



RALPH MCGILL  
LECTURE XXVII

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*Jerry Ceppos, former chief news executive of Knight Ridder, delivered the 27th annual McGill Lecture in the University of Georgia Chapel.*

**Ralph McGill Lecture**  
**University of Georgia**  
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Thank you.

I am honored to deliver a lecture carrying Ralph McGill's name.

I've read a good deal about McGill in preparation for this talk and particularly enjoyed Gene Patterson's description of McGill's greatest accomplishment. That, Patterson said, was "to start a conversation."

Patterson, who, like McGill, won a Pulitzer at the *Atlanta Constitution*, expanded on what he meant during a conversation with Howell Raines. The conversation was recounted in Patterson's own book, "The Changing South of Gene Patterson."

He said, "To know that period of the South is to know that it was frozen in silence. People were not discussing the issue. Neighbor and neighbor were afraid of each other. Conformity was established by precedent. And for a man who might doubt the wisdom of segregation to sit down with his neighbor and say, 'Hey, I'm not sure we're right,' could have ruined that man in most southern states.... Therefore nobody discussed the issue. Only the politicians, who were aggravating emotions, were discussing it. McGill suddenly and boldly on the front page of the *Constitution* began to talk openly about the rights and wrongs of segregation, and this led people to be emboldened to talk about it, even if all they did was cuss McGill."

I want to suggest today that, if journalism is to survive the tough patch that we're in now, we need a new kind of courage, different from McGill's

but complementary, and new kinds of conversations, with media consumers and students and our own staffs.

Newspapers, and journalism in general, won't lose influence because of the Internet.

Or because of declining advertising revenue. Or because of corporate ownership.

Instead, the death threat is in the decline in trust in what we do. That decline is fed by Jayson Blair and Jack Kelley and the others but also by all of us who don't set standards and make sure that everyone understands them. That decline is fed when we don't take safeguards and when we don't know how to react to a crisis until it's upon us. That decline is fed by silly errors—and by our unwillingness to acknowledge every last one of them. It's fed by our secrecy, our fortress mentality.

The Pew Research Center says that 45 percent of Americans “believe little or nothing they read in their daily newspapers.” Of course, you can't believe every figure you read either. The woman who drove me from the Atlanta airport to Athens yesterday told me that her horseback survey shows that 90 percent of her rides don't believe what they see in newspapers.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism must have had her in mind when it summed up the crisis last year: “Americans think journalists are sloppier, less professional, less caring, more biased, less honest about their mistakes and generally more...harmful ...to... democracy than they did in the 1980s.” Sixty-seven percent believe news organizations try to cover up their mistakes. The number was 13 percent in the '80s.

If any of our readers poked his or head into this room, the first question would be, “What are you doing about this epidemic of ethical problems in journalism?”

What I find interesting is that many of us aren't so worried. The Project for Excellence in Journalism found that only 5 percent of national journalists and 6 percent of local journalists agree with me, that ethics is our biggest problem. According to the *Washington Post*, most journalists say that plagiarism is being EXPOSED more often, but hasn't increased. That seems to me to beg the question: There's...a...lot....of...plagiarism. Period.

Tell me why our ethical problems aren't as serious as Enron's or Worldcom's or Tyco's or those of other corrupt institutions that we write about.

Tell me why we shouldn't arm ourselves so that everyone knows the rules in advance and knows how to react when the inevitable ethics crisis strikes.

We can arm ourselves if we practice a new kind of courage and solve five issues facing all of us every day.

First is the question of who's in charge in our newsrooms. You've heard a lot about that in the last two weeks because of the apparent disregard of assignments by Judith Miller of the *New York Times*.

But anyone who has worked in any newsroom more than a week knows that the rogue reporter came along about the same time as hot type. Those of us who are bosses often tell ourselves to let these people shoot themselves in the foot occasionally because they're worth it. Well, they're not. At some point, their aim will be so bad that they'll shoot the editor—and not... in...the...foot.

As the very same Gene Patterson wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1998 after what then passed for a spate of journalistic problems: “Higher pay and lower modesty in the ranks coincided with the newsroom brass becoming soft. By turning papers' content over entirely to reporters, editors disempowered their subeditors.”

Demonstrating a new kind of courage calls for taking the tough stand and leading all of the staff, not just the folks who are amenable.

As Bob Haiman wrote in the Freedom Forum's wonderful “Best Practices for Newspaper Journalists”: “Staffers should never be unclear about what the boss thinks is appropriate.... Top editors should routinely initiate discussions with the staff on the values that are important to the newspaper.” I would add to that: It's much easier to articulate what should happen in an emergency before the emergency. Or, in contemporary terms, FEMA should know how to handle a hurricane before the clouds move in.

Let me add one thought about the rogue reporter: Almost everyone has criticized the apparently casual management of Judith Miller—except for a single top editor of another newspaper. There's a reason: Every newspaper has a Judith Miller. Almost no editor keeps as tight a tether on its Judith Miller as he or she should—because of courage issues but also because of the day's demands: the sensitive story that demands a read from the top or the meeting with the publisher or the press limitations that could cost color on Page 1 tomorrow.

So let us celebrate the new kind of courage that would have the doctors running the asylum—but let us not criticize the management of the Times as if it is the only institution where the doctors take an occasional smoking break.

The imperfection of both doctors and patients leads to the second issue requiring a new kind of courage, the aggressive and open use of

corrections. Let me tell you about my experiences with telling readers that we might not be perfect.

In a series called “Dark Alliance” that the *San Jose Mercury News* published in August 1996, we suggested a direct connection between the start of the nation’s crack epidemic and efforts to raise money in the 1980s for a CIA-organized rebel force in Nicaragua known as the Contras. The series also strongly suggested high-level CIA knowledge of that connection. We solidly documented disturbing information: A drug ring associated with the Contras sold large quantities of cocaine in inner-city Los Angeles at the time of the crack explosion there. Some of the drug profits from those sales went to the Contras.

This was a major story. But we wrote about the Contras getting millions of dollars. It was an estimate, and we didn’t say that. We didn’t publish a comment from the CIA. We oversimplified the complex issue of how the crack epidemic in America grew.

Months later—and 8-1/2 years ago now—the *Mercury News* decided to exercise what some at the time called a new kind of courage, although I’m not so sure it deserved that distinction. I wrote a column expressing my reservations about our series. I tried to explain to readers some of the difficulties of practicing journalism. Stories about the column ended up on the front pages of many papers, including the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*.

One of the reasons that my column was front-page news was that the CIA-drug issue was an important one. In short, the content of the series was important. But another of the reasons, one that troubles me more than anything else in journalism, is that even journalists think it’s news when one of their own admits he’s not sure about a story. The very first words of the front-page article in the *New York Times* said, “In a highly unusual critique published in his own newspaper, the editor of the *San Jose Mercury News* acknowledged” shortcomings in the series.

Think about that. Isn’t something terribly wrong when a *New York Times* reporter expresses surprise on the front page that an editor would admit a mistake?

Three and a half years later, when the *Times* conceded problems with its own coverage of the Wen Ho Lee case, I found similar wording from the Associated Press about the *Times*’ “unusual 1,680-word editors’ note” and from Reuters, writing about “a highly unusual editors’ note:” and from the *Boston Globe*, using the same adjectives: “a highly unusual\_post-mortem” and from the *Washington Post*, writing of “an extraordinary editors’ note.”

The experts used similar language about last month's *Times* coverage of the Judith Miller case. So, two questions come to mind:

1. Three hundred years after Addison and Steele, why don't we just admit our mistakes and get it over with? Research shows that readers think better of us when we do. I've argued for years that we should "decriminalize" corrections. I mean that we should encourage reporters and others to volunteer that they made errors rather than to cover them up so that the errors don't go into their "permanent record," as my kids refer to their mysterious files at school.
2. Why is it that most of the extensive corrections run in the *New York Times*? Does the *Times* make more mistakes than the rest of us? I don't think so—quite the reverse, in fact. Instead, I think that the *Times* understands the new kind of courage better than the rest of us do, a courage that extends to critiquing the work of its own reporters.

Years ago, a colleague at the *Mercury News* asked me if we "had" to run a correction—that language tells you something—because we merely had misspelled someone's last name. A good deal of debate ensued. We made the right decision—but years later it's time to avoid the debate: Correct the darned name.

Closely related to corrections is a third issue of courage that should be fun but instead is viewed more like surgery: Explaining how the sausage is made. This step should be great fun but we've been avoiding it ever since Addison and Steele published the *Tatler* in 1709. (Incidentally, part of getting accustomed to my new title of "retiree" is feeling old enough to recall seeing Addison and Steele at the bar at my first ASNE meetings, I'm pretty sure.)

I realize that we've been practicing our profession for only about 340 years, but maybe it's time to decide that talking about ourselves is more polite than our parents said—and might fit just beautifully into the kind of dialogue that McGill tried to start.

For some reason, media consumers are fascinated with us. It can't be our charm, so it must be for wonderful reasons: Many readers care about journalistic responsibility and wonder how in the world we decide which stories to cover and which to put on Page 1.

Our recent scandals have only reinforced that interest, just as Watergate or the indictment of Lewis Libby has awakened some people who fell asleep during Civics class.

Why not capitalize on the intersection of reader interest and journalist concern about our plummeting credibility ratings? My own dream has two parts:

First, I'd like to run a Web site where readers could ask us why we do what we do. It wouldn't be limited to one newspaper or TV station. It would answer questions about any news outlet. Imagine your frustration if you questioned journalism but had no way to ask for an explanation. That is today's situation. I hope to change it. I'm not envisioning an ombudsman for the nation...but, come to think of it, we could do worse.

Second, I'd like to teach media consumers how to evaluate our ethical behavior. Let readers decide for themselves whether to trust us—but give them some guidelines for judgment—and then let them question the guidelines.

I like an idea from my friend Dan Gillmor, a former *Mercury News* technology columnist who now is writing about the idea of the “citizen journalist.” Dan likes to say that “the readers know more than we do.” He's right.

Ralph McGill started a conversation with readers. I dream of continuing it and creating a conversation about journalism that hasn't happened in more than 300 years—“news as a conversation,” I heard someone say the other day. This conversation might be an example of a new kind of courage. Or it might be plain fun.

Writing in the “National Journal” last week, William Powers explained how power has shifted...to the media consumer: “The news business once operated as a kind of private club. Now it behaves more like a public utility in which every news consumer is a stockholder. If the stockholders (through their proxies, the media critics, bloggers and other press-watchers) push for an investigation of a suspicious news story or journalist, they get it. The outlet under suspicion really has no choice but to obey.”

A fourth example of a new kind of courage would be to demonstrate skepticism about our own work. As I've told Knight Ridder editors, they're dreaming if they think plagiarism doesn't happen in their newsrooms. The same thought applies to every newsroom in America.

Before you accuse me of being another cynical journalist, let me enumerate the newspapers that have detected plagiarism in the last year. Remember, these are only the alert papers that found the problem and were courageous enough to tell their readers about it. Here goes. If you're taking notes, you'd better have a big pad:

1. *The Seattle Times*

2. *The Florida Times-Union*
3. *The Bakersfield Californian*
4. *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*
5. *The Worcester Telegram and Gazette*
6. *USA Today*
7. *The Mustang Daily* at Cal Poly
8. *The Rocky Mountain News*
9. *The BG News* at Bowling Green University
10. *The Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*
11. *The Daily Tribune News in Georgia*

Of course, we're in good company. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a remarkable report less than a year ago about academic plagiarism. Listen to its conclusions:

“Plagiarism is the gravest sin in the academy -- or so we have been told. Stealing someone else's words and passing them off as your own is the lowest of the low in a realm where scholarship is king.

“But when the conversation turns to individual cases, the room falls strangely silent. The same professors who constantly bemoan their students' lax attitudes toward plagiarism often clam up when it is their colleagues doing the copying. Journal editors, department chairmen, and association leaders likewise become skittish, fearing lawsuits and bad publicity.”

If academics know it happens, journalists should know it happens—and guard for it by systematically designing procedures, the same way they would if the power goes out or the press throws a gear. For example:

Verify the educational credentials of applicants. Or go even further, as Trevor Brown, the retired dean at Indiana University suggests: Ask professors about the moral conduct of applicants.

Develop interview questions dealing with ethics and objectivity.

Make tough reference checks.

Tell new hires your standards.

Write ethics codes that include real-life cases, knowing all the while that you'll never capture every possible ethics violation.

Impose a zero-tolerance plagiarism policy. We all know that every case is different, but make zero-tolerance your going-in position.

Share information openly with other newspapers so that we do not become enablers. Our lawyers approved this policy; yours will, too, if you push.

Tell your readers when there's a problem. Solicit their participation in the corrections process, by accuracy questionnaires or other devices.

Name a newsroom credibility committee.

You can think of a dozen other ideas. We require a new kind of courage to implement them more than we require brilliant new ideas.

Some of you probably are thinking to yourselves, "Not everyone in this room would even agree with a definition of plagiarism. How can we police ourselves?"

You're right about the definition problem. In fact, I read yesterday in the new issue of "American Journalism Review" that "if information is published in three or more sources, the convention is that it's common knowledge" and doesn't need attribution. I have to tell you that, in 36 years of journalism, I never heard that convention. I don't necessarily disagree with it. I'm just worried about what other definitions I don't know.

My answer to the definition problem is to require ethics courses of journalism graduates so that they may at least think about and debate such issues—and know how to react when the crisis strikes. This fourth issue requires all of us to exercise a new kind of courage—asking journalism schools to add yet another required course, asking students to take it and asking professionals to support the requirement.

Only about half of the accredited journalism schools in the United States require an ethics course for graduation even though all offer them. A friend who is dean of a major journalism school says that's OK because today's students don't care about ethics. Author Susan Tifft, quoted in that AJR story, says something similar. She says some students think, "I can afford to be ethical once I get to where I need to go. But on the way there everybody else is cheating, everybody else is plagiarizing, so if I don't do it, then I'm stupid." The perception is: "I can't afford to be ethical now, but I'll be ethical later." "

Maybe. But wouldn't an ethics course at least raise the questions now, not later? My question to you: How would you react if you knew that your doctor hadn't studied medical ethics?



The fifth and final issue that calls for a new kind of courage is the toughest. It's the one that says that no story will appear in print or online or on television or on radio unless it meets a tougher fairness standard than we like to use.

Joann Byrd, a former ombudsman at the *Washington Post* and former newspaper editor, says that our standard of fairness bears no relationship to the public's standard even though we use the same words.

"Whatever else people expect of the media, they always want it to be fair," she wrote in the Freedom Forum's Media Studies Journal. "Despite what readers and viewers and listeners think, fairness is not an alien concept in newsrooms. Journalists are no less fair, no less committed to fairness, than other homo sapiens.

"But there's a reason that complaints about fairness are after the fact. Journalism has a different definition of fairness than the people it serves."

We'll never bridge the gap—make it a chasm—entirely, but a new kind of courage would help.

For example, one metropolitan paper last year ran front-page pictures day after day of John Kerry campaigning in the area just before the election. It ran one front-page picture of President Bush campaigning.

The reason was the conventional newspaper reason: Kerry campaigned in that city intensively during the closing weeks of the campaign. Bush visited only once because he felt that he would win easily in that region.

That makes perfect sense for us. But for people looking for a certain kind of fairness, it confirms that the paper leaned left. The solution would have been pretty simple, but it would have required a new kind of courage, a new kind of fairness over knee-jerk journalism: That new courage would have said, "We're going to suspend the usual rules just before the election and we'll give approximately equal play to the candidates for the last two weeks." Imagine the newsroom uproar. Imagine courage that editors would have needed.

Another case: On Halloween last year, two days before the election, a neighborhood in Charlotte, N.C., mobilized and carved hundreds, or maybe thousands, of pumpkins to spell out Kerry's name. Photographers came back in, happy that they had a color picture with bright orange pumpkins, vibrant flames and a night sky. One hell of a picture, they thought—and it was a slow day anyway.

Managing Editor Frank Barrows decided to exercise a new kind of courage. He said that he wasn't going to publish a pro-Kerry picture one day before the election just because some folks had carved pumpkins. So he sent photographers out to find pro-Bush pumpkins. As luck would have it, North

Carolina's many Republicans weren't into pumpkins that year, so Barrows... killed the picture.

Not a popular decision in the newsroom, but can you imagine trying to explain to readers the next day why the Kerry picture had run? "Well, the orange was really eye-catching...." Orrrrrrr...., "Hey, it was a Sunday night. Give me a break." Can you even imagine the caller on the other end of the line listening to the unfortunate truth: "We weren't trying to make a political statement. We just ran a picture without thinking." Sure, the reader will say.

Killing stories and pictures is one of those macro decisions that can ensure fairness. At the other end is individual word choices. It's amazing how rarely we think over every word in a story, how cavalier we are with words given that we're in the word business.

At Knight Ridder this summer, I rebelled when I saw my local newspaper repeatedly refer to calls for a "living wage"—without quotation marks or any other designation showing that this has become a political term. I rushed to the AP Stylebook, sure that the term would be flagged. It wasn't, probably because it's too new. So I dashed to the *New York Times* style guide—and didn't find it there, either. I finally checked the dictionary, only to find the term referred to as a sort of minimum wage. Well, that's what one group wants us to think but that's not really what the term means.

Along the way, we realized that "living wage" isn't the only hot-button term that drives readers crazy. So we asked ombudsmen for a list of the 50 most important hot-button words, and we're vetting the list. If everyone agrees about their danger, we'll circulate them to every editor. And my local Knight Ridder paper now generally puts "living wage" in quotes.

What the exercise really did, though, was to remind us that editing courage requires questioning the loose use of words, many of which are unintentionally hurtful to people we write about or are downright inaccurate.

So those are my five suggestions for demonstrating a new kind of courage: being in charge if you're supposed to be in charge... decriminalizing corrections...engaging in a dialogue with readers...being skeptical of our staffs just in case...requiring every journalism graduate to study ethics...and saying no on occasion to every-day journalistic practices that shouldn't happen every day.

They don't really appear all that courageous next to Ralph McGill's kind of courage. So, why is it so difficult for us to engage five simple concepts?

On my good days, I agree with Gene Patterson, who wrote in that *Journal* piece in 1998:

"Given the glaring faults of contemporary journalism, I remain

confident that the news media will learn the lessons of the recent embarrassments and succeed in pulling up their socks before the public loses faith in them. The written word is going to prevail as the reliable record of a free and reflective society, no matter what technology delivers it to the reader, and the tough idealists who take up this line of work will be committed in the main merely to telling the truth.”

But every once in a while, when I get too full of myself and feel certain that we will overcome our ethical problems, I realize that it hasn't worked the way Gene had hoped, and I pull out this book. It's about “Jimmy's World,” the fabricated *Washington Post* piece that won the Pulitzer Prize—until the Post returned it because the story wasn't true.

The book prescribes some of the solutions—some of the new kinds of courage—that we've talked about today, based on interviews with 30 news executives. As the foreword says, “What they have to say tells a great deal about the strong...changes that many in the field...consider essential.”

The book was published...in 1981.

Thank you.