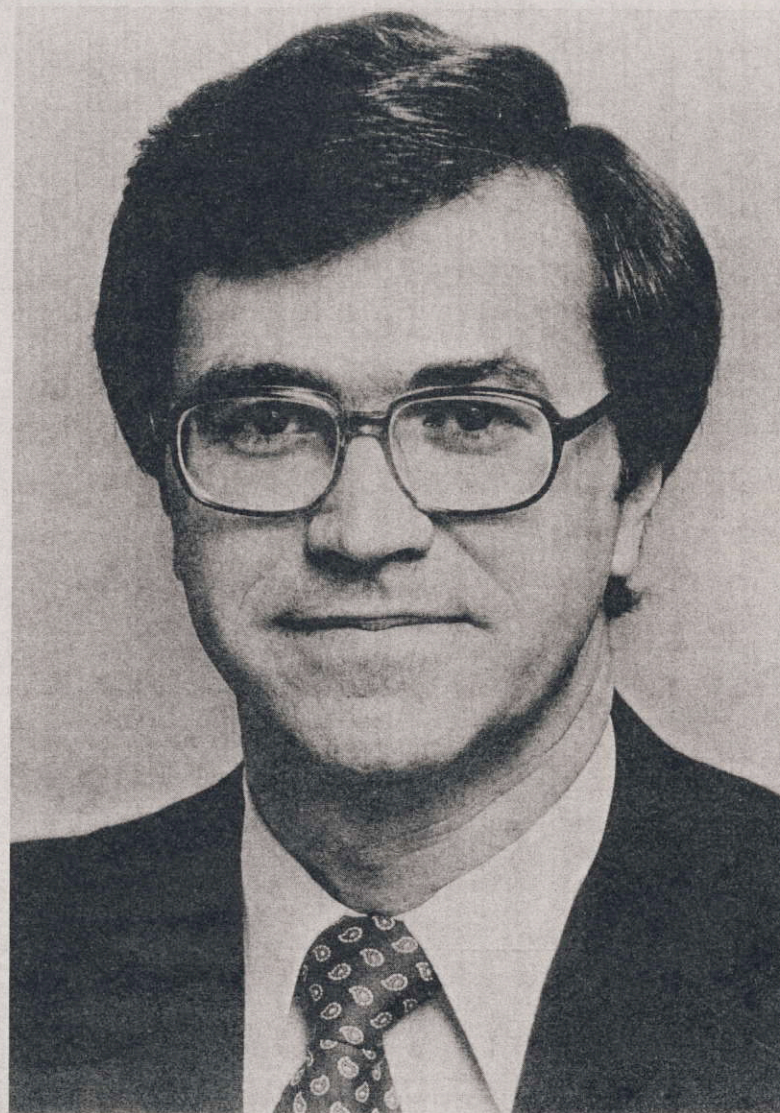


IV



**Tom Johnson**



## THE MCGILL LECTURE

By Tom Johnson

Publisher and Chief Executive Officer, *The Los Angeles Times*

In my student days on this campus in the early 1960s, the name Ralph McGill was synonymous with controversy. His was a determined and, yes, a disquieting voice—one that spoke out against the cruelties and injustices that were prevalent in the South then. And to that voice—often a lonely voice—belongs much of the credit for the new spirit of enlightenment and tolerance in today's South.

Ralph McGill's message did not endear him or the *Atlanta Constitution* to large numbers of readers of that newspaper or to influential factions in Southern life. The praise for his courage and vision was left almost entirely to journalism award committees and to civil libertarians elsewhere.

But his voice was persistent. The South must liberate itself from its past and address itself to new realities, not the least of them the emerging federal laws mandating an end of the most oppressive forms of segregation.

I remember now that not all of us on the staff of the *Red and Black*—and certainly not all of us on campus—agreed with Ralph McGill. To accept his views was to acknowledge the existence of racism in Southern society and the young—the inheritors of white privilege—were reluctant to join in that assessment.

But it is also true that for those of us on the staff of the *Red and Black* Ralph McGill's columns and editorials had a special message that went beyond his views on race. He was challenging us not only as Georgians and Southerners but also as future journalists. We might accept or reject the truth of what he wrote. We could not ignore his view that a serious newspaper is no mere vendor of information but a powerful institution that influences its region and its readers, for better or worse.

In his own words: "a shocking number" of Southern newspapers "had failed in the responsibility of leadership—to reveal a region to itself. Painfully few had ever dissected the so-called Southern way of life or stripped the myths from the Southerner's belief that he was somehow different from other Americans and entitled to special rights, including that of being 'let alone' in the ugliest practices of discrimination."



I, for one, agreed with Ralph McGill's concept of what a newspaper ought to be. More than that, I agreed with his concept of what the South ought to be, and is now becoming. And today, this member of the class of '63 considers it a high privilege to return to this campus as the Ralph McGill lecturer.

In the years since I left Athens, my career has taken me from journalism to government, to broadcasting in the South, and back to journalism in Texas and now California. Wherever I have worked, the example of Ralph McGill has been a powerful influence on my life and on my attitudes toward my profession.

I will not attempt yet another eulogy to this great Southern editor. The consummate tribute to him was paid by his friend, Eugene C. Patterson, in the first Ralph McGill Lecture.

Rather, I would like to discuss with you the state of American journalism today and to ask—as Ralph McGill often did of his colleagues—whether we measure up to our responsibilities and to the public trust implicit in the constitutional guarantees of a free press.

I can tell you that many thoughtful members of society do not believe we are as good at our job as we need to be.

—Some businessmen complain that our reporting is often biased, distorted, and inaccurate.

—Some politicians complain that we shield our own ethics and practices from outside inspection while insisting on our right to investigate everything they do or don't do.

—Some judges continue to try to gag reporting of pre-trial hearings in criminal cases on the ground that it deprives defendants of their rights.

Never mind that many businessmen complain, not because we fail to get the story right, but because we *succeed* in getting it right.

Never mind that government officials who complain the loudest about the press or television are often those who have the most to hide from the press.

Never mind that the best guarantee of a fair trial is an open trial.

This kind of criticism will never stop. Frankly, I would be worried if it did. The give-and-take between the press and other public and private institutions in this country is inevitable, and desirable. When complaints like these die down, it will mean we are not doing our job. We do make mistakes. But a mistake in a story is easier to correct than a mistake in judgment that never comes to light and leads to some abortive military venture or major business failure.

What does concern me, however, is the decline in public confidence in the integrity and credibility of American journalism in print and on the air.

Lapses in judgment and failure to meet reasonable standards of accuracy and honesty have lent substance to suspicions about the media's own sense of ethical behavior. I have in mind the cases of the *Washington Post's* Janet Cook Pulitzer Prize hoax and of the *New York Daily News* and the fabrication of a story about violence in Northern Ireland.

Each new libel judgment against a newspaper or a magazine further erodes the reputation of journalism for accuracy and fairness. Major libel cases are rare, but the public has long memories.

The cumulative effect of these and other breakdowns in honest and even-handed treatment of the news can be read in a national survey the Los Angeles Times Poll made last month on America's view of the media.

Nearly 40 percent said they think that the mass communications industry acts irresponsibly. Nearly 20 percent said the abuses of press freedom should be dealt with more sternly by government regulators—although the people who were interviewed had a higher opinion of journalists than of the bureaucrats, who presumably would do the regulating.

Only one in four said that the media are ethical. Only one in three said we are fair.

This Poll confirms the findings of other similar surveys in recent years. The picture you get of the press is one of an institution darting out from the sanctuary of the First Amendment, using its great power to do mischief, and then darting back to shelter to escape retaliation.

There are too many violations of journalistic ethics. One violation alone should be enough to ring alarms all through the profession, and there are many violations and many alarms. There are cases of bias or of the use of newspapers to promote self-interest or—as we have seen—of the presentation of outright fiction as fact.

There is no excuse for such offenses, but neither can they fully explain why so many Americans both cherish a free press and hold it in contempt. The fact is that vicious personal attacks on public figures, deliberate hoaxes, and blatant conflicts of interest are far less common than they were in the full flower of yesterday's yellow journalism. But they should not be permitted.

Many Americans view journalists as arrogant. They believe the press has become too powerful. They see journalists as "celebrities" whose own personalities or biases, rather than the facts, dictate what they write or say on the air. They see journalists as messengers, bearing bad news.

Surely, these impressions all play some part in the alienation of the press from its public. But I believe the principal reason—one that



reflects credit on the profession and not discredit—is that we also do a better job than we have ever done before.

The stories we cover today frequently were nobody's business twenty or thirty years ago.

We cover social unrest and breakdowns of major cities, in a depth and detail not found in newspapers a generation ago. We cover multinational corporations. We cover the environment—the quality of air and water. We cover product safety and reliability and the complaints of consumers about both. We cover equal rights. We write about the dangers of supertankers. We cover the power of unions in coalition with industry and the difficulty of achieving political reform while the coalition exists.

We discuss in print the quality of American business management and its ability to compete in global markets. In the days of Calvin Coolidge, people never doubted that the business of America is business. In the days of nuclear reactors, who can doubt that the business of business is also America.

To cover those stories, we opened our news pages to new voices. Voices of protest from demonstrators at Three Mile Island or Diablo Canyon. Voices of anger from the ghetto. Voices of frustration from many classes and many millions of Americans who have lost faith in the ability of government and other institutions to respond to their pleas for equality and opportunity. For a time, voices of radicalism on the campuses.

At first, these new voices were strange and, very often, strident and threatening. They were disconcerting to complacent Americans who thought the press was providing aid and comfort to dissidents and nonconformists who were openly challenging the values of American society. Because we granted them access to our news pages, we were accused of conferring credibility—and even legitimacy—on their causes.

A former chief of police in Los Angeles once took the *Times* to task for reporting on events that he thought were unworthy of the attention—a gay rights demonstration, the announcement of a petition drive to legalize the use of marijuana, and a pro-abortion rally.

The chief wrote us: "You are constantly attempting to condition your readers to a dramatic new set of moral values. You are the Paul Revere of the oncoming avalanche of libertine behavior."

And, with that, he told us to cancel his subscription.

The chief's opinion may have been extreme, but it would be unrealistic to doubt that large numbers of other Americans share his concern that their newspaper—once an amiable and entertaining

visitor to their home—is now the bearer of tidings that they can do without.

Many of Ralph McGill's readers felt that way. But he understood, as we now understand, that massive changes are taking place in our society. Not all of the changes are welcome, but our responsibility is to report them as fully, as accurately, and as objectively as we can. We do not owe advocacy to any point of view. But we do owe access to every point of view.

Nuclear power is an example. There was a time when we took a public utility's word for it that reactors were safe. Now we publish the dissenting opinion of experts representing opponents of the project. After Three Mile Island, can we afford to do less?

There was a time when we went to a chief of police for his analysis of a ghetto uprising. Now we put the same question to a black leader.

There was a time when we took government's word that covert intelligence operations were always in the national interest. We no longer do.

Recently I spoke to an audience of executives of California's leading corporations—and I can tell you that it was not a pleasant evening. I was told that the *Los Angeles Times* in particular and the media in general are hostile to the corporate interests of this country.

I could not agree. Times Mirror, the company I represent, is also one of the largest corporations in the West. Our newspaper's success and the interests of our own shareholders depend on a vigorous and growing economy. But some executives in that audience—happily, not all of them—really believed that the American press is trying to undermine public confidence in the very corporations on which the press depends for a large part of its advertising revenue.

We can all remember a time when relations between the media and business were much friendlier. It was a time when the advertising department had too much to say over the news operation. In fact, much of the news on corporate activities came from publicity handouts which went directly into the paper, often without much editing.

How do these changes relate to the public's negative perception of the media? They relate very directly.

The press is a formidable institution in its own right. It now confronts other formidable institutions more aggressively than it ever did in the past. That is an obligation and a duty, of course, but it also leads to a public perception of the press as a part of every controversy rather than just a reporter of it.

Because our pages are more open, we are seen by many as the cause of criticism of society's values rather than simply its chroniclers. That



perception has grown as the press finds itself in conflict with the same authorities as the "radicals"—the courts and government.

The arrest and jailing of editors and reporters for refusing to name their sources or open their files . . . the frequent exclusion of the media from criminal proceedings in the courts . . . the demands for the licensing of journalists in the United Nations and elsewhere . . . and, yes, the hoaxes and multimillion-dollar libel judgments—all have thrust the press itself onto its own front page.

In this atmosphere of conflict, the corporation or government agency with an axe to grind finds itself on common ground with a public that suspects that the media have gone too far. And they exploit that common ground.

There was a time when newspapers might expose wrongdoing in City Hall, with some vigor and delight, but put the business beat pretty much off limits to investigative reporters. In too many cases, newspapers saw no reason to bite the hand that fed them. What was good for business was good for everyone, and the publisher was always welcome at the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary luncheons.

That relationship had to change. Corporate news has become one of our most important beats because the decisions of the private sector now have such a critical impact on the average family.

As with social issues, we are dealing with a host of new developments: efforts to combat industrial pollution . . . proposals for off-shore oil drilling . . . private demands for the opening of public lands to resource development . . . deregulation of major industries—airlines, autos, trucking, to name a few . . . the equities of the tax structure . . . safety in the work place . . . consumer product safety . . . and, again, the peril and promise of nuclear energy.

All are volatile issues. All involve the public interest. All have a direct bearing on the kind of country this will be for your children and mine.

Business leaders acknowledge the importance of these issues. They also complain that journalists listen more intently to Ralph Nader than to General Motors and to the Sierra Club than to Secretary Watt.

The charge is often heard among businessmen that reporters are economic illiterates who are insensitive to the working of the free enterprise system. They are said to concentrate on the sensational or the trivial and to look always for the bad news instead of the good. And, most serious of all, they are said to have a strong anti-business bias that colors every word they write.

One reason offered for this combination of incompetence and bias—I hope Dean Cutlip will forgive me—is the charge that most

journalism graduates have been brainwashed by ultra-liberal or unqualified professors. I don't accept that.

The indictment is too broad. Obviously, there are cases of insensitive, uninformed, and even naive reporting. And we must do better. Public trust in us depends on it. But misjudgments are made in news rooms as well as in corporate board rooms.

But the basic disagreement between the press and the private sector is more a consequence of our respective responsibilities than of the infrequent excesses of either of us.

The corporation's first responsibility traditionally has been solely to the interests of its shareholders. Our first responsibility is to the larger public interest—and those interests are not always compatible.

Whether it likes it or not, the private sector has become public in the sense that its performance is now as subject to question and criticism as are the actions of government. Its influence is too pervasive for it to be otherwise. And it reflects no great credit on the media that we should have taken such a long time to direct major attention to business itself. It was long overdue.

I had the privilege last April of speaking at a conference on the First Amendment on this campus. I said then, and I repeat now, that the press itself must accept a degree of responsibility for the continuing attacks on its freedoms and its credibility.

Too many publishers resist the accountability they demand of others and thus seriously weaken their own defense of First-Amendment privileges.

More often than not, the newspaper is the most influential institution in the city it serves. Its endorsement of political candidates can be decisive. Its editorial positions can sway the actions of local and state governments. Its support or opposition can signal success or failure for civic undertakings.

Too many newspapers apply a double standard. They want to intervene actively in the affairs of their community, but they resist all inquiries into their motives.

Too many wear the editor's hat when they argue their right to investigate the integrity of others but switch to the treasurer's hat when their own self-interest is in question.

Their most frequent answer to questions concerning their internal operations is "no comment"—an answer they would not accept from others.

Too many turn critical reporters away from their own doors, while objecting strongly to the expulsion of their own reporters from the courts or from sessions of government.



We are not just another business in town—and we cannot have it both ways, pleading our rights under the First Amendment while opting to remain silent under the Fifth.

I suspect that critics of press freedom will continue to have considerable public support until that same public perceives the media to be as open and as forthcoming as the media expect others to be.

Ralph McGill understood that. The courageous positions of the *Atlanta Constitution* were in sharp contrast with those of other Southern newspapers that were pandering to an Establishment that was against desegregation as much on economic grounds as on racial grounds.

In the end, Ralph McGill won—not only because he was right, but also because the integrity of his advocacy was never in question.

In a time when the integrity of the media very often is in question, we can look to Ralph McGill for an example of how high a calling journalism can be—but only if we practice it honorably and selflessly.

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