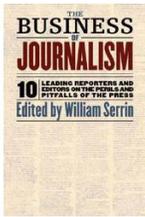


JOURNALISM ON THE ROCKS

Media as industry: Now you have part of the story

By Dean Nelson

June 11, 2000



THE BUSINESS OF JOURNALISM

William Serrin, ed.

The New Press, 202 pages, \$16.95

A few years ago, I loaned a copy of the book "Who Speaks for God," by liberal social activist Jim Wallis, to a friend of mine. He returned it the next day and said, "They misnamed this book. It should have been titled, 'Why I Hate Pat Robertson.' "

That's a little how I felt when I read "The Business of Journalism." It is a collection of essays written by prominent and influential journalists, commenting on the state of the craft as we know it today. A more accurate title would have been, "Why I Hate Journalism."

The editor would have us believe that (gasp!) journalism is a business in this country; ergo, it doesn't give us "just the facts." Did anyone not know this before? Until recently, did people think that journalists did what they did completely independent of their owners' and/or their advertisers' wishes?

While it is true that this has dangerous implications for democracy, the reality is that journalism has always been beholden to someone or something, which has always had dangerous implications for democracy.

Begun in this country as political pamphleteering, journalism grew into a variety of voices owned by families and companies. And while it is true that now there are fewer voices owned by even fewer families and companies, the idea that news organizations used to be independent is simply an illusion.

The public was shielded from seeing FDR in a wheelchair. Is that really any different from the public being shielded from news about Disney, Time Warner or Westinghouse? Journalists have always shied away from certain topics, or covered certain topics, based on who owned the news organization.

This does not mean that all journalism is corrupt, and that no one in the field is doing anything of value. A lot of government officials are still being held accountable to the public by journalists. A lot of companies' behavior is being exposed by journalists. The public is still being informed -- but not as well as it could be, according to this book, because of the undue influence of big business. I agree.

I confess to having been more than a little shocked to hear a prominent television news reporter tell my journalism class recently that the public will never see an investigative story about San Diego used car dealers on that reporter's station. Just too many advertising dollars at stake. And when the Los Angeles Times had its

sweetheart deal with the Staples Center exposed, a few more jaws dropped, including mine.

But this is nothing new. That doesn't make it right, but a little context would have tempered the whining quotient in "The Business of Journalism." It would have made the self-righteous breast-beating more tolerable. Do the journalists in this book long for, say, the good old days of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst and the early Chandler years? That would not be an improvement.

James Warren of the Chicago Tribune wrote about how hard it is to change bureaucratic inertia in the Washington, D.C., bureau. E.R. Shipp wrote about how she had to work hard to convince editors at The New York Times that her story ideas were important. Vanessa Williams of The Washington Post doesn't think there is enough diversity in her newsroom. Is there some new information here?

The book is a collection of essays based on speeches given at New York University. I hope it is only the first in a series. I look forward to reading about how journalists have, in some cases, overcome those business or governmental pressures and still committed good journalism.

Pete Hamill, who was not part of this book, says that he got into journalism because he felt that it was an honorable profession. He still feels that way. So do I. Journalism still tells important stories. It still works as a watchdog (yes, and a lap dog).

I probably won't recommend this book to my journalism students. I'd rather wait until they can read more than half the story.

■ Nelson is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University.