



Clarence Page delivers the 16th Ralph McGill Lecture at the opening session of the Georgia Press Institute, co-sponsored by the Georgia Press Association and the College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

THE McGILL LECTURE

Clarence Page
Columnist
The Chicago Tribune

I am deeply honored and humbled to be asked to deliver the Ralph McGill Lecture, especially this year. A quarter of a century — precisely 25 years — has passed since two momentous events in American journalism: Sadly, Ralph McGill died, and, happily, I graduated from journalism school.

Perhaps no one else would put those two events together, but they sit together in my mind for good reason. Ralph McGill was a living legend in my formative years — a writer, commentator, editor, and publisher whose character and courage helped to inspire me to pursue journalism as a career.

McGill knew what Paul Fussell was talking about when he said, “Journalism is what people don’t want you to write. All else is public relations.”

Or, perhaps more bluntly, Ralph McGill knew what my colleague Murray Kempton at New York *Newsday* meant when he compared editorial writers to soldiers who come down from the hills after the battle is over . . . and shoot the wounded!

Ralph McGill loved the South too much to be its unquestioning cheerleader. He had to tell his fellow Southerners what many, perhaps most of them, didn’t want to hear at the time yet needed so badly to hear. And he told it in the way of great journalism, firmly, yet persuasively, touching our hearts on the way to our heads.

He was an idealist without being an ideologue. He offended the left as an ardent opponent of communism. He offended the right as an ardent opponent of racism. He called the shots as he saw them; and, when he decided later in his life that his earlier defense of racial segregation was wrong, he was not too

proud to tell the world he had made a mistake, that he was not alone, and that the noblest traditions of the South demanded that Southerners put things right. He brought the Old South into the New South. He brought great honor to the South and honor to our profession. We could use more like him in the North.

At the time of his death I was becoming, through chance of history, part of the first generation of black journalists to penetrate white newsrooms. Young people have a hard time believing me today when I tell them about those days—before Oprah or Bill Cosby or Ed Bradley or Colin Powell. But even in the 1950s and the 1960s, when major media were crusading for equal justice for blacks elsewhere, very few were giving blacks an equal shot at jobs in their newsrooms.

Despite the lack of obvious opportunity or role models mainstream journalism offered a young African American of my generation, I decided to go into journalism sometime in the winter of my high-school-junior year in the early 1960s. A lot of momentous events were going on at the time. President John Kennedy had just been assassinated. Black college students were staging sit-ins in the South. White and black demonstrators were registering black voters. The beginnings of the anti-war movement were churning up at Berkeley in California. A quartet of longhairs called The Beatles was performing on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and setting American standards—and American parents—on edge. None of us knew quite what to expect of all this, but we knew things would never be quite the same again.

It was a time of great change, I decided. I wanted to be a part of it and a career in journalism, I figured, would offer me my best chance.

The hardest part was finding a newspaper that would give me a chance. When I graduated from high school in 1965, the first paper where I applied for a summer internship turned me down, saying they weren't hiring any students that summer. The next day, I later found out, they hired a young white girl who had worked for me as a reporter on our high-school newspaper, where I had been feature editor. She also happened to be the daughter of one of the newspaper's top editors.

I was angry. But my father told me not to get mad, just get smart. Go to school, get your education—and someday maybe you can get even. I am pleased to say, parenthetically, that in 1986—20 years later and under a very different management—the newspaper that was the first to turn me down for a job became the first to subscribe to my newly syndicated column.

My parents, though, were properly alarmed at this news back in 1965. My mother had always wanted me to be a doctor. My father would be satisfied if I managed to stay out of jail. But my grandmother, bless her heart, simply told

me this: "Son, you can do whatever you want to do. Just prepare yourself, for the doors of opportunity are opening up and, when they do, you must be ready to step inside."

Little did my grandmother know that just a few years later big cities would be exploding in riots and editors would be looking, eagerly, to hire at least a few reporters and photographers they could send out to "the ghetto" without looking too conspicuous!

So, by the time I graduated from college in 1969, major media had gone from not wanting to see black applicants at their door to searching vigorously for them. Women had yet to earn equal opportunity in newsrooms. Latinos, Asians, and native American Indians had yet to be discovered, for the most part. And few people were talking about blacks moving up into management jobs. But at the entry level, our time as African-American journalists had come.

So, a quarter of a century later, I look back, as I grow older into what William Safire would call my "anecdotalage," and realize anew that I stand on the shoulders of those great journalists who came before me—Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Monroe Trotter, Ralph McGill—and that, as sobering as it may be to consider, new generations of journalists will come to stand on whatever shoulders I leave behind.

As Ralph McGill felt about the South, I love our profession of journalism too much to be its unquestioning cheerleader. George Will once declared media criticism to be America's second-favorite leisure activity. I am sure he is right. America is a nation of media critics, and no one criticizes the media more vigorously and agonizingly than those of us who work in them.

So I come to you today offering a compilation of what I have learned over the years about our shortcomings, in the hope that by diagnosing our problems I can help us move toward some remedies that can enable us to serve our audiences better and save ourselves from becoming cultural dinosaurs in an age of change.

One day in New York I was on a panel with journalist Ken Auletta. His book, *The Underclass*, added that word to the social discourse of the 1980s. It was a discussion on community development, but inevitably the subject of the media came up, as it so often does. The community developers and foundation people there were quick to blame the media for failing to note the good news about community development. To their amazement, the media people there agreed with them. It was Auletta who pointed out that while everyone talks about the "pathologies of the underclass"—drugs, gangs, welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock births and the like—that we in the media have pathologies,

too. He's right. What do I mean by pathologies? Candidate Bill Clinton said one definition of insanity is to do the same unproductive thing over and over again. We in the media fall repeatedly into customs, traditions, and habits of mind that do not serve us well, yet we can't seem to shake the habits.

He's right. One of the pathologies is the bad-news syndrome. When things are going the way they are supposed to, it is not news to us. It is only when things *aren't* going the way they are supposed to that we in the media tend to take notice. How often do you read, for example, about a ghetto teenager who is *not* on drugs? About a black youth who is *not* in a gang? About a teenage girl who is *not* pregnant? About a poor black father who has *not* abandoned his family? About a poor black mother who scrubs floors to put her kids through college? Most of us African Americans are like that, but you don't read about us. Instead, we have gone from one set of racial biases, in which the major media treat us as though we did not exist, to a new set of biases in which we exist only as poor, helpless, addicted, and somehow a little shady.

Here, then, in the tradition of David Letterman, is my Top Ten List of Press Pathologies:

Ten: The Parallax View

Parallax is a photographic term that refers to the difference between what the film sees and what the eye sees in a twin-lens reflex camera. The camera distorts reality, we are taught. Better cameras distort less, but they all distort. Journalism also distorts. Unfortunately, we journalists often delude ourselves into believing otherwise, even when our audience knows better.

Nine: The Rolodex Syndrome

A liberal-leaning New York-based media watchdog group called FAIR took a survey for about six months a few years ago of the top 25 most-often-used talking heads on ABC's "Nightline." As it turned out, all but two of the top 25 talking heads were white males. The other two were Jeanne Kirkpatrick, representing America's women, and Jesse Jackson, who must be every producer's favorite spokesman for America's 30 million black folks. *The Rolodex syndrome* describes the tendency of producers and assignment editors to turn to the same people for reactions whenever a big issue breaks. People often ask me how I managed to appear as a talking head on so many television shows. Simple, I respond. Just make sure your name is in every assignment editor's Rolodex.

I'm not complaining. I appreciate the exposure. But there is a broader depth of opinions in American than that which we normally hear on the broadcast talk shows or read about in the newspapers. I, for one, would rather turn on a microphone on in a working-class pool hall or beauty parlor than hear

one more roundtable by "The McLaughlin Group."

Eight: Pack Reporting

Reporters are often compared to wolves or sharks because they run in packs. Yes, every editor and reporter worth his or her salt praises enterprise. Major newspapers typically tell their Washington reporters to break out of the pack and send back something the wire services do not have. Surprise me. The reporter trots off happily, until that fateful day when the reporter gets scooped by the wire service and the editor barks, "Why don't we have this story?" Soon the reporter finds himself or herself back in the pack.

In the pack, reporters are satisfied with remarkable ease by a good picture and a decent story once a day. The Clinton White House press corps in its early days failed to provide that, and guess what? White House reporters went off on their own, reporting a variety of hot-button issues breaking every day, ranging from gays in the military to a possible value-added tax to support health care. The Clinton agenda became muddled and confused in the public's mind, according to polls, at least until David Gergen was invited to the rescue. David Gergen, a fixture from the old Reagan White House, which, under Mike Deaver and David Gergen, among other spinmeisters, was expert at media manipulation, as chronicled in Mark Hertsgaard's excellent book on the press during the Reagan presidency, *On Bended Knee*.

The Reagan White House controlled the flow of info with a "Theme of the Day" that could be told in pictures and story, which was enough to satisfy the needs of most of the media. Leslie Stahl recalls the day she thought the Reaganites would be upset by a story she did on the president cutting millions of dollars one morning from a program that aided the elderly. Oh, that's okay, a Reagan press aide told her. Our pictures got out, that's all that matters. The pictures, as it turns out, were of Reagan happily smiling and shaking hands with senior citizens at a center for the elderly. At first Stahl had thought the photo opportunity at the nursing home was a godsend. After all, TV needs pictures; without pictures, there's no story in television, another pathology peculiar to TV. But it turned out that the photo op was designed to distract and blunt the impact of the bad news, which was the cut in aid to seniors. Similarly, Hertsgaard recalls, Reagan posed for a famous photo op in a working-class Boston pub, holding a beer stein high with the blue-collar boys the very same day this working man's friend had signed a bill that limited the rights of unions to strike.

That great spokesman, "anonymous White House source," once said, "Reporters are like alligators. You don't have to love them. You don't necessarily have to like them. But you do have to feed them."

Seven: Parochial Localism

Years ago, when I worked the rewrite desk in the newsroom, we used to have a rather cynical slogan, "News is what happens near the news editor's house." I first heard it after one of our top editors, having moved with his wife from the suburbs back to the city now that their kids were grown, was highly upset by a robbery on his block and assigned the city desk to assign a reporter to do a story about urban crime and fighting urban crime. An issue he cared not a bit about before suddenly became important after it landed near his doorstep. Localism is good, but it should not be too parochial or else you've got *parochial localism*.

Note: This malady is the flip side of "Afghanistanism," which James Reston cited as a condition from which journalists and Washington officials suffer: "If it's far away, it's news," he said, "but if it's close to home, it's sociology."

Six: The "Nightline" Syndrome

ABC's excellent late-night news program also illustrates a popular fallacy of the news business. Typically, it will find two or three people who hold wildly opposed, extreme views, pit them against each other framed in a split screen for a half-hour, then wrap up the show as if all sides have been covered. Actually, it is only the side the network television camera has room to cover, and the television eye is afflicted with a lamentable tunnel vision. I think we have the illusion that more is covered because most of us have heard since childhood that there are two sides to every story. Actually, that's a myth. There are far more than two sides to most stories, and this is especially true when we are talking about stories as complex as the economy, health care, welfare reform, race relations, immigration or Japanese trade.

The Clinton White House played this pathology to its advantage in the NAFTA debate when it pitted Al Gore against Ross Perot on the "Larry King" show. The White House could have invited Lane Kirkland of the AFL-CIO or any number of more reasonable-sounding members of Congress. But, no, that would have been too close to the Clinton political base. Instead, by facing Ross Perot with the mild-mannered vice president, the Clintonite deliberately elevated Perot to the position of being chief spokesperson for the anti-NAFTA side, making the anti-NAFTA side look more marginal than it really was. What looked at first like a no-win situation for the guarded Gore against the fast-talking Perot looks in hindsight like a no-lose situation.

Five: Old Before It's Sold

One of my greatest pet peeves as a reporter in both print and broadcast (media) is to have a story squeezed out of the day's lineup through no fault of

its own except the fact that it can "hold another day," as editors and news producers like to say. But then the next day when you try to pitch the story again, an almost reflexive response shoots it down. "What? That old story again?" Many a great story has died simply because it became old in the eyes of a news editor or producer long before the public ever got a chance to see it.

Four: PC in the Newsroom: The "Politeness Conspiracy"

Much has been written in the major journalism reviews and trade publications about "political correctness" in the newsroom now that editors in an enlightened age find themselves managing multiracial, multigender, multicultural newsrooms and serving an increasingly multiracial, multigender, multicultural audience. Compared to my day, when I was the second full-time black reporter to be hired by my newspaper, which was then 120 years old, I certainly think these changes are good compared to where we're coming from.

But the PC I worry about is what one friend calls the *politeness conspiracy*. This pathology describes a supersensitivity—a *supersensitivity*—about the feelings of various groups who might jam our switchboard or come picket our building and embarrass our bosses, bringing much shame, embarrassment, and possible job jeopardy down on some middle-level editor. In many cases, controversial material is simply left out of the paper or off the air, which quite often is a mistake.

I think the most insidious form of censorship is self-censorship. When in doubt, let it out. Let the audience decide. If it is too obscure to offend sober minds in your newsroom—and I don't think newsrooms have ever been more sober than today in our current age of sobriety—then there's a good chance it won't offend very many readers, either.

Three: Pigeonholing of Reporters . . .

by Race, Gender, Age, Background

Now that editors and other managers are learning the value of multicultural newsrooms, too many make the mistake of assigning people to stories according to their race, gender, age, or background. Some folks don't mind, but quite often pigeonholing talent can be a way of truncating talent, stunting the intellectual growth of your staff, blocking good people from stories or assignments in which they could blossom.

Two: Newsroom Culture Gaps

This is worth a book in itself, but let's name one—what I call the false family model. It may sound nice, at first, to say, "We're just like family around here," until you realize your family may be dysfunctional. Maybe you've got too much control at the top with good old "papa." Maybe ideas and contributions from the ranks are being discouraged. Families are wonderful,

but they sometimes have favorite sons who are expected to inherit all the gold, little sisters who are never expected to amount to much, and dear old "Uncle Deadwood," who is allowed to vegetate in the corner until retirement, all because we love him so. That can be a very cruel kind of love.

And my number one pathology of the press:

One: Accenting the Diagnostical, Ignoring the Remedial

Coverage of social problems that amounts to a diagnosis, but not a prescription. Coverage that turns a blind eye to possible remedies, to good news from the grass roots. The community that is turning back crime. The public school that is turning the corner on literacy and math scores.

Is there hope for this patient? Yes, there is. Change is at hand. Today's media managers increasingly are aware of these pathologies, although they don't call them pathologies. We are beginning to see new action and innovations from newspapers and television network news now that both industries have been thoroughly frightened by increased competition for shrinking audiences.

Some of these changes have been good, others troubling. On the good side, television is accepting fewer handouts and trying to spot unconventional news sooner. CBS has "Eye on America" to find those good-news stories. ABC has "Person of the Week." Cable has brought in new choices, possibly as many as 500 channels in the next few years, although, as Russell Baker once wrote, "it's hard to imagine how they're going to stretch 500 channels of programming that presently is inadequate for seven." No matter. More choices do enable every viewer, in the words of one FOX-TV executive, "to become his or her own news editor."

Newspapers have expanded their op-ed pages to bring more alternative voices into the paper, and that's good. They have changed their beat structures from vertical to horizontal to spot more quickly social trends that cross the usual beat boundaries. Newspapers are sticking to their franchise as the medium that tries to be all things to all people in a culture of increasingly suburbanized geographic sprawl and segmentation. As census numbers show that, for the first time, more Americans live in suburbs than in cities or on the farm, our newspapers are opening suburban bureaus and publishing sections for each geographic area. Some marketers are calling it "the sectional revolution." Others fear it might be sectional perversity, promoting the segmentation of society and whatever memory we may have of a common culture.

We can already hear the impact of specialization on radio, where a spin down the AM and FM dials reveals an array of voices that talk less and less to

each other, from radical black talk radio to Rush Limbaugh. Unlike the common culture that was encouraged by a society that gathered in living rooms across the country to watch the "Ed Sullivan Show" or whatever other show, we now split up, even in the same household, to watch or listen to different choices. Radio at its best is theater of the mind, the best broadcast medium for ideas. Choice is good, the benefit of a democratic society, but we must be ever mindful of a need for media that bring people together, too, particularly to exchange ideas. It is a role to which newspapers were born and, I think, cannot easily walk away from.

Also on the negative side, competition for audience has caused local TV news in major markets to drift in many cases toward the tabloid-TV style of "Hard Copy" or "A Current Affair." And newspapers, famously following the style of *USA Today*, are turning away from in-depth reporting in favor of little McNuggets of news, catering to shortened attention spans in the deepening competition for the reader's time.

Even so, choices give us considerable reason for optimism. For every McNuggeting of news, there is a C-SPAN or local all-news channel that offers more depth than most people care to appreciate.

In this, the age of giant communications mergers and talk of an information superhighway, those who fail to keep up will get lost on the exit ramps.

As I look back on the legacy left to my generation by Ralph McGill, I think of the legacy the current generation in power is passing on to today's journalism graduates. The torch is passed, as John F. Kennedy said, and it burns brightly in this new era of great change. I wish there were more jobs in the marketplace, as there were when I graduated, but there are immense opportunities.

Ralph McGill's spirit lives on in journalists who persist in using our craft and resources, not just to report the news, but also to take time in clearly-labeled commentaries to try to explain the news, to use thoughtful words to help readers sort things out, to offer them provocative opinions to which they can react and help knowledge to progress, so we might build a better future for those who will come along and stand on the shoulders we leave behind.