



Claude Sitton

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## THE McGILL LECTURE

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Georgia is fortunate in many respects, but in none more so than in having one of the finest colleges of journalism in the nation. It is a tribute both to its dean and faculty and to the support it receives from the Georgia press. The distinguished Georgian for whom the college is named—Henry Grady—was an editor who proved equal to the challenge of change. We meet in tribute to Ralph McGill, an apostle of change in his time. And we meet at a time when change challenges our profession as never before.

No one can say how McGill would deal with our challenge. But I do know this. He kept his eyes on the future. And I think he would tell us to do the same—to look at where we are, where we need to go, and what we need to do to get there. His principles could guide us. And chief among them was his belief that if a newspaper is to succeed it must offer serious content, it must have something to say.

I grew up on a farm in Rockdale County in the 1930s. Back then it was the *Atlanta Journal* that covered Dixie like the dew. WSB Radio was the king of broadcast hill. Television was an interesting experiment.

Not until I returned to Georgia at the end of World War II did I come to read the *Atlanta Constitution* and the column of its great editor. Even then McGill's pen had earned him a place among such leading Southern editors as Douglas Southall Freeman and Virginius Dabney of Richmond [Virginia], Josephus and Jonathan Daniels of Raleigh [North Carolina], Mark Etheridge of Louisville [Kentucky], and Hodding Carter Jr. of Greenville, Mississippi.

I first met McGill in 1949. He and Jack Tarver were getting off of an elevator in the old Reddy Kilowatt Building, which housed the



*Constitution* on Forsyth Street. McGill had just hired Tarver as associate editor—a real stroke of genius for them both! Tarver became publisher and president of Atlanta Newspapers. And, while Tarver and McGill had their differences, it was Tarver who fought off one attempt after another to kick McGill out of his pulpit on the front page of the *Constitution*.

I got to know McGill well while covering the South for the *New York Times* from early in 1958 until late into 1964. My office was just around the corner from his on the *Constitution*'s fifth floor. He was a man driven by curiosity—a trait of all good journalists. And often when I came back from covering some civil rights crisis, we would talk.

For McGill, the interview was a suction hose. What's the situation now? How did it get that way? What's it going to be in the future? This was no idle gossip. Oh, no! I soon found out that if I was doing a think piece for the Sunday paper, I'd damn well better not tell McGill. If I did, he would beat me into print in his column in papers all over the country. Nobody would ever accuse McGill of stealing from me. No, I would be the prime suspect.

McGill had more than curiosity. He had a great love for people, especially those who were down and out through no fault of their own. You knew that when you read him. That great love—fortunately for the South—was matched by great intellect and talent. No matter how complex the issue, he could see it whole. And he could write it clearly. That's what I want to do now with the challenges that journalism faces.

Press, radio, and television are being tested as never before. We compete for the attention of a public whose busy lifestyle leaves little free time. We contend with pressures from within and without that threaten our credibility. We convey news to an audience whose ability to comprehend is sometimes dulled by a lack of interest or a lack of learning or both. We cope with a demand for content that not only fills the wants and needs of readers but does so in a vibrant and compelling way.

News media have undergone a revolution since that day in 1949 when I met McGill. Circulation of the nation's 1,643 daily newspapers is up. That's because of our Sunday growth, which continues. But on weekdays we now reach an average of only half the nation's households. Weeklies number 7,600, counting paid and free. Their circulation totals 53 million, compared with about 63 million for dailies.

Radio was once dismissed as a dying medium. But target marketing has turned radio into a scrappy competitor. Television has become a

giant. But it's a giant with a migraine headache called market fragmentation. Commercial networks may soon see their share of the market drop below 50 percent. Cable, on the other hand, is thriving. CNN [Cable News Network] is a major player with a very bright future.

Magazines, books, and niche publications bid successfully along with broadcasting for readers and advertisers. And the market now embraces some new competitors—audience-segmented cable channels and all manner of databases. Even the facsimile newspaper is making another try at profitability.

Four major developments in the last four decades have affected the gathering and dissemination of news:

- First, broadcast has long since replaced print as the town crier who hits the street first with the headlines.
- Second, changing lifestyles have sent almost two-thirds of women between 16 and 64 to work outside the home, reduced leisure time, and created new ways to spend it.
- Third, technology lets us serve the special interests created by those changes and serve them in new ways.
- Fourth, images rather than the printed word dominate our society.

Television is the medium of that dominance. It has great appeal. It can bring the famous into our living rooms. It can take us live and in color to some of the world's momentous events. And, in skilled hands, it can serve as a constructive medium of information and education.

But television's appeal lies in part in its ability to deceive. I do not speak of the atrocity of the docudrama, with its false pictures, false sequences, and false dialogue; nor do I speak of the reenactment or simulation of news events. I speak instead of the viewer's reaction to what's viewed.

Reporters deal in summaries, as they must. And summaries can be deceptive. But the potential for deception is far greater when the summary comes from television. Just listen to Sander Vanocur of ABC. Vanocur, who was a friend of McGill, brings to the subject insights gained through years of distinguished work in television news here and abroad. He puts it this way:

"We do not say so explicitly, but implicit in what we put on your television screens—since the camera never blinks, unlike the human eye which does—is the idea that what we are showing you is truth on cue. I doubt that we do. I doubt that journalists, with or without television, can ever do that."



If you've seen an event and then watched it reported on television, you know what Sandy Vanocur means. You know how much of what you saw was left on the cutting room floor. But you don't miss it in that seamless web of images that parades across the screen.

That imagery—the setting, the shapes, the color, and the fast-paced clip at which they crowd in upon us through the camera's eye—can affect our perceptions in other ways. They stroke our emotions, manipulate our thoughts, and transport us into a make-believe world.

People don't listen to television. They watch it. And communication experts know well the potency of its imagery. Advertising uses it to sell everything from toothpaste to political candidates. Yes, it works for the product. But when it comes to public affairs it doesn't work for the system—no, not for our democracy. Voter turnout has been on a downhill slide throughout the television era.

In fact, Joel Swerdlow of Northwestern University's Annenberg Washington Program for Communications Policy Studies thinks television is destroying our two-party system. He says TV has led more and more candidates to build their own organizations. This breeds the politics of personality as opposed to the politics of party and the politics of issues. Today's candidate must be telegenic. No Harry Trumans need apply.

Television has another quality that is masked by the impact of its imagery. It often gives us news gathering in the raw. Producers don't like "talking heads." So, we get a staccato rush from one sound bite to another. This is not the story of a reporter who has talked to many sources, done the necessary research, and then pulled the results together into a comprehensive whole.

Television, too often today, undermines journalistic credibility. I say that even though public opinion polls rank television news somewhat ahead of newspapers in believability. I say it because television shows a world that never was and never will be. But television is by no means the only contributor to this erosion of credibility.

Current trends in newspaper circles raise new threats to credibility. We hear it said that newspapers need a fresh mindset. Aggressive coverage, truthful reporting, interesting writing, and professional behavior are not enough. No. We must project a warm and cuddly image, one that says newspapers are the fun place to be. What we have here is a problem of perception.

Two questions: First, can newspapers beat television as an entertain-

ment medium? Second, is it smart to play to your opponent's strong suit?

Well, smart or not, some newspapers are trying. They're soft. They trivialize content. They scorn coverage of public affairs. They seek, not respect, but cheap popularity and the profits they think it will bring.

Millard Grimes, the owner of the *Rockdale Citizen* in Conyers—my old hometown—focused his laser eye on the problem five years ago. In his fine book he edited on the history of the Georgia press, *The Last Linotype*, Millard says the greatest threat to newspapers may stem not from without but from within. His words:

"In 1985, much more than in 1950, the bottom line is discussed far more frequently than the banner line at most newspaper offices. . . . There is a growing impression that newspapers are looked on first as 'properties' that produce income, rather than as a primary means of informing the public about what's going on."

He continues: "Financial strength is essential, of course, if the press is to be free and independent, but several factors in the 1980s are pressuring newspaper companies to strive for ever higher profit margins, often at the expense of the news and information function, which is, after all, the purpose for which they were created and granted federal constitutional protection."

Why is he right? Excessive prices paid for newspapers. Debt service that demands huge cash outflows from new owners. The scramble for capital to buy new equipment. Stock sales that render the larger public companies vulnerable to the demand for short-term profits. Don't think these trends have escaped our readers.

Take a look at the Gallup organization's surveys for *Times Mirror*. They show a substantial erosion of public confidence in press, radio, and television. The public continues to like us, to believe us. But it doubts that we are disinterested reporters of the political and social scene. Criticism of some of our practices has increased substantially.

The public sees a lack of fairness, questionable independence, inaccuracy, and intrusiveness. Even 4 of every 10 members of the press itself find bias in news coverage. They say this bias is neither political nor economic. Instead, they attribute it to one-sidedness, incomplete and sloppy reporting, and unconscious personal bias. There is perhaps another reason, one that we hear less about.

This is our hypersensitivity in covering issues involving race, ethnicity, and gender. The *Washington Post* ombudsman, Richard Harwood,



dealt with this recently in his Sunday column. He says pressures from groups demanding special treatment "can—and sometimes do—lead to self-censorship and an unwillingness to deal candidly with 'sensitive' realities." No doubt our readers notice and wonder why we're not coming clean with them.

My list of sins against credibility goes farther: excessive use of anonymous sources, keeping company with the rich and famous, and double-dipping by serving on boards and agencies that we cover. Now, I ask you, should we wonder that the public questions our independence?

Add to that list such outrages as the recent purchase of Alaska's second-largest newspaper by the state's second largest petroleum services company. It admits it's going to turn that newspaper into a platform for a pro-oil point of view. Save a spot, too, for the former head of a chain who writes his autobiography, describes himself as an S.O.B., and then offers persuasive evidence that this is so. About all you can say for that caper is that it sells books.

And let's not leave out those old misdeeds that mar the work of all media. In our rush to get the job done, we are sometimes careless with our facts and with the reputations of others. We do at times pursue the abnormal even when the normal is more significant. And we are quick to judge, slow to retract our judgments when in error—though less so than in the past.

But let's be realistic. Practitioners of a craft that pushes, pokes, and pries into the business of others will always have a credibility problem. That means we must press on with that searching self-scrutiny and vigorous debate of our practices and policies. However, please keep in mind that wisdom from William Allen White: There are three things no one can do to the full satisfaction of anyone else—poke the fire, make love, and edit the newspaper.

There is one best answer to newspaper critics and that's better content. The strengths are there to provide it. Newspapers can handle complexity. They can take readers where the TV camera never goes. The newspaper package, unlike television, possesses the flexibility to reach multiple audiences. And newspapers still hold the franchise on local news.

Newspapers have made major improvements of late—in illustration, in format, and in accessibility. Color has added attractiveness, although we're beginning to overdose on it. Some editors seem to think color—

whether it's the last rose of summer or the first hot-air balloon of spring—can generate a rush to the newsstand. I doubt it.

I referred earlier to news that fills society's wants and needs in an interesting and compelling way. And we have the resources to provide it. Reporters and editors are smarter than ever, better educated than ever, better informed than ever.

Our writing shows improvement. We set the scene, more often than not. We give readers the sight, sound, smell. We no longer are prone to ignore stories that are simply interesting in and of themselves. But we brag too much in billing our reporters as being a superior cross between a prosecutor and a vice squad detective.

If that's so, why did we come so late to the Savings & Loan scandal? Why did we fall for a phony insurance crisis that led some states to gut their tort laws and make it more difficult for victims to recover for wrongful injury? Why did we allow one president after another to mask rising budget deficits by cooking the books with balances borrowed from Social Security, the Highway Trust Fund, and other sources?

National and foreign news content of newspapers has improved. But presentation remains a problem. Front-page leads and headlines often echo last night's telecast. And they lack so much as a hint that the stories they showcase offer the reader not only the "what" and the "where" but the "why" and the "how." Sure, it's difficult to do. But the answer is not to bury significant national and foreign stories back with the mattress ads or to ignore them altogether, as we sometimes do. How tragic that is in a world grown interdependent.

Foreign news often exerts local impact. Foreign trade in 1987 accounted for a quarter of our gross national product—four times its value in the 1950s. The South's farmers sell against the overseas producers of cattle, cotton, and tobacco. Textile, rubber, and auto workers depend for their paychecks on American success in competing with foreign manufacturers.

The local nature of foreign news goes beyond the jobs added or put at risk. Our nation wears a coat of many colors. You have readers with friends or relatives abroad. They want you to tell them—as only newspapers can—what's taking place in Europe, in Africa, in Latin America and the Pacific Rim. You have foreign students at local schools and universities.

Yet, U.S. news media have cut back sharply on resources devoted to covering foreign news. Articles in last fall's issue of the *Gannett*



*Center Journal* tell us that the number of correspondents sent abroad has dropped from 2,500 to 420 since World War II. Full-time American correspondents are stationed in fewer than one-third of the world's nations. What's more, they are moved so often that few have the time-in-country needed to understand the people and events they cover.

Medium-sized and larger dailies have rediscovered local news. They've also rediscovered that local news is expensive to cover and difficult to define. It's expensive because it's so labor intensive—and it takes good people if it's to be done well. It's difficult to define because of how we live. What's "local" in a suburban community of families in which the parents work in widely separated places and the children attend two or three different schools outside the neighborhood? It's hard to find the "there" in their lives.

Readability gurus warn us against using any word that has more than two syllables. Well, maybe three. I'm going to use one with six. *In-ter-re-la-ted-ness*. Interrelatedness. Meaning. It's the tie that binds—one fact to another, one series of events to another series. Pattern. Meaning. That's what newspaper content today lacks too often.

The *Wall Street Journal* often has it. The *Journal* may lack color photographs, circus makeup, sports, and comics. It may be blessed or cursed—depending on your point of view—with editorials written from the perspective of a troglodyte. But it has at least three stories on its front page on most days and a good many inside that possess interrelatedness. This is interpretive journalism in the best sense. Perhaps this is why the *Journal* leads the pack in the credibility standings.

Interpretive journalism does not mean slanted reporting, cause advocacy, or throwing spitballs at authority. McGill described it correctly back in 1959 in criticizing the false concept of objectivity. In a Pulitzer address at Columbia University that year, he said:

"One of the curses of newspapering was, and is, the cult of objectivity. Objectivity, of course, was a formula invented for escaping from the recklessly slanted news of the good old days. Print both sides, we said, and let the people make up their minds. But we overdid it. Some of the readers we have lost have fled the obscuring effects of objectivity . . . The trouble with American journalism's objectivity was that it wasn't really objective since it usually obscured the facts and caused readers to say, 'I wonder what the whole story and the complete truth is?'"

What was true for McGill in 1959 is true today. Reverence for false

objectivity too often marks coverage of state, national, and foreign news by some news agencies. The Associated Press has many capable national and foreign correspondents. But their work suggests that they get little encouragement to make full use of their knowledge and talents. Progress has been made in this respect under the management of Lou Boccardi and Bill Ahearn. But the AP still has a way to go. That is why many newspapers rely heavily on supplemental news services, which provide excellent coverage marked by valuable insight at prices well within reach.

The absence of interpretive or explanatory reporting on the local level can be traced to a number of sources. Reporters who are green, lazy, or both write without first understanding what it is they have covered. But another factor accounts for our shortcomings in this respect and it's one that publishers can and should do something about.

I speak of the widespread belief that good reporters and writers must become editors to get the pay and prestige they deserve. That's not so in Europe. And I think the best European newspapers at times surpass our best when it comes to explanatory journalism. We also need reporters who have shared with our readers some of life's experiences such as children, a home, and a mortgage. And you can keep them only with decent salaries. You get what you pay for.

There's another way in which our news and editorial staffs are by no means representative of the public we serve. We must recruit, retain, and promote more black reporters and editors. Otherwise, we will never do an adequate job of covering all segments of our communities, nor will we attract the black subscribers we must have to maintain our penetration rates at acceptable levels.

In all of our efforts, we should seek respect, not popularity. Popularity is not a legitimate goal for a newspaper. But a constructive response to the needs of the society that the newspaper serves certainly is. And, as has always been true, society's greatest need today is the ability to deal intelligently with change.

We must communicate and interpret that change. We must dig beneath the surface of events for hidden meaning and potential trends. We must search out that pattern of interrelatedness of which I spoke. And we must point the way to promising alternatives. That course will bring us respect—and readers. It will also keep us true to our reason for being—the coverage of public affairs.

Let us cut no slack for the imbeciles in our ranks who say that the



press can reduce that coverage. Why do they think the First Amendment was adopted and ratified? And, forget not, it is the FIRST Amendment! FIRST in that sturdy framework of liberty—the Bill of Rights! FIRST in support of our four freedoms—of speech, press, religion, and assembly; and, thus, FIRST in defense of our future as a democratic nation!

We have James Madison of Virginia to thank in large measure for the First Amendment. He saw the press as vital to democratic government. To him, the freedoms of speech and press were much more than just human values—values important to the individual alone. No. They were critical to self-government. Democracy required that the people possess the knowledge provided by full and vigorous debate of public affairs.

That is why the founders gave to the press the special protection of the First Amendment that we enjoy to this very day. That protection exists for a purpose. We neglect that purpose at our peril. If we fail to cover public affairs, we will lose not only the reason for that protection but also that protection itself.

McGill said it: We should and we must publish newspapers with something to say. And what did he mean by that? Listen to these words from his column on June 16, 1968:

"One hundred years ago this morning, the first issue of *The Atlanta Constitution* was published and circulated to a public ready to read a newspaper with something to say.

"There is a feeling of awe, which all the staff shares, at being a part of an institution which has completed a century of printing the news, entering vigorously into issues which have within them the power to benefit or harm, advance or retard, the progress of the city, state and nation.

"*The Atlanta Constitution* was to become unique. It was not content to be simply a local newspaper, provincial and narrow of view, as were not merely its competitors but its contemporaries generally . . .

"*The Constitution*—then and now—feels it owes a duty to its readers to interpret national influences and forces and their possible, or certain, effect on the South."

So said Ralph McGill. If it was important in his day that journalism offer serious content—that it have something to say—it's just as important in ours. Whether it will be up to us—to you and to me—for there's really no one else.