too far for the profession to tolerate today's

abuses. In a world of vast media penetration, dazzling technology, and unrestrained capitalism, the wrongs of journalism do seem manifestly greater, more sinister, and potentially more damaging than ever. In an era we have come to know as the Information Age, the Nuclear Age, and the Age of Terror all at once, the stakes for truth, lies, inaccuracies, and compromised reporting are that much higher, often resulting in actions that have life-and-death consequences.⁴³

In key ways, journalistic corruption inflicts more significant damage to the fabric of a free society today than systemic dishonesty in most other institutions in American life. Fraud in journalism goes far beyond the material or transitory, especially at a time in world history when the American electorate wields more power for good and ill on the planet than any society in human history. Journalism is the lifeblood through which democracy and a just society are sustained, its entire worth dependent on credibility. Its power for good is generated by a professional devotion, dedication, and ability to get things right—and by having the sustained courage to do so in the face of power. When wrongdoing infects this process, when journalism reverts to its worst tendencies, the long-term damage is far more extensive than the sight of CEOs and accountants hauled off to jail for cooking books.

When professional journalism is systemically weakened in an age when we should expect it to be better after centuries of refinement aimed at creating higher standards, our faith in what joins us as a people in a civil society is also damaged in a way that is difficult to repair. It's this very lack of faith that seems to characterize much of the public's attitude toward the news industry. Indeed, perhaps the most disturbing sign of journalism's general disconnection from citizens in this era of doubt is the alarming degree to which our society has become so fractured that we are unable to agree on even the most basic facts about our lives, our communities, and the world.

Shortly after the 2004 presidential election, the University of Maryland reported in a survey that more than 70 percent of those who voted for George W. Bush in the November 2004 elections believed wrongly that the administration had found proof that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. These same voters believed wrongly that world opinion supported the American invasion of Iraq. These voters also were convinced that Saddam Hussein's regime had a direct link to al-Qaeda terrorists and the 9/11 attack on America, despite all official evidence and widespread news coverage to the contrary on each point. This poll showed that millions of these voters relied heavily on Fox News, owned

by Rupert Murdoch, as their chief source for news and information, a finding that underscored the power of political bombast and argumentative tone to fuel events around the globe more quickly and significantly than professional journalism. The researchers reported that viewers of Fox, today the nation's most highly rated news channel and the news source most closely aligned with Republican Party interests, were nearly four times as likely to hold demonstrably untrue views about the circumstances surrounding the war in Iraq as Americans who relied instead on National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).⁴⁴

Since its founding in 1996, the Fox News channel has built a strong and loyal following among millions of Americans who consistently hear the channel describe itself as dedicated to a "fair and balanced" presentation of the news. Ratings for Fox grew by 7 percent in 2005 alone. For the fifth consecutive year, the channel, with its wide assortment of conservative-oriented news discussion programs, remained the most widely watched twenty-four-hour cable news network in America.⁴⁵ But the channel's greatest influence on American society and our news culture has come not from the network's journalistic contributions to the nation's public record but instead from its formula for economic success, a formula that features as its centerpiece not news but news talk programs hosted by combative personalities. In many ways, Fox News occupies a center stage in the American carnival, a sideshow of its own making where fiery bombast, entertainment, sensation, idle comment, and punditry serve as cheaper and livelier substitutes for actual news reporting and investigation. Unfortunately, we have seen its network and cable competitors struggle hard to follow suit.⁴⁶

Jim Rendon, a former graduate student of mine now working as a staff writer for *SmartMoney* magazine in New York City, expressed it this way in an e-mail message not long ago, reflecting on the powerful and profitable nexus of entertainment and political bias in the news and the effect on democratic society:

There are so many outlets offering so many different versions of events that people are increasingly able to read only those stories that bolster their opinions. While I am no fan of the objective journalism model (I am in the point of view backed up by fair and accurate reporting camp), I think we are heading towards a crisis of fact. There is simply less public consensus about what has actually occurred. People should look at journalism with a skeptical eye. However, partisan attacks on the media have made people more skeptical of stories that do not mesh with their political beliefs, yet completely accepting of those that do.

AGES OF TRANSFORMATION

When I left daily journalism in 1992 after sixteen years at the *Washington Post* and a stint at *Newsweek* magazine, I had little idea that I was about to find myself straddling two contrasting eras in the modern history of the news media. At age fifty-two, like most journalists of my time, I consider myself part of a generation that was motivated to join the profession by a series of inspiring works and acts of reportorial courage that in many ways defined American journalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

I was six years old on Thanksgiving Day in 1960 when I watched the CBS Reports program *Harvest of Shame* with my family on our first black-and-white television set. This landmark documentary, in which the chain-smoking Edward R. Murrow brought the hardships of migrant farmworkers to millions of American living rooms, proved the power of television to inform and move the public. At fifteen, in high school in Seattle, my pals and I scanned an issue of *Life* magazine one afternoon in the library, all of us stunned into silence as we viewed page after page of names and faces of Americans killed in Vietnam in only one week. At sixteen, I was moved by the corporate bravery exhibited by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in defying the Nixon administration and publishing the Pentagon Papers, which detailed the secret history of our nation's involvement in Indochina. And at twenty, while in college, I followed the resignation of President Nixon in the wake of the Watergate scandal, a story broken by two young newspaper reporters, barely ten years older than I was, who followed hunches and investigated public records for the sake of getting at the truth and informing Americans about wrongdoing by their elected leaders. The Fourth Estate did its job, and, amazingly, the system worked, just as the Constitution promised it would. As a young citizen seeking to immerse myself in the spirit of my times, I was thrilled by the experience of learning about the press and its role in society.

Many still see those years from the late 1950s through the 1970s as a kind of golden age of American journalism, a time when television in particular came into its own as a journalistic medium. In the early days of television, the three networks began to see tremendous value in (and bestowed generous budgets on) news and documentary divisions as a way not just to gain ratings and profits but also, and equally important, to earn prestige. Interestingly, the chief impetus for the rise of TV news was an odd mix of civic-mindedness and abject penitence. It came as a direct result of the quiz show scandals of the late 1950s, when congress-

sional hearings revealed the full extent of fraud polluting the new medium. The networks worked hard to repair and restore their credibility as institutions in American culture, and it was through news—professional journalism—that the networks found it. NBC's White Papers, the groundbreaking CBS Reports documentary series, and the nightly news programs on each of the three networks came about as a direct result of the networks' fears that the Federal Communications Commission would revoke their licenses unless they demonstrated sustained and serious commitment to public service in the aftermath of the scandals.⁴⁷

The rise of professional television journalism and its stunning capacity to provide instant coverage of breaking events, from political assassinations to moon landings to inner-city riots, also sparked reforms and improvements in the print media, just as it led to the demise of many evening newspapers and the marginalization of radio as a journalistic force. Unable to compete with television's immediacy, newspapers and magazines worked harder to produce investigative and explanatory journalism that provided badly needed context to news events that television couldn't match. Such crosscurrents in the evolution of journalism during that age helped to shape a better, more informative, and more responsive press.

But like most so-called golden ages in our cultural history, that period in journalism looks better in hindsight than it actually was, the bright glow of its achievements relegating its many failures and problems to the shadows.⁴⁸ In fact, this notion of a "golden" period is more mythical than real. This was, after all, the same era in which the nation's newsrooms remained almost entirely white and male, so segregated and disconnected from the lives of millions of Americans that when the Watts race riot erupted in 1965, for example, editors of the *Los Angeles Times* were compelled to enlist a black clerk in the advertising department named Robert Richardson to hurry to the community to report on the violence. The newspaper had never employed a single black journalist on its staff, and few in the sea of white faces in the newsroom even knew where Watts was.⁴⁹

During the early years of that golden age, corporate and advertising pressures were not uncommon, with product placements in network evening news programs even more blatant than they are today on the network morning news shows. The first nightly news program NBC aired at the dawn of the new medium in 1950 was named after a cigarette company, the *Camel News Caravan*. Former NBC News president Reuven Frank, recalling his rollicking early days in television news in his 1991 memoir, *Out of Thin Air*, wrote revealingly about the overt restrictions advertisers placed on news content. In an interview with Robert Siegel

on NPR's *All Things Considered*, Frank, who was the chief writer for the NBC news program, expanded on his memory of an anecdote about Camel cigarettes that said a great deal not only about the struggle to raise journalistic standards but also about the almost Orwellian, and at times hysterical, control that advertisers sought over journalism:

Mr. Frank: I was not allowed to use any picture that had a no smoking sign in it. I was not allowed to use a picture of a live camel, of the animal the camel.

Siegel: That wouldn't be a problem occurring very often but what was their objection to seeing a live camel on the news.

Mr. Frank: Well to them a camel was this sweet-smelling cigarette endorsed by doctors. And the real camel, as anybody who has been to a zoo knows, is a large and smelly beast that is likely to spit at you or kick you. The serious problem came in the proscription of any picture of a man smoking a cigar.

Siegel: That is someone smoking something other than a cigarette.

Mr. Frank: Other than a cigarette, a cigar. They were not in the cigar business. And this was very difficult because at that time the most famous face in all the world was that of the former prime minister, the leader to victory, Winston Churchill. And Churchill's face always had a cigar in it. And if you could not use anybody smoking a cigar, you were going to miss some important news.

Siegel: You couldn't show a picture of Churchill.

Mr. Frank: I guess occasionally you could get a shot. But to do a story about Churchill, you could not do it without a cigar. So I went to the people I work for and I said, you can't do this. I mean, something has got to be done about it. And they were terrified. They were terrified, first of all because they were second-raters . . . otherwise they wouldn't have been in television. And also NBC had won this in a competition with CBS, and Camel paid enough for that program to run the entire television news department. So they did not want [anything] to jeopardize that.

And I said, well then I'll go down. I was the lowest man in the pecking order. I was the writer. And I said, I will go down to the agency and ask them. And I trotted myself down to 42nd Street, to the offices of the William Esty Company, and I said, look, you've got to give me some kind of dispensation on the cigar rule, otherwise I can't use Churchill and I can't run a news program. And without any argument he said, fine, okay. And I felt, you know, why all this stress, all this angst? And I thanked him and I headed to the door, and as I got to the door of his office, I was about to leave and he said, but only Churchill. I said how about Groucho Marx? He said no.

Siegel: So there was one cigar smoker permitted on your program.

Mr. Frank: In the entire population of the earth at that time, I could show one of them smoking a cigar and no others.⁵⁰

It is also true that some of the finest and most courageous journalism practiced between the early 1950s and the early 1970s came not from the established mainstream news media but rather from the alternative press on society's margins. Less constrained by traditional socioeconomic or political sensibilities, such publications went forward with stories that most outlets either missed or were afraid to publish. On September 15, 1955, for example, *Jet* magazine printed the horrific photos of fourteen-year-old lynching victim Emmett Till, who had been beaten, shot, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River by white vigilantes, images that helped to galvanize the civil rights struggle. In 1969, freelance investigative journalist Seymour Hersh broke the explosive story of the massacre of Vietnamese villagers at My Lai by American GIs, more than a year and a half after the mainstream press had initially and falsely reported the atrocity as a victory by American troops over Viet Cong insurgents. Hersh's Pulitzer-winning work—which led to U.S. military tribunals and the criminal conviction of an officer responsible for the killings—first appeared in a tiny alternative news agency called Dispatch News Service. The My Lai story was eventually picked up by more than thirty newspapers, though *Life* and *Look* magazines both rejected it.⁵¹

With all its flaws, however, that era did offer up journalistic heroes aplenty, reporters with conviction, talent, and heart who inspired thousands of young Americans to consider journalism not just a career option but a noble and worthy calling. And one that was beginning to open its doors to minorities and women, after the tumult of the 1960s. Reading the work of newspaper writers such as Charlayne Hunter-Gault at the *New York Times* or witnessing television reporters such as Max Robinson anchor the news at ABC, young black college students and women graduates considering career paths in the early 1970s found compelling evidence that mainstream journalism was willing to adjust to seismic societal shifts to improve itself, to accept the call for equal opportunity, and to admit people who had traditionally been kept outside that mainstream.

The litany of widely admired names from that era—Murrow, Woodward, Bernstein, Huntley, Brinkley, Cronkite—remains to modern professional journalism what names like Koufax, Mays, and Aaron from baseball's golden age in the 1950s and 1960s are to the sport today. But that age has become little more than a flickering memory in many ways. Perhaps the most fitting signal of its demise came in the form of a some-

what anticlimactic revelation in 2005 of one of the era's most closely held secrets: the name of "Deep Throat," a former FBI official named Mark Felt, whose role as an anonymous source during the Watergate scandal proved critical in American journalism's finest hour.

By contrast, the heroes and inspirations for the new generation of reporters entering the profession today from classrooms like mine seem to come not from the ranks of editors and reporters who publish and broadcast meaningful works of political and social significance, but from those who make courageous ethical and moral stands against corporate, economic, and political pressures that often derive from the very news organizations that employ them, pressures that conflict with the journalist's mission to seek truth and report it. Investigative reporter Lowell Bergman, for example, is perhaps most famous not for his considerable achievements in print and broadcast journalism but for his resignation under protest in 1997 when CBS News bowed to corporate and legal pressures and declined to broadcast a story of his that was critical of the tobacco industry. Consider, too, Jon Lieberman, a respected Washington, D.C., news bureau chief employed by broadcasting giant Sinclair Corporation. Lieberman was fired shortly before the 2004 presidential election when he publicly opposed the archconservative company's plan to broadcast a politically biased documentary attacking the military experience of Democratic candidate John Kerry under the guise of "news."⁵²

And consider young Baghdad-based *Wall Street Journal* reporter Farnaz Fassihi, a thirty-one-year-old graduate of the Columbia University School of Journalism and an example of the finest and most committed journalists of her generation, who sent an emotionally moving e-mail letter to friends in America about her experiences as a journalist in Iraq in 2004. Fassihi told the truth as she saw it, explaining in raw, gut-wrenching detail the suffering and painful reality of life for millions of Iraqi civilians pressed between the insurgency and the American occupation. After the letter was publicly disseminated via the Internet, however, she was vilified by right-wing activists in the United States who accused her of possessing a hidden agenda against the war. The political furor mounted against her grew so intense that *Journal* editors were moved to encourage Fassihi to take a vacation from her post.⁵³

The furor can be economic as well as political. One of journalism's most respected top executives of recent times, Jay Harris, a veteran newsman, gained national acclaim for his decision in March 2001 to resign his post, under protest, as publisher at the *San Jose Mercury News*.

One of the few African Americans holding top newsroom posts in American journalism, Harris chose to quit after being ordered by the newspaper's parent, Knight Ridder Corporation, to trim newsroom costs at the *Mercury News*, including editorial positions and news production, in order to boost the corporation's profitability. With profit margins in newspapers already ranging from 22 to 29 percent, Harris charged in a memo to his staff that he simply could no longer accept the relentless corporate pressure that was compromising the practice of news reporting and the public's right to know. Knight Ridder's new revenue targets could not be achieved, he wrote, "without risking significant and lasting harm to the *Mercury News* as a journalistic enterprise."⁵⁴

The 2004 winner of a prestigious Ancil Payne Award, given annually by the University of Oregon to a professional journalist who fosters "public trust in the media by courageously practicing [the] profession in the face of severe political or economic pressures," was Virginia Gerst, a features editor at the *Pioneer-Press* in Glenview, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. Her achievement? She resigned after a twenty-seven-year career at the newspaper when the publisher, Larry Green, ordered her to produce a favorable review of a local restaurant. Green was eager to regain the eatery's lucrative advertising revenue, but Gerst objected on the grounds that the restaurant was simply no good and that such a review would serve neither the truth nor the public interest.⁵⁵

But identifying such heroes and inspirations can be a complicated task in today's news environment. Longtime *New York Times* investigative reporter and former Mideast correspondent Judith Miller was jailed in June 2005 by a federal judge on contempt charges in connection with her refusal to divulge information about an incident in which the identity of a CIA operative, Valerie Plame, was publicly divulged. Under federal law, it is a crime to reveal the names of CIA agents. Miller had never published an article naming Plame, but prosecutors wanted to know what she had been told while she was working on a possible story. For nearly two years, Miller and the *Times* fought for the right to protect the confidentiality of her sources. When the Supreme Court refused to hear her last appeal, she went off to federal prison rather than capitulate.

In earlier times, Miller's action might have seemed brave, admirable, and deeply honorable, attracting support from citizens and peers. But Miller had already become widely known not for her courage in that case but for her disturbing failures as a reporter in the months leading to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Her overreliance on questionable

sources who peddled fraudulent information on Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, published in numerous *Times* stories, helped to frame official debates over the rationale for the invasion, deceptively so, at a critical time in the nation's history.⁵⁶ Indeed, Miller's work came to symbolize a troubling wider culture of failed skepticism, weakened investigative zeal, and unquestioning acceptance of authority that characterized much of the mainstream media's coverage of power centers in Washington on this issue. Not long after Miller made a deal with prosecutors and was released from jail in 2005, after eighty-five days behind bars, the *Times* and Miller agreed that she would resign from the newspaper.

But perhaps the most revealing irony in the saga came with the revelation of the name of the anonymous source Miller had so staunchly sought to protect from prosecutors and the American public. It turned out to be a figure who had played an important role in her national intelligence reporting before the invasion: I. Lewis (Scooter) Libby. Far from a brave, Norma Rae–like whistle-blower or an ethically minded Deep Throat insider seeking to correct injustice or criminal wrongs—which is the popularly accepted model of the credible anonymous source whose identity is worth going to jail to protect—Libby represented something else entirely: as Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, Libby was one of the nation's most powerful political operatives. According to court documents, Libby figured prominently as an anonymous source in a concerted White House political campaign in 2003 in which his superiors gave him explicit orders to leak classified information to Miller and other reporters to counter and discredit the claims being made by authoritative dissenters that Iraq represented no military threat to the United States.⁵⁷

One of those dissenters was Joseph C. Wilson, a former foreign service diplomat who in 2002 had been commissioned by the CIA to investigate claims regarding Iraq's quest for nuclear capabilities. In a column published in the *New York Times* after the invasion, Wilson concluded that the administration's intelligence had been "twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat."⁵⁸ Wilson was the husband of Valerie Plame, a CIA agent and an expert in the field of weapons development in the Third World, whose identity Libby is alleged to have unlawfully revealed to reporters as part of the political campaign to discredit opposition. Libby was eventually indicted on federal charges of perjury and obstruction of justice in connection with the leak.

In the end, the Miller episode dramatically revealed unsettling ambi-

guities, suspicion, and moral ambivalence surrounding contemporary journalism and its expected function in American society. In essence, here was the professional journalist, Miller, and by extension the nation's most prestigious and influential newspaper, the *New York Times*, steadfastly protecting not the whistle-blower who could provide crucial information on a deadly serious issue, but the powerful forces seeking to *undermine* the whistle-blower. Here was the professional journalist going to jail to protect not the brave "little guy" or the ethical, well-placed insider, but instead a figure who was working to shore up the highest ranks of entrenched political power in the land.⁵⁹

The morally complex and troubling lessons of the Miller saga stand in sharp contrast to the tragic story of Daniel Pearl, the talented *Wall Street Journal* reporter who was taken hostage when he went out one night in 2002 in Karachi, Pakistan, to interview a suspected member of al-Qaeda. Here was a journalist not much older than the students in my classroom, performing his job according to the most honorable traditions of truth seeking. Yet even here his experience represents a most anguished and defining episode about the professional journalist's uncertain place in the modern age. If the idea of inspiration in journalism today often comes from the experiences of reporters who must defy their institutions to tell the news, the martyrdom of this young reporter, whose murder by Muslim terrorists was recorded on video and distributed on the Internet by his killers as a political statement, says something far more distressing. The journalist's job is to tell the news, and sometimes this means possessing exceptional courage to go out and find it. But is this important mission worth sacrificing one's life? What sort of profession is journalism today, and what sort of world are we creating, that allows for such a senseless horror to befall a human being in the course of practicing an honorable profession? What sort of weird and obscene commodity is news when killers use the same digital tools of communication that journalists do to report their evil for political purposes the world over? Are Pearl's life and death examples of heroism we should honor, a story to inspire us in our collective cultural and professional memory, as the memory of World War II martyr Ernie Pyle does? Or is Pearl's experience instead a chilling caution, a warning, a lesson about the increasingly fragile place professional journalism occupies in this age of rampant and meaningless violence, even when it is performed correctly and with the highest ethical purpose? These complex questions serve as resonant indicators of the enigmatic quality of the

profession's role in the modern world—questions that remain challenging for a teacher to answer.

The truth is that professional journalism continues to play a complicated but critical role in a rapidly changing technological society. As troubled as journalism is today, it remains a craft more vital to democracy than ever. Despite all its shortcomings, and somewhat paradoxically, I believe that it is in many ways being practiced more effectively and certainly in far more varied styles than ever. I believe that this is true for certain corners of alternative media as well as for the so-called corporate and New Media. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* are, in my eyes, the world's finest daily publications, the gold standard in public service-oriented news reporting and writing, newspapers whose value to society becomes ever clearer in the face of the economic struggles and demise of so many other print media. Among magazines, the *New Yorker* remains at the top of its game today, producing perhaps its finest reporting and providing an example of piercing, literary journalism, despite the harsh economic realities that confront the rest of the industry.

In addition, the exciting rise of online publications such as Salon.com, devoted to solid and fair journalism, points to the value of the Web as a new source of reporting. The emergence of journalistic blogs similarly offers optimism about the future of online sites as watchdogs and whistleblowers keeping an eye on the media, government, and industry and as sounding boards for instant public feedback, civic participation, and comment. Reporters and writers at other alternative media, from the *East Bay Express* to the *Washington City Paper*, broadcast organizations like the PBS *Frontline* documentary series, and the terrific family of news and information programs produced and distributed by National Public Radio, continue to produce effective and meaningful professional journalism in the finest traditions of the craft.

Interestingly, just eight years after the *Los Angeles Times* scandal in which the paper's owners allowed advertisers to control editorial content in a Sunday magazine featuring the city's new sports arena, the newspaper stood up to a major advertiser, earning, to its credit, such extraordinary animus from General Motors over a series of critical articles about GM vehicles in 2005 that the auto giant pulled all its advertising from the *Times*. The contrast between the two incidents was remarkable and represented a rare exception to the synergistic trends that have melded news and business interests throughout the modern media. Here was the largest newspaper in a state with the nation's largest number of auto-

mobile buyers standing up to the nation's largest automaker, despite the repercussions for its bottom line. The action of the *Times* and GM's response (it rescinded its ban on *Times* advertising four months later) seemed to convey the welcome civic message that in journalism the public interest could trump business interest when it came to reporting the news.⁶⁰

One young former student of mine, who is employed as a beat writer covering education for a national daily newspaper, not long ago expressed this feeling of social efficacy and professional fulfillment in an e-mail message about his own work and his view of the news media and its future:

I'm actually more optimistic, believe it or not. I came to journalism from activism, having grown tired of ramming my head against the brick wall of the status quo. I expected to enjoy writing about social issues as a journalist, but not necessarily to change things. Little did I know what an impact writing and journalism would have. I have affected federal legislation quite a few times, on a number of issues. I have also had a very tangible impact on policy. Some of my articles have helped close loopholes that gave excessive subsidies to companies at the expense of students. Others have stopped the administration from effectively cutting student grants. In all, these changes have meant that literally hundreds of millions of dollars more have been spent on federal financial aid than otherwise would have been.

Yet his experience in journalism, one in which his skill, talent, classroom learning, and professional idealism have clearly translated into tremendous workplace satisfaction, represents something of an exception to what I have come to know about the lives of young journalists in the industry today. Their lives are often very difficult, often as fraught with moral challenges and disappointments as with inadequate compensation. Nowadays young journalists are compelled to work harder and harder, in more forms of media, from radio and television to blogging, in newsrooms where punishing twenty-four-hour cycles have replaced set deadlines—and yet the institutional support for their labor in terms of pay and expenses appears to be diminishing, even at the nation's finest and most respected publications.

I also sense a sharpening anxiety that the lessons I knew well from the field, lessons learned barely fifteen years ago, are becoming less pertinent, and possibly irrelevant. Beyond the flickering black-and-white images of a broadcast from a distant time, what could the heartfelt and unadorned honesty of *Harvest of Shame* really mean in the classroom anymore to young people coming of age at a time when viewer atten-

tion spans are hopelessly minute and “news” is sometimes presented by way of “re-creations” and dramatizations? Do the journalistic lessons of *All the President’s Men* from thirty years ago still apply at a time when government has become extraordinarily sophisticated at delivering the “news” itself and when most Americans simply don’t trust journalists to have the public’s best interest at heart?

My years in daily journalism as a city, national, and foreign correspondent were not without their own ethical quandaries, and I certainly worked as imperfectly and humanly as any reporter, grappling from time to time with company publicists and politicians seeking to influence my work in their favor. But I simply never had to do some of the things many young journalists are being asked to do today, nor did I have to wrestle with such demons of conscience as they sometimes face. I never had to spend professional time, energy, and skill searching for a cheating husband in order to grab ratings—or contend with the demoralization of having done so. I never had to compete against other journalists representing news organizations that were willing to pay tens of thousands of corporate dollars to sources for interviews.

I never had to work for a local television news station so profit-hungry that it promised favorable news coverage for advertisers and newsworthy interviews with corporate clients if the advertisers paid the station \$15,000 per story, nor did I work for a station that charged “guests” such as entrepreneurs and hucksters as much as \$2,500 to appear on their “news” programs, as stations in Florida and Mississippi did. Neither did my editors ever assign me to take part in fake “news conferences” staged by the network, where I was told to ask questions of someone posing as a baseball team executive, for the sole purpose of taping lively footage that could be aired during slow news cycles, as presumably professional baseball reporters did recently for ESPN’s news program *SportsCenter* during baseball’s off-season.⁶¹

I never worked at a newspaper so desperate for ad revenue that it published in its news pages, for a price, verbatim press releases from local businesses that resembled news articles.⁶² No publisher or editor ever assigned me to write favorable stories for businesses featured in advertorials and special advertising sections published by the newspaper company itself. I never worked for radio station owners so driven by money that they were willing to sell the naming rights to their newsrooms to the highest corporate bidders.⁶³

To the best of my knowledge, I never worked with fellow journalists who eagerly took cash under the table to shill for sponsor products in

their “beat” subjects during interviews on local television news programs, as many reviewers and so-called journalistic product experts reportedly do today.⁶⁴ Unlike a young, bright, and ambitious local television news anchor in Cleveland named Sharon Reed, who had graduated with a master’s degree from Northwestern’s prestigious Medill School of Journalism, I never had to contemplate the idea that an editor would ask me to shed my clothes and appear naked on camera expressly to boost ratings and profits during “sweeps week”; nor would I have felt compelled by circumstances or been willing to do so, as she enthusiastically did, guided by her understanding of the modern values of her profession.⁶⁵

During my full-time work in daily journalism, I never had to contend with an environment so politically polarizing that excellent, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporting like that of Dana Priest of the *Washington Post*, who revealed the existence of a system of secret prisons for terror suspects operated by the CIA in Eastern Europe, would prompt cries from government supporters for the reporter’s jailing. And during my years as a daily reporter, I never had to worry that by simply doing my job and telling the truth—by bearing witness for the American public on issues of vital importance—I would put my life in jeopardy from persons in my own country who did not want to *see* that truth. Such was the case for Kevin Sites, a young freelance photojournalist stationed in Iraq who documented for NBC News the killing of a wounded Iraqi prisoner in Fal-lujah by a U.S. Marine corporal, only to himself become the target of death threats—not from Iraqis, but from Americans deeply distrustful of the news media and outraged by what they considered an act of disloyalty by a journalist who was simply doing his job, and doing it well.⁶⁶

THE JOURNALIST’S CHANGING IMAGE

In recent years, I have seen the image and concept of what it means to be a “journalist” in American popular culture change markedly from the clearer definition we knew and generally shared as citizens in a democratic society a generation ago. The meaning of the term has become disturbingly murky and confused, connoting a mishmash of guises, purposes, and roles. This vagueness likely contributes to the public’s distrust of those who consider themselves serious and truly professional practitioners of the craft, especially when we consider the full range of performers who have been lumped together under the title of “Journalist” (writ large) in the past decade.

To the average American citizen, a Journalist is the television talker who is paid a considerable retainer to regularly make noise on cable news programs, arguing any question of the day regardless of whether he or she knows anything about the topic or not. The figure who hosts the show is a Journalist, too, paid a high salary not to seek out and report the news but to entertain an audience with a certain glibness and an argumentative personality. Today's Journalist is the rabidly opinionated Court TV news anchor and CNN Headline News commentator who blusters about a televised murder trial, proclaiming the defendant's certain guilt and urging the maximum sentence long before all the evidence has been presented or the jury has reached a verdict. Or she is the network television star with the sensational Q-rating who commands an annual salary of at least \$8 million and magically has us believe, with treacly sincerity, that she understands the problems of ordinary working-class Americans.⁶⁷

The broadcasters who have no problem taking money to play themselves in soft drink commercials are Journalists, as is the ESPN anchor who pads his salary by taping commercials for television sports advertisers and earns six-figure fees for speaking engagements before sports-related trade groups.⁶⁸ Yet another version of a Journalist is the Fox broadcaster who encourages listeners at an advertising and trade group convention to come up with novel ideas for him to help market their products deceptively, discreetly, and live during his network telecasts. Indeed, he revels in the opportunity, reportedly stating, "Think it up. I'll try. I have absolutely no pride." Other Journalists are the real-life network or cable television news personalities who accept Screen Actors Guild salaries to playact as journalists in order to lend recognizability and credibility to Hollywood and television scripts.⁶⁹

The public accepts as a Journalist the inveterate Washington beltway insider with easily shifting loyalties and ethics who works as a Pentagon spokesperson, political campaign adviser, or presidential speechwriter one year and the next as a network news correspondent or magazine reporter whose independence and balance we are expected to trust.⁷⁰ In an age of confused loyalties and skewed professional values, other Journalists weirdly feel that their prime duty as news reporters is to share important information not with the general public to whom they are entrusted to report it, but rather with those they cover in order to affect judgments within those centers of power.⁷¹

In the minds of a surprisingly large number of Americans surveyed by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania not long ago, the title "Journalist" has come to encompass figures as fanatic

ical as conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh and as stridently self-righteous as television talker Bill O'Reilly.⁷² Also labeled a Journalist is the fellow who has no training or experience in news reporting but nonetheless manages to receive top security clearance to cover the White House for an obscure Web publication because of his strong Republican beliefs and connections. Once credentialed, this Journalist asks soft, staged, and leading questions of the president at nationally televised "news" conferences in order to boost the leader's standing in public opinion. He receives daily passes to White House press briefings and continues to attend briefings until his lack of professional experience and his involvement as a male model for Internet-based gay pornography sites come to national attention.⁷³

Journalists are also those who faithfully take part in annual gatherings that feature off-the-record sessions with the corporate rich and politically powerful in far-flung retreats, like the World Economic Summit in Davos, Switzerland. By tacitly agreeing to treat certain conversations with the powerful as privileged information, these Journalists reveal a lack of moral concern about the corrosive effect on their presumed credibility and integrity.⁷⁴

In the age of high-definition TV, a Journalist is the broadcaster who must regularly go in for the eye tuck, the hair transplant, or the Botox injection in order to project an appearance of youth and thus extend his or her longevity in the business of reporting the truth. Another Journalist is the nationally recognized television celebrity tapped to anchor the *CBS Evening News* not on the basis of her limited experience as a news reporter but because of her popularity among American viewers. When a forty-year veteran CBS news commentator publicly points out that the network could hire *eighty-five* genuine news reporters and correspondents at an annual salary of \$250,000 each for what CBS will be paying the TV personality to anchor the news, executives dismiss his criticism as invalid, irrelevant, and misplaced.⁷⁵

Still another curious figure dubbed a Journalist is the best-selling writer of science fiction who crafts a suspense novel based on the notion that global warming is a myth dreamed up by a conspiratorial cabal of U.S. climate scientists to further their own ambitions. He soon finds himself lavished with the highest honor bestowed in science journalism by the American Association of Petroleum Geologists. "It is fiction," concedes the spokesperson for the organization, whose mission is tied closely to the science of oil exploration, "but it has the absolute ring of truth."⁷⁶

At a time of pervasive distrust of both the news media and the government, people gravitate to the Web in growing numbers to see works of reportage like *Loose Change*, a provocative short-form “documentary” produced on a laptop computer by a twenty-two-year-old self-styled investigative reporter. Cobbling together bits of video imagery, fact, conjecture, documents, political history, and forbidding music, this Journalist presents a compelling case for the conspiracy-minded, arguing that the 9/11 attacks on the United States were not the work of al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden at all but instead can be traced to a group of powerful domestic “tyrants ready and willing to do whatever it takes to keep their stranglehold on this country.” Since it was first put online in 2005, the documentary has been ranked among the most-watched independent videos in the nation.⁷⁷

The documentary filmmaker who hires hundreds of child and adult actors to perform in fictional reenactments of the 1963 civil rights protest by thousands of grade-school children in Birmingham, Alabama, is also a modern Journalist. Using advanced digital editing skills, the Journalist smoothly merges period news clips of heroic protests from the 1960s with his own fictitious representations in order to create the illusion of a seamless historical reality. The Journalist doesn’t inform viewers about the fabrications. In fact, he works very hard to convince them that what they are seeing is historical truth. The upshot of his shameless deceptions, which occupy the narrative heart of his film, is that the unsuspecting Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awards the Journalist its highest honor in the category of Nonfiction and Documentary film.⁷⁸

A Journalist is the fellow fired from his job as a *Boston Globe* columnist after his bosses discover that he has been fabricating sources and committing plagiarism over the course of his long career. He nonetheless immediately lands another gig on MSNBC News as a highly paid commentator chiefly because of his talent for garrulousness. Two years later, the owners of the *Boston Herald*, the competing newspaper that had exposed the Journalist’s transgressions in a series of outraged investigative reports, hire him to write columns for *them* instead.⁷⁹ In the American media carnival’s smoke-and-mirrors show, a Journalist is the fabulist who is fired by his magazine for making up stories, but then writes a novel about his humiliation and soon sees a successful Hollywood film made about his life and times.⁸⁰

This confused, contorted, and contradictory attitude about how journalism, its ethics, and the Journalist are defined in civil society is playing

a central role in important legal issues surrounding the evolution of the New Media. Consider the court case working its way through an appeals process in California, in which Apple Corporation is suing a group of bloggers, including a Harvard undergraduate, for releasing inside information on the company's research and products. The bloggers, whose Web publications focus on news, rumor, and gossip about Apple, insist that they are Journalists and are therefore entitled to regulatory protection under the state's shield law that allows them to protect confidential sources. Many see the case as an important crossroads testing the limits of free speech in the Internet age, underscoring the changing definition of the reporter.⁸¹

In startling ways, today's image of the Journalist in American culture seems to be moving farther and farther away from what professional journalists have traditionally been or are supposed to be: *practitioners of the craft of journalism*. Skilled hunters and gatherers of news, facts, and information in an increasingly complex society. Trained reporters and communicators dedicated to truth, balance, and fairness, not to celebrity gossip, punditry, rumormongering, or craven political or commercial bias. Journalists inherently believe and take professional pride in the value of reporting original news and information and informing the public for its own sake, rather than valuing rhetoric, online opinionating, or exercises in vanity such as "public conversations" with other celebrity journalists about the issues of the day.⁸²

Real journalists are experts at presenting these reports to the public—these products of dedicated intellectual process, of digging and hard work—in as timely, substantive, accurate, and independent a fashion as possible. Journalists regard serving the public trust as central to their purpose, and they believe in questioning and, if necessary, challenging power and vested interests to protect that trust. They question the powerful on the behalf of the ordinary citizen and regard corporate and political elites as subjects to be watched closely, not as figures to be fawned over. Journalists are professionals with ethical and moral standards who inform the people in a democracy about the community and the world so that we all may become knowledgeable enough to make decisions about the best ways to improve our lives.⁸³

For a host of reasons, however, that comparatively clear-eyed view of what professional journalism represents in civil society no longer really applies, having been muddied by so many pretenders, nonprofessionals, and charlatans. And the effects of this dilution of meaning are being felt in important institutions in American life such as government and the ju-

diary, which, like the public, are treating the Fourth Estate with increasing disdain and contempt. For example, the courts in past years have usually sided with reporters who argued that they merited special legal protection governing the use and confidentiality of anonymous sources. Without such protections, whistle-blowers would be far less inclined to reveal to reporters important information about wrongdoing in government and business, all to the detriment of democracy and the public's right to know. But with the news media under increasing fire these days over problems of accuracy, credibility, and political bias, the courts no longer seem to see it that way. Judges are telling reporters and the institutions that employ them that they don't deserve any special treatment or protections under the First Amendment. As a result, the threat of jail time for reporters protecting confidential sources has become more pronounced, producing a chilling effect on how the media report the news.⁸⁴ Even worse, some media corporations, with an eye on profit margins and shareholder concerns, seem willing to betray sources and the profession's traditional values when put to the test by the courts.

The contrast between the two most recent eras in journalism's evolution is truly stark. In 1971, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* both struck a momentous blow for the power and freedom of the press in democratic society when they defied federal orders and refused to divulge the names of officials who leaked the Pentagon Papers to them. The newspapers bravely published the government papers, despite threats and legal action. The U.S. Supreme Court eventually backed up their arguments that the public had a right to know. But thirty-four years later, in June 2005, Time Inc. agreed to turn over a reporter's notes and other information in the Valerie Plame case to federal prosecutors after the Supreme Court declined to hear appeals by *Time* journalist Matthew Cooper. First Amendment advocates around America were stunned by *Time's* decision. The controversy raised once again the crucial questions of anonymous sourcing and the function and trustworthiness of the press in a free society: if *Time* and other powerful news media institutions decide that they are unwilling to fight to protect confidential sources in the face of governmental, judicial, or business pressures, who will want to tell the news media the stories inside government and business that the people need to hear?⁸⁵

Indeed, *Time's* move and the jailing of Judith Miller almost immediately produced a dampening effect on the work of at least one news organization and perhaps many others. Editors of the *Cleveland Plain*

Dealer soon revealed their decision not to publish a “profoundly important” series of investigative articles that relied on confidential sources and illegally leaked government documents, for fear that its reporters could face the prospect of jail if the articles were published. Amid the tough new prosecutorial environment surrounding the press, the *Plain Dealer*’s lawyers strongly advised the editors to stay within the law. But staying within the law also meant that the public was deprived of vital news.⁸⁶

Such moral ambiguities surrounding professional journalism are as deeply complex as they are troubling. And within this uncertain climate, and its ever-accelerating change, I find the task of comprehensively educating a new generation of reporters increasingly vexing. There are two parts of this mission as I see it today, one fairly straightforward, engaging, and inspiring; the other complicated, gnarly, and often unnerving. The comparatively easy part is teaching students how to report, how to write, and how to *critically think* as journalists. It also means exposing them to the many great works of journalism that have shaped and bettered American society, told citizens what we needed to know, and honored the promise of the First Amendment, from *The Shame of the Cities*, “The Death of Captain Wachow,” and *Hiroshima* to more recent reporting on the abuses of Abu Ghraib. The canon of professional journalism, along with the many examples of individual and institutional heroism in service of informing society with the truth, will always remain central to the education of young journalists, just as great achievements remain central to the education of engineers, physicians, and lawyers in their fields. To show and to inspire is to educate.⁸⁷

But the difficult part of the teaching mission is filled with lessons that are not so clearly defined or self-evident. It involves conveying the many specific, complex, and unsettling ways that the profession of truth seeking is struggling to maintain a firm place in American society; how journalistic integrity is increasingly under siege; and what those struggles may mean not only for my students in their future careers but also for citizens at a time of unprecedented technological advances. Indeed, the hard part is simply trying to keep up with these struggles and epic transformations, to make sense of them all, while continuing to teach exactly how and why traditional standards of professionalism in this craft matter more than ever. This effort requires not only that we listen to the cal-

liope as it plays its dissonant musical notes in the American carnival but also that we turn and actually follow in the direction of the noise and hubbub, and enter the carnival to witness the marvels it has to offer. For here is where we find, up close, the various modern sideshows in action, with their lively roots in U.S. history, briskly peddling works to the public that look just like the genuine article—professional journalism—but which are in fact often anything but.