

# Who's the Fairest of Them All?

*Making the media more accountable to the public, watchdog groups such as Accuracy in Media bite back at news organizations that sometimes play fast and loose with the truth.*

William Randolph Hearst was never one to let the facts get in the way of a good story. In 1898, to increase the circulation of the *New York Morning Journal*, Hearst sent artist Frederic Remington to Cuba to view the political situation. Hearst, upon whom Orson Welles based his title character for *Citizen Kane*, didn't like what Remington had to report: There wasn't much going on.

Eager to promote some type of conflict so his paper could report it, Hearst wasn't going to let the fact that there really wasn't a war stop him. That's why he telegraphed Remington an infamous dispatch: "You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." He got the Spanish-American War and was so proud of it he published a headline reading, "How Do You Like the *Journal's* War?" Earlier in this century, journalists used to call lurid murders "blood and underwear"—a combination that was sure to sell more copies if illustrated by photos of the pretty victim in her lingerie.

Today's equivalent of blood and under-

wear might be the tabloids with stories on O.J. Simpson, photos of alien abductions and irrefutable proof that J.F.K. and Elvis are both alive and well. Though the headlines have changed, the question remains: How far will the media push the facts to sell a story to the public?

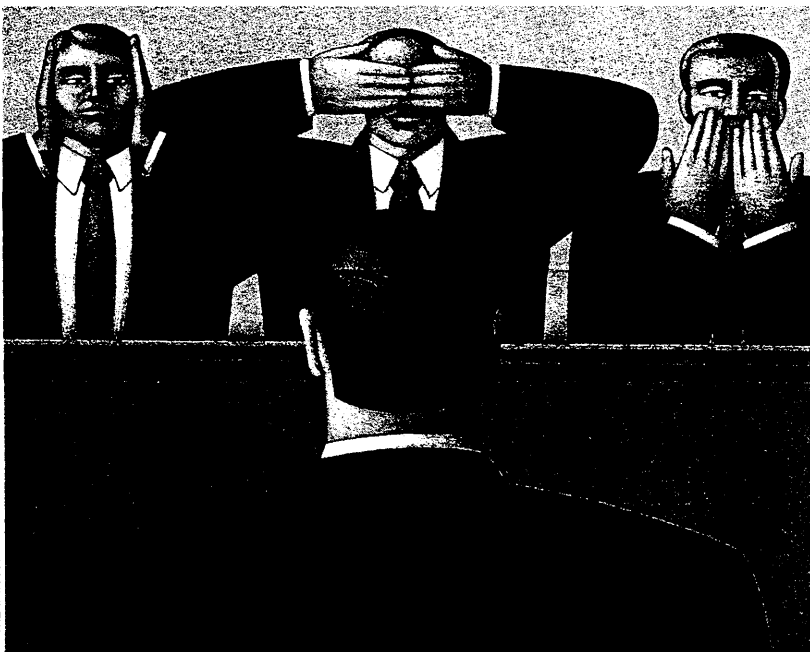
"What we've noticed is TV news magazines play fast and loose with the truth," says Joseph Goulden, director of media and analysis for the media watchdog group Accuracy in Media (AIM). "Editors or producers start off with a preconceived notion of what a story should be. It's often fed to them by a special-interest group. Sometimes, it is a story that is pretty well packaged in advance with video clips, interview sources and everything. Then they do a sort of afterthought on the other side, which lasts maybe 15 or 20 seconds. This is exactly what happened with the GM case that was fed to NBC by the trial lawyers—only NBC got burned."

## JUST FAKING IT

Goulden is referring to an NBC news magazine show that several years ago did an exposé on GM trucks that supposedly exploded upon minor impact.

"They had firemen out there, and some of them had camcorders and saw the test people tape this toy rocket motor under the gas tank," says Goulden. "Also, they were overflowing the gas tank and not screwing on the cap. They were preordaining what was going to happen. They rammed the truck twice and managed to get a small fire going. Of course, by the time it aired, it seemed like all of Indiana was burning."

"NBC ran the story and didn't explain what they did. Some guy in California who runs a hot-rod magazine wrote a column voicing suspicion about the NBC story. One of the firemen called the editor, who then called Detroit, and by sundown GM had a battalion of lawyers on the case," he says. "Not only was the truck found in a junkyard with the rocket motor still taped to its



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bottom, but a look around the fire company also turned up the videotape."

Goulden sees this as just one example of media excess.

Gary Gilson is the executive director of the Minnesota News Council, which promotes media fairness through public accountability. He sees touchy issues in a fast-paced business where dollars are the bottom line.

"I think that there's a problem with the current climate of competition," says Gilson. "We have more forms of information media today than we've ever had before, and they are all competing with each other for advertising dollars and subscriber support. The turf that they've chosen to compete on is more geared toward cosmetics, promotability and graphics than it is toward meaningful journalism. Even reporters and editors who went into the business to do public-service journalism often find themselves ordered by the

ownership to do what is commonly called infotainment."

"When television news organizations tackle and investigate a story, they rarely have the resources to do it thoroughly. Just imagine yourself in the position of a television station entering sweeps month in which you have to have something with a hard edge of investigative journalism to it every night for 28 or 30 nights in a row. It's impossible. A lot of it

have almost been presold to the public. The media culture has generated more and more superficiality. Ethics sometimes pays the price because everybody's out there selling something. Sometimes news organizations cut corners on the reporting, and the story turns out to be unfair."

The Minnesota News Council offers a public forum for people to address their complaints regarding the media. A

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is done with smoke and mirrors," Gilson says. "News consultants who command big fees from television stations will say to a client in St. Louis, 'Our client in Phoenix did very well last sweeps period with this kind of story. You ought to do it, too.' So there is a real incentive to do things inexpensively with a small investment of time that

panel composed of 12 people from the community and 12 media representatives listens to complaints and then makes decisions. Recently, Northwest Airlines filed a complaint against WCCO-TV, the CBS Westinghouse-owned Minneapolis affiliate, claiming that during a television exposé, anchor Don Shelby violated journalistic stan-

dards by painting a distorted and untruthful picture of both the airline and the people who work there. About 300 people attended the hearing, including representatives from both *60 Minutes* and *The Wall Street Journal*, in which the panel determined that Northwest had been maligned and falsely presented.

Gilson often finds that television stations are more prone to make errors and less likely to make retractions than print media. "Television vanishes the moment it's been broadcast," he says. "They're already on to the next thing. Not that newspaper reporters aren't after the next thing, too, but newspapers have a tradition of printing corrections."

"The public has not felt empowered to hold television news to account, although they are empowered to do so because they own the airwaves," he says. "The public has been persuaded that the people who run television stations actually own them. They own the equipment but not the frequencies. The

public owns those and gives them to the stations in trust as long as they use them responsibly. So, generally speaking, the public has not exercised its responsibility or its option to hold television accountable."

**THE PRYING EYE TAKES ITS TOLL**

Michael Flannery has been a political writer in Chicago for 23 years. He used to work for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and is now the political editor for WBBM-TV, the CBS affiliate in Chicago. He still finds an outspoken discussion in the newsroom about what's right and what's wrong. "I hear reporters talking all the time about what's appropriate," he says. "At my station, we have a lot of discussion about many ethical issues, including victims' rights—jamming a camera in front of a grieving widow. I think we do more harm in the long run with that sort of thing—violating people at times like that."

"There was a poll conducted last spring by the Freedom Forum that

found 80 percent of the correspondents in Washington voted for Clinton in the 1992 election," says Accuracy in Media's Goulden, who is a former reporter and author of a number of books. "Eighty percent is a pretty good turnout for anybody."

Flannery agrees that there may be more liberals in the media, but he sees that as an outcome of personality. "I think that journalism is a self-selecting profession. There aren't many conservative ideologues that get into the biz," he says. "If you don't possess the flexibility to sit down and talk to a Lenin-Marxist for an hour—to walk a mile in somebody's moccasins—you can't be a good journalist. You've got to be able to bond with that cop or that welfare mother to get the story. You can't lecture them."

The *Columbia Journalism Review* ran an article about Joe Klein, the *Newsweek* reporter who anonymously wrote the scathing *Primary Colors*, a fictionalized

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## WORLD SPOTLIGHT

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account of the Clinton White House, and lost his job as a consultant at CBS after he admitted that he had lied about authoring the book. But after a brief two-week suspension at *Newsweek*, he resumed his column.

It's this type of behavior that angers AIM. "If you're a lawyer and you go into the courtroom and lie," says Goulden, "the judge can have you arrested and locked up for contempt of court. If you are a plumber and you foul up the installation of someone's bathtub, the state can take away your license to do business. A lot of these media groups claim to have high-blown standards of ethics, but there is no provision for what happens when they violate them."

Flannery also takes issue with what Klein did. "The man betrayed his employers," he says. "CBS was right to dump him."

But there is another take on media ethics, and it's provided by one of the lions of the media world, *Harper's Magazine* editor Lewis Lapham.

### AMUSEMENT FOR THE MASSES

"Media and ethics shouldn't even be mentioned in the same paragraph, the same page," says Lapham. "The two concepts have nothing to do with each other. The media are always in search of how to drum up a crowd, what will make a good headline or what will make a news show. You can take it back as far as you want—to the pamphleteers during the 17th century, to the attacks on people like Jefferson and Hamilton. It's been going on throughout American history. Our present-day media pale by comparison—it's timid compared with the past."

"But with the media, it's always been bread and circuses, whatever amusement sells," he says. "I mean, Jefferson was accused of having a black mistress by the Federalist press. After all these

years, we're still not sure he did. But that didn't stop the press."

And Lapham doesn't view the media as totally liberal. "Ninety-five percent of talk radio is conservative," he says. "There is no liberal radio except for Gary Hart and National Public Radio. There are more conservative intellectual opinion magazines like the *National Review* and *The American Spectator* than liberal ones. When they talk about the liberal media, they're really only talking about *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and those really are not particularly liberal papers."

But all in all, Lapham views the thought of media ethics as somewhat amusing. William Randolph Hearst—and Charles Foster Kane, for that matter—might well agree. "You need to take the media as troubadours, as jugglers," he says, "because that's what they are." ■

*Jane Ammeson is a regular contributor of features to WorldTraveler.*

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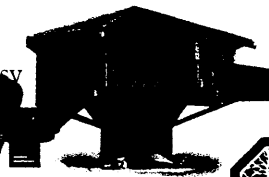
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