

ABOUT GENEVA OVERHOLSER

Geneva Overholser is best known for her work at the *Washington Post*. She wrote a syndicated column for the *Washington Post* Writers Group from 1998-2001. Previously, she was ombudsman for the famed newspaper – dealing with reader complaints, writing a column and critiquing the paper in-house.

Overholser began her journalistic career in Colorado as a reporter for the *Colorado Springs Sun* and then spent five years working as a freelancer in Africa and in Europe. In 1981, she joined the *Des Moines Register* as an editorial writer. In 1985, she was awarded a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University, after which she took a job at the *New York Times* as an editorial writer specializing in foreign affairs and security issues. She returned to the *Des Moines Register* as its editor in 1988.



Under the editorship of Overholser, the *Register* won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize Gold Medal for Public Service for “It Could Happen To Me: One Woman’s Story,” a series of articles about the rape of an Iowa woman that used the woman’s name and photograph. The series of articles resulted from a powerful essay Overholser wrote, arguing that the press needed to reconsider the way it covered rape cases.

Overholser currently is the Hurley Chair of Public Affairs Reporting at the University of Missouri. She is a board member of the Knight Fellowships at Stanford, the National Press Foundation, the Alfred Friendly Press Fellowships and the PBS television show “Media Matters.” She is also a trustee of the Stanley Foundation. Overholser previously served as a board member and officer of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and as a member of the Pulitzer Prize board for nine years, the final year as chair.

The South Carolina native earned a bachelor’s degree in history at Wellesley College, a master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University and a French language certificate from the Sorbonne.

Her accomplishments include being named a Nieman fellow at Harvard and a Congressional fellow with the American Political Science Association, “Best in the Business” in the *American Journalism Review* and “Editor of the Year” by the National Press Foundation. In addition, she is a fellow of the Society of Professional Journalists and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

GENEVA OVERHOLSER

First, allow me to tell you what an enormous pleasure, and honor, it is to be here with you this morning. It's a pleasure, because of the opportunity to get to know (or get to know better) so many wonderful people.

It's an honor – well, only begin to count the reasons. One, of course, is the list of speakers I follow, from my dear friend Gene Patterson early on the list, to my dear friend Cynthia Tucker last year.

Another is that I am here at the behest of Grady College, named for a local Athens boy who made good as the "Voice of the New South."

Another is that I'm delivering this lecture in the name of one of the veritable icons of journalism. Let me assure you, as a child of the South myself – and a child of the civil-rights era – I know a little something personally about the power of courageous journalism in those days. I was 10 years old and living in Hot Springs Ark., when the newspaper our family subscribed to – the *Arkansas Gazette* – won two Pulitzer Prizes, one for meritorious public service and the other to its executive editor, Harry Ashmore, for editorial writing (just one year

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before Ralph McGill won his). The paper had taken a strong stance against Gov. Orval Faubus's efforts to keep Little Rock's Central High School white – and its circulation dipped from 100,000 to 83,000 as a consequence.

These editors – Ralph McGill, Harry Ashmore, Hodding Carter, and many others – are heroes. Journalists, all, they showed us how powerful, and how honorable, journalism can be. As, of course, did Gene Patterson, whose wonderful new book – a collection of his civil-rights era columns, is just out.

I have to tell you, for me, a child of the South and a journalist, to come here and lecture at a college named for "the Voice of the New South" in a lecture series named for "the Conscience of the South" at the university Gene Patterson graduated from – well, if there is a Journalism Trifecta, I've hit it.

But I can't just go on gushing all night (though my colleague at Missouri, Charles Davis, who equates Athens and heaven, told me I must stand up here

and talk about them bulldogs, and go "Woof," so I'll throw that in) but, now I'd better try to earn my way onto this lectern by moving on to the topic at end. And that is, What Good Is Journalism?

Why am I talking to you this morning about this question – I'll put it to you right away: Because I think that journalism in America is dangerously threatened. And I think that a decline in America's journalistic health leads

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directly to a decline in America's civic health. And I think that the best hope for protecting journalism – for once again nourishing it – lies in a public clamor for good journalism.

Now I'm not a fool – or at least not a complete fool – and so I'm under no illusion that speaking out in support of journalism is what most folks these days are inclined to do. Indeed, journalists

have been experiencing a plummeting public reputation for years, and we currently show up in surveys right down there with used-car salesmen.

People think journalists are pushy, obnoxious, cynical, superficial, self-infatuated and bent on hobnobbing with the powerful. They think we confuse news and entertainment, embrace sensationalism, and care more about prizes than we do about the public. The books about the media that sell well have titles such as "Bias" and "Slander."

And guess what – I am here to tell you that things are worse than that. That the picture is actually more worrisome – significantly drearier – than you think.

Let me read you just a sampling of titles from my office bookshelf.

The News About the News: American Journalism in Peril

Conglomerates and the Media

Read All About It: The Corporatization of America's Newspapers

Don't Shoot the Messenger: How our Growing Hatred of the Media Threatens Free Speech for All of Us

The Big Chill – Investigative Reporting in the Current Media Environment

Megamedia: How Giant Corporations Dominate Mass Media...And Threaten Democracy

The Press and the Decline of Democracy

Rich Media, Poor Democracy...

...well, you get the drift.

As is evident from that list, the roll call of media problems is long. To kick us off here, let me discuss just half a dozen of them with you.

1. Entertainment and scandal crowd out substantive news. PBS newsmen Jim Lehrer dates this development from the OJ obsession. I'd say it may go back even further. But the tendency – to rush, herd-like, toward one story, which drowns out all others – has surely been exacerbated of late, with 24-7 cable news channels and with newspapers online competing to be just as fast – and just as catchy – as anybody.

2. The culture of news organization is risk-averse. We are slow to make changes even when solid evidence indicates the need to do so. For example: An interesting research project out of Northwestern University recently found that it isn't that the public is uninterested in the news – but rather that the public is unhappy with many of the choices editors make. Respondents to the survey ranked "stories about ordinary people" as number one among their preferences, and "how I fit into my community" as 2nd, national and international news as 3rd. – Sounds like a pretty good journalism diet, right – Yet such heavily-covered stories as crime ranked eighth in reader preference, and sports ranked ninth – Altogether, a pretty good indication that we're not matching our coverage to your interests.

3. Editors these days are far more likely to move frequently from one community, as are reporters. There is therefore less connection to the community and indeed less knowledge of the community.

4. This opinion of media is part of a wider social development. Journalists are far from alone experiencing a decrease in public confidence in them. Society has shown a growing distrust of almost all professions and institutions in recent years.

5. Add to all this the very different tenor in our nation's life since 9/11 and the very powerful feelings of national pride and protectiveness that have

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surged through our land. This has had a profound impact on journalism. There was a great deal of wonderful journalism practiced in the wake of 9/11, but it tended to be journalism that made us feel good, that brought us together, not journalism that challenged the prevailing thinking – a harder kind of journalism to do in such a climate. Remember the USA Patriot Act, which Congress passed quickly in the wake of 9/11 – Its name alone should raise a red flag, in my view. Yet thorough and digging coverage was virtually nonexistent regarding this legislation. Here was a law allowing federal investigators to search homes more freely, to tap e-mail and phone calls, to share information with intelligence agencies, to narrow the applications of the Freedom of Information Act – yet you'd have thought there was nary a need for scrutiny of its effect. This was partly of course because Congress was so pliant at that moment in our nation's history. But we in the media were pliant, as well.

President Bush, I think, has done a very skillful job of making anyone who questions anything look unpatriotic. But this is a president who was prone to keeping things close to his chest BEFORE 9/11. And journalistic failure to prod and probe are not acts of patriotism. Indeed, skepticism IS an act

of patriotism for journalists. But we in journalism have grown far more worried out being disliked in recent years than we used to be. Now, on top of that, we must fear being labeled “unpatriotic.”

And too few of us have stood up well to these challenges.

6. But the journalistic challenge that I want to focus on – the challenge that is overarching – is this: Satisfying shareholders has become more important

than serving citizens. Making money for their corporations now has a greater hold on journalists, like it or not, than making a difference in their communities – the quest that brought so many of us into the craft in the first place.

Listen to how *Taking Stock* – a recent book about the impact on newspaper companies of public ownership – a book from Iowa State University Press, which just happens to have as one of its co-authors, your dean – listen to how *Taking Stock* puts this: “News was the product around which the business was shaped. The news was selected, presented and packaged in appealing and

therefore profitable ways, to be sure, but the central focus of the newspaper has been the publication of news. Dramatic change is now afoot, however. Today, the business of news is business, not news.”

“News has become secondary, even incidental, to markets and revenues and margins and advertisers and consumer preferences.”

Or consider this line from longtime newspaper editor Harold Evans: “The problem many organizations face is not to stay in business, but to stay in journalism.”

Nor is it only newspapers.

Indeed, broadcast organizations are under even greater pressure – and have generally gone

further down the road toward

unprecedented profitability and away from journalistic responsibility. A Tennessee broadcast journalist described what's happening in television news this way:

“I see the country drifting in this mindless direction, and I see it has invaded television news...And only the people with the intestinal fortitude to stand up to it, and to reject it, are going to save us from it. Because the temptation, see, is to get an audience by having all these lurid stories and some celebrities. And you say to yourself, ‘Well, see, look at our ratings. Isn't that wonderful –’ And that is an abdication of our responsibility. While news can be entertaining, that's not our job, to be entertainers. Our job is to be informers...And that's a tremendous challenge today because these forces of infotainment...are crashing through the door. And the ratings are imperative, you have to have them or you don't survive.”

Don Hewitt of 60 Minutes has said that when he got into the biz as a young producer, the ethic was “Make us proud.” Today, it's “Make us money”

Part of this is attributable to a decline in local ownership. I was stunned recently to read remarks by John Curley, the former CEO of Gannett, the company that made “quarter-to-quarter profit-increase” the mantra of the newspaper business. Curley spoke to a group of Pennsylvania newspaper editors, most of them in family-owned newspapers, and he told them, “Keep it as long as you can.” Lamenting how much pressure Wall Street has put on the chains to provide ever bigger returns to shareholders, Curley said some of the chains would do well to tell Wall Street that they've done all they can

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to improve the bottom line – and focus instead on producing a quality news product for their subscribers. As the former editor of the *Des Moines Register*, which under Gannett (after being family-owned) went from just under 6 million dollars in annual profits to 20.5 million dollars after the first three years of Gannett ownership – well, you can imagine my consternation that

“...journalists cited “a lack of training” as their top source of job dissatisfaction.”

this conviction had not come burning into Curley’s breast a few years sooner.

When the press and broadcast media are owned by some of the wealthiest corporations in America, is there any wonder that they come so late to reporting

on financial difficulties, on misleading accounting and conflicts of interest – from the savings and loan scandal to Enron. Or that their enthusiasm for the “new economy” was virtually unbridled – When the media become just another institution intent on accumulating wealth we can hardly have confidence that they will be digging out facts that businesses don’t want us to know.

Now I want you to think with me about the practical impact of these economic pressures. Again, I would note six of them.

1. First, impact on employment – on who works at these media institutions. In 2001 alone – through retirement, death, buyout and layoff, newspapers collectively lost 2,000 journalists nationally, and broadcast and cable another 1,600.
2. Second, what about the ones still on staff – How are they doing – Michigan State University does a survey of beginning salaries by occupation. Guess where journalism ranks – Out of 40 occupations, Journalism is 3rd from the bottom – just nosing out preschool teachers, who – as we know – are hardly famous for being reimbursed in line with the importance of the work we do.
3. Consider training. Training in the average U.S. business – even those supposedly less committed to social responsibility than the press – is a given. Fortune magazine’s list of “100 Best Companies” cites offerings of 52 to 132 hours of training per year per employee, and notes a powerful relationship between an organization’s investment in training and its performance.

Yet two-thirds of the nation’s journalists receive no regular training at all. As one colleague of mine has put it, the amount newspapers spend

on training is equivalent to a rounding error. So no wonder last April’s convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors revealed results of a survey showing that journalists cited “a lack of training” as their top source of job dissatisfaction.

4. On and on go the sad pieces of news from surveys, about job satisfaction plummeting among journalists, about declining numbers of journalists expecting to remain in the field until retirement, about increased numbers of mistakes associated with overloaded copy desks, about reporters with fewer and fewer hours to spend on stories, about the number of reporters news organizations have covering government at all levels, from Congress to state legislatures to the county courthouse.

A new and very interesting book called *Good Work: Where Excellence and Ethics Meet* compares the two fields of genetics and journalism, as to whether their practitioners are able to do good work. Geneticists, they found, are able to be “true to their domain” in a well-functioning field. “In contrast, the realm of journalism emerges as poorly aligned; that is, many practitioners feel that it is difficult to honor the precepts of the domain, their field is wracked by tension, the stakeholders are threatening the core values and the principal roles, and the future may well hold even worse tidings. Under such circumstances, good work is but a distant dream.”

5. As, my fifth point, here, I want to draw special attention to the question of international news coverage. Let me put it to you this way: On Sept 11, you would not have been nearly so likely to have been caught utterly off-guard as you were, had the press been doing the job it should be doing to keep you informed about the rest of the world.

Remember how many at the time said, “How could our intelligence services have failed us so?” A good question. But I would ask this one, as well:

How could our reporting on intelligence have been so poor? In February 2001, CIA Director George Tenet told the Senate Intelligence Committee that Osama bin Laden’s “global network” was the “most immediate and serious” terrorist threat to the United States. A handful of newspapers covered the testimony, and even their stories were brief and buried.

“It is expensive to provide intelligent foreign news, and media corporations like to avoid doing expensive things these days whenever they can.”

A few weeks before that, a bipartisan commission released a report saying that "the relative invulnerability of the U.S. homeland to catastrophic attack" was coming to an end. The commission, headed by former Sen. Gary Hart and by former Sen. Warren Rudman, said: "A direct attack against American citizens on American soil is likely over the next quarter-century," and that America's military superiority "will not protect it from hostile attacks on our homeland...Americans will likely die on American soil, possibly in large numbers."

The report was hardly noticed. The *New York Times* didn't cover it. Hart, who says he was "tearing his hair out" during the 9/11 terrorist attack because the commission's warnings had been so clear – and so clearly ignored – has said of the report's release that "the White House shut it down."

But the media did not have to join in.

(Incidentally, I saw last week that the Hart-Rudman group had done a second report, this one containing still more unsettling warnings – and this one, unsurprisingly – did get more coverage) Guess we learn – but what's missing now –

A critical part of the problem is that news of international relations has shrunk dramatically. A survey a couple of years ago, from Harvard showed that U.S. network television's time devoted to international news had

dropped 70 percent, from 45 percent of total coverage in the 1970s to 13.5 percent in 1995. In newspapers, another study shows, the falloff has been even worse – from 10.2 percent of news space in 1971 to less than 2 percent today.

Why has this happened – People will argue all kinds of things going back to failures of civics class in high school that lead to lack of interest in adulthood, but I'm here to tell you that it boils down, in the end, to money. It is expensive to provide intelligent foreign news, and media corporations like to avoid doing expensive things these days whenever they can.

6. Now, let us consider for a moment a more positive development: The proliferation of new means of communication. Given this development – and the evident great public interest in information – this should be a positive moment for news media. And indeed the Internet, in particular,

seems to me to offer enormous hope for democratization of the media. It used to be that the cost barrier for entry into the journalistic mix – was so high that it was a rare privilege indeed to be published. But the Net has changed that. So why do I list this new explosion under problems – Because it's journalism

I'm worried about here. It's JOURNALISM I'm trying to bring to your attention, not information or communication generally. I'm talking about the KIND of information that gets done only in organizations specifically devoted – and willing to devote resources to – finding out what is going on, with an eye toward the public interest and disseminating it with a commitment to fairness and accuracy. That can happen in all kinds of media – but a lot of what happens under the guise of information is certainly NOT journalism.

As Bill Kovach, whom you Georgians know as former editor of the Atlanta newspapers, and who is now head of something called the Committee of Concerned Journalists (you see, I'm not alone!), said at a recent Aspen Institute session, "The world changes with every generation, but those of us who spend time monitoring the behavior of something we love, fear that journalism could disappear into the current mix of communication and the public would never see it go."

(Let me say by way of comic relief here that Bill was responding, as I recall, to our moderator at that meeting, Jeff Greenfield, who had just recounted the wonderful line from the movie, "Atlantic City", in which Burt Lancaster's character is standing on the shore with a newcomer, who is looking out over the ocean with him and marveling at it. "Ah, but you should have seen it in the old days," says the Lancaster character. Thus Bill's acknowledgment that the world changes with every generation.)

To end my litany of misery here, I want to say that all that I have told you is quite often discussed within the trade. As one friend of mine notes, "Being a cash cow IS a strategy," and it's a much-discussed strategy as well.

And one question that is posed in the debate is this one: Is it rational that we should go on degrading our "products" as the business people call newspapers – even as we see readers turning away in response.

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A friend of mine tells of having asked a buddy in Tennessee what percentage of profit crack dealers make. The fellow answered: "25 percent. Degrade the crack any more than that to increase the profit, and you're apt to get yourself killed."

Well, newspaper companies' cash-cow strategies don't seem to produce that kind of consequence for corporate leaders – or much of any negative consequence at all in the short term, anyway.

And I would argue that this is because this topic, so much discussed in the biz, is little-discussed beyond it. The public knows little about it, indeed.

And why is that – Well, think about it. Who is going to tell you – The

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newspapers – Sure...Right... Think of the reporter who yearns to tell the story about how much newspaper advertising rates are going up even as circulation is going down. The publisher would surely want that given prominence. Newspaper profit margins have gone up some 50 percent in the last decade, while readership has gone down 15 percent – that could be a good lead on a biz-page

story. Newspaper companies make 2 to 3 times the returns that the average industry makes. Surely the CEO would be eager for advertisers to know that-

In other words: Don't hold your breath.

As Jay Harris, the wonderfully honorable and thoughtful former publisher of the *San Jose Mercury News*, who left the job over disagreement about cost cuts, said, "With several notable and distinguished exceptions, the press does not cover itself as well as it does other institutions in society. If these cuts were happening in local hospitals, it would be an enormous story...the public is largely unaware and must be made aware of the slow but steady erosion in priority that's given to the public interest."

I daresay I've done enough here to make my dreary case. So let's move on to the happy part of my speech, the part encapsulated in the title:

What Good IS Journalism – Let's think about that for a moment.

Journalism gives you everything from the weather to the stock market, from movie reviews to personal finance. And, of course, it gives you the news: local, metro, state, national, international. Now, newspapers do this to

varying degrees. But believe me – they do it better than just about anyone else. In any given community, I assure you, newspaper newsrooms are the place where the most original reporting is going on, and that reporting in turn influences other media. But all media can provide powerful journalism, even I – the ink-stained wretch – will assert.

If you were to say to yourself what good journalism is, I suppose you might come up with some Big Stories. Think about seeing the movie, "The Insider," – and who knows how or when we would ever have learned about the cigarette industry's dangerous deceptions without that investigative reporting-

Or – I think of this because I was just with the great reporter Seymour Hersh last week – think about the My Lai massacre. There were plenty of reasons we might never have known about that, without Sy Hersh's skill at ferreting it out, and his courage in telling it.

You know what I'm getting at. There is story after story about abuse in nursing homes, venality in the foster care system, American adventurism abroad, misuse of your tax dollars, failures of the safety net, excesses of corporate behavior.

It was journalism – Rachel Carson, writing in magazines – that first gave us an awareness of our detrimental impact on the environment. It was journalism that Upton Sinclair was committing when he wrote about the horrors of the meatpacking industry – a principal reason we now have the Pure Food and Drug Act.

It was, of course, journalism that revealed the corruption that brought Richard Nixon down. And it is journalism, today – indeed, journalism students at Northwestern University – who brought to light wrongful convictions, leading to the exoneration of death row inmates in Illinois and now a moratorium on executions and a reevaluation of the death penalty in that state.

So journalism is powerful – but in more ways than just the Big Stories. Journalism brings the community together – from birth announcements to obituaries, to routine city and county news, crime reports in your

"Journalism brings the community together – from birth announcements to obituaries, to routine city and county news, crime reports in your neighborhood..."

neighborhood – and, for that matter, those movie listings, sports scores, stock quotes and restaurant reviews.

And it is journalists, too, who are essential to fighting for the First Amendment, which – many people think, and some polls indicate, would never pass today. This, I think stems not only from the public disaffection for the press. But also from the fact that, if media businesses are behaving just like any other business, it's much harder to defend the notion that they alone deserve First Amendment protection.

What Good Is the Press, then, has many answers. The United States Supreme Court has said that news provides information and opinion that “enables the members of our society to cope with the exigencies of their period.”

Phil Graham, Katharine Graham's husband and the one-time publisher of the *Washington Post*, called journalism “the first rough draft of history.”

The recent book by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, attempts to set out for the public what it is, exactly, that defines journalism – and distinguishes it within the broader communication mix.

Among the traits they cite:

“Journalism's first obligation is to tell the truth

Its first loyalty is to citizens

Its essence is a discipline of verification

Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover

“...despite all the evidence to the contrary, people still actually seem to like the press, and to consume it in large numbers.”

It must serve as an independent monitor of power

It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise

It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant

It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional

Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience”

Thomas Jefferson said, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

In concluding this testimony to what is good about the press, I should add that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, people still actually seem to like the press, and to consume it in large numbers. Despite the reports of journalism's decline – we are reminded here of Mark Twain's wonderful comment about the reports of his death being exaggerated – the truth is that this is an industry running strong.

“...incentive compensation for corporate officers should be tied in significant part to achieving journalistic quality goals.”

Consider this: On Super Bowl Sunday 2001 – the biggest TV day of the year – 86 million people watched the super bowl. And on that very Sunday, 132 million people read the Sunday paper.

I haven't heard anyone calling the Super Bowl dead.

So, let's agree – at least as long as I'm the one doing the talking – on two propositions: There is a lot that is good to be said about journalism. AND American journalism today is in a great deal of trouble.

So, what can be done?

Good question. I have to say, when I began speaking out on this issue, after becoming editor of the *Des Moines Register* in 1988, I despaired of any answer to that. A critique of the effects of the economic pressures on journalism could not be heard. I once gave a speech on this subject, which I tried to couch in quite congenial terms, at a Gannett corporate gathering where I was being honored, and the speech became the first ever delivered by the Gannett Editor of the Year that wasn't reprinted in the corporate magazine. A friend of mine described it as “samizdat” – for those of you who remember the old Soviet literature that could not be sanctioned officially and therefore was mimeographed and sent around from person to person among those eager to know the forbidden truth.

But the situation has changed drastically – in part, alas, because so much more damage has been done to our journalistic stock (and I'm not talking – for once – about Wall Street.)

The good news is that this change means that people are seeking solutions. In the last year alone I've gone to half a dozen major gatherings – under the aegis of the Aspen Institute, the Carnegie Corporation, the Nieman Foundation, the Ford Foundation and various journalism schools, to

discuss the issues I have raised with you tonight. Numerous books have been written, research conducted, and panels assembled on professional convention programs. Let me share a bit about some of the possibilities being discussed.

“...I believe that only through acquainting the public with the issues at hand – and with the extent of the challenge – can we hope to attain any real solution.”

1. One is an endeavor in which several of us former newspaper editors – your dean, again, played a role in this – joined to write to the CEOs

and board members of the nation’s 14 largest publicly owned newspaper companies, making some suggestions – for their consideration – about corporate governance steps that could help strengthen the journalism their companies do. We urged them to consider that boards of directors have among them members with experience on the editorial side of a news organization. We urged them

to designate a director – or directors – to have special responsibility to monitor the company’s editorial performance. And we urged that incentive compensation for corporate officers should be tied in significant part to achieving journalistic quality goals.

I can’t say we revolutionized anything. One prominent and well-respected CEO wrote back, “Are you guys out of your minds?” That was my first hint we still had some work to do – but I don’t need to tell you that the issue of responsible corporate governance has only grown more and more prominent, and I believe there is progress to be made on this front.

2. Another arena for action is research. All kinds of interesting research is being conducted:

- Research about practices – from training to compensation to R and D – in other industries and other professions, that could help media companies behave more responsibly.
- Research about how some newspaper companies manage to continue to invest while others squeeze more and more profit – and what are the results for the community.
- And also research that attempts to give company leaders some numbers to look at other than money. Several of my colleagues in this good fight are looking at ways to measure investment in the newsroom – some call

it “journalism capacity” – and its impact on the community. And some are attempting to find correlations between commercial success and journalistic investment.

3. I should add here that I am far from unwilling to use another often-powerful tool: SHAME. I read an opinion article recently in the *Washington Post* holding that it is public shame that has finally brought attention to the wildly spiraling CEO compensation packages. Shame might help in this issue, too. As the publisher of the *Kansas City Star* said a year or so ago, both money and public opinion, including “standing in the community” matter to executives, and “we’ve got to make the case that quality matters to the money and quality matters to public opinion.”
4. Some have spoken of convening a national commission – perhaps a reworking of the Hutchins Commission of 1947 that looked at many of these same issues, bringing together powerful opinion leaders to call attention to the problems afflicting journalism and bring pressure upon its leaders to consider their public responsibilities even as they weigh their financial ones.
5. Other suggestions include annual outside reviews of the journalistic units of any company that owns them. Or a national partnership for quality journalism, funded by corporations that would track, promote and defend the independent news function in this country.
6. Others have suggested that the solution lies in many different kinds of ownership, from public companies to companies that have publicly traded stock but are still controlled by families, to private companies – to models for print that are more along the lines of national public radio.

In the end, however, I believe that only through acquainting the public with the issues at hand – and with the extent of the challenge – can we hope to attain any real solution. Participants at one of the meetings I went to called this the need to “re-acquaint the public with its role and resources as citizen sovereigns.”

“...I believe, only when the public demand for good journalism is heard as loudly as Wall Street’s demand for shareholder satisfaction, that corporate journalism will give its civic duty anything like parity with its commercial duty.”

It is, I believe, only when the public demand for good journalism is heard as loudly as Wall Street's demand for shareholder satisfaction, that corporate journalism will give its civic duty anything like parity with its commercial duty.

The playwright Arthur Miller once wrote, "A great newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself." I submit to you today that our great national conversation is threatened. We must attend to the quality of that conversation if we care about the quality of our self-governance.

Joseph Pulitzer, when he made his proposal to support the founding of a school of journalism (now the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism) wrote that, "Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary,

demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. The power to mold the future of the Republic will be in the hands of the journalists of future generations."

I left the United States 30 years ago to spend five years overseas. I lived first in Africa – in Kinshasa, then Zaire, now once again Congo. As a reporter – and as an American – I was blown away by

how different a world is with no free press – no means of finding out what is really going on, no means of mobilizing action, of curbing tyranny – no means, really, to do anything but hang on, desperately.

Then I moved to France, where the press was rich and lively and quite free politically – but where I discovered a different kind of challenge. France, and much of the rest of Europe, was caught up in a frenzy of huge corporate acquisition of media, and these nations were gripped by a fear that fewer and fewer voices would ring out, and that those democracies would suffer as a consequence.

I came back home to America, and I thanked my lucky stars that our press was so vigorous and so free and so strong. Now, 25 years later, I'm not nearly so sanguine. I believe journalism in America is endangered, and that we will have to fight to keep it working for us and for this great democracy.

It is in the hope that you will join me in this fight that I have given this speech.

**"I believe journalism in
America is endangered, and
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for this great democracy."**

UPCOMING LECTURE

RALPH MCGILL

LECTURE XXV

Hodding Carter, III
President and CEO
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

October 14, 2003

Grady College

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RALPH MCGILL