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## The Priesthood of Journalists

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Many journalists call their work a profession, while others call it a craft. Increasingly, the more jaded reporters see it mainly as a highly profitable business built largely on newsroom cutbacks. But there is one way in which many journalists see themselves, although this perception may not arise until after they have been practicing the craft for some time: Journalists see journalism as a kind of *professional priesthood* in which they, much like the clergy or even police officers, surrender to the higher calling of serving others. Theorists might refer to two theories in describing this priesthood: *hegemony* theory (directed at what journalists believe and comprising the social, cultural, and ideological beliefs of journalists) and *news work* (directed at what journalists learn and experience on the job.) New York University researcher Jay Rosen notes that this priesthood “creates and maintains its authority over what counts as serious journalism” and has a well-developed sense of duty. He even goes on to describe what he calls the “god terms and faith objects in journalism.” In sum, he calls it a “high church in journalism, with high ceremonies, like awarding of a Pulitzer Prize, joining the panel on ‘Meet the Press,’” and so on.<sup>1</sup>

While this coming together as a unique work group may be a helpful stance for journalists to take in separating themselves from the stories they cover, it is also a stance that suggests arrogance to many news consumers. One common criticism of the news media is that editors and reporters are the ones who decide what is important for the world to know, and they are the ones who decide how that information should be used and framed, if they choose to use it at all. Critics deride reporters and editors for appearing to shut the public out of the loop when it comes to deciding what is news,

and that often is defined as arrogance on the part of an elite community of journalists. Some have referred to journalists as a clan whose members carry out their responsibilities according to the rules of the clan in order to get validation from others within the clan. The kind of clan that journalists comprise is discussed in the next chapter, specifically under the heading of “Socialization of Journalists.” That socialization process is one of the factors leading to the worldviews that journalists hold.

Some criticize journalists for myopia, which critics perceive to be induced by the news industry, as a later chapter will show when it discusses former MIT linguist Noam Chomsky, who proposed that journalists work for news media that are in the grip of powerful corporations run by individuals in league with powerful government officials. The information that comes through the media pipeline is controlled by the power elite in America, which uses it as a weapon to sell specific ideologies and keep the masses in line.

These critiques of the media have not gone unnoticed by media managers, who have tried to bring readers and viewers more into the loop over the years in deciding which kinds of stories should be covered more often. This consumer feedback is the crux of the concept known as “public journalism” or “civic journalism,” which intentionally promotes more interactivity with the market’s public. Critics within the journalistic community perceive that as a cop-out, turning over a big portion of the editorial function to untrained people who don’t understand the nature of journalism. But the news media are all in a fight for survival and larger market shares in an age of intense media competition. The day of editors standing on Mount Olympus and dictating to the people what they should and shouldn’t know is, to a large degree, over. In its place has come more attention to audience research and readership studies, along with more public forums hosted by newspapers and television stations to let the public have more of a say about what the news should be for them.

## **Journalism as the Fourth Estate**

This “higher calling” is typified by the classical description of journalism as the “fourth estate,” a term generally attributed to Thomas Carlyle, a noted historian of the nineteenth century. Carlyle, however, attributed its genesis back to English writer Edmond Burke, who said that the press gallery in Parliament was more important than any of the three official branches of British government the press covered. To Carlyle, the British press was a powerful, unofficial branch of government, as important as the priesthood, the aristocracy, and the House of Commons.<sup>2</sup> Other commentators and

philosophers have used the term “fourth estate” to signify the media as the fourth power that provides counterbalances and checks on the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of American government. Other uses and interpretations of the term refer to the mediation role of the press between government and society, its translating of government policy and decisions for the American public, for example, and to the so-called “watchdog” function of the media in free societies, where the press serves as a guardian of public welfare. Later, this chapter provides an illustration of this watchdog role when it outlines the role some journalists interpret for themselves as giving voice to the powerless.

The concept of the fourth estate is not voiced as much today in daily conversations about journalism, but the meanings attached to the concept remain intact in the minds of serious journalists serving free societies everywhere. It is a big part of the lure that draws many idealistic young people into the world of journalism in the first place—and that keeps them in the business as a career—as later discussions with journalists will show.

## Learning the Ropes

A second aspect of this *priesthood* is that the norms and ethics of the calling are a product of a kind of journalistic inbreeding. In other words, a journalist learns what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior from other journalists who learned it from other journalists, etc. There are also the various ethical codes published by journalistic organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists and the American Society of Newspaper Editors, along with standards and practices laid down by individual media operations. Although a formal hierarchy, like that of the Catholic Church, is missing, there is a more informal—yet very real—set of in-profession (and often in-house) standards that guide the work of individual journalists. This socialization aspect will be the focus of a later chapter.

The term “professional priesthood” has been applied to the journalism profession by many people over many years. Even a casual survey of those keywords on the World Wide Web will underscore that. Here is an interesting interpretation of the concept:

Today’s news is created, packaged, and delivered by a priesthood of journalists, trained by editors who hired them because they had the right “instincts,” that is, they had the same set of cultural expectations and values as the editors themselves. The news is delivered, take it or leave it, to a passive audience. The public has little ability to add anything to the news agenda or to correct errors

of interpretation or omission. Theoretically, both the news production process and the product are protected from outside influence in order to preserve journalists' ability to tell the truth, without fear or favor. Traditional news organizations seldom offer information about their reporters' qualifications, how they choose what becomes news, or what citizens can do to affect the news agenda. In fact, inquiries into the political affiliations of journalists are viewed as inappropriate, and many reporters do not disclose even their outside income from interest group speeches.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from socialization, the issue of journalists detaching themselves from the community is a subject of debate within the journalistic community. Often, the decision of how attached or detached reporters and editors should be is left up to the newspaper's editor or the television station's news director.

## The Separated Journalist

A third aspect of this priesthood is this: Journalists find they must *separate* themselves from others in the community more than they would were they in another business. Reporters often worry that an assignment down the line will require them to report on this organization or that, this person or that, or this issue or that. When that time comes, the journalist wants to do all he or she can to remain objective and present a balanced and fair report. Personal friendships can get in the way of that kind of separation, so many journalists choose to make most of their friends among other journalists and to be very selective about what groups they join, if they join any at all.

Peter Bhatia is executive editor of *The Oregonian*, Portland's metro daily and a leading Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper. Assessing the characteristic of a journalist's detachment, he says,

Even in an era where closeness to sources is more common due to the burst of excellent, narrative writing in newspapers, I think the cautions and distance remain important. Balancing: that remains a great test for reporters and editors, and it will always be so, I think.

How does he define "distance"?

"Distance does not mean in writing or voice necessarily," he explains. "That's something we have figured out in recent years. That is, our reporting and writing can be intimate, but we can still maintain an appropriate distance from our sources. The simple equation is to remember our obligation to the reader, to be fair, honest, truthful, and complete in our work. Those old values are still good values."

For many journalists, keeping a distance from people they are reporting on, or may have to report on in the future, is a matter of emotional self-preservation. Penny Owen, veteran reporter for *The Oklahoman* who was one of the key reporters on the Oklahoma City bombing story in 1995, is one of these reporters. Here's how she describes her experience:

The bombing started a whole new reality of dealing with victims and survivors. It meant getting to know them over years, rather than just a couple weeks on the cop beat. It does change the dynamics when covering victims over the long term. For me, some self-preservation kicked in. It was tempting to get close to these people I got to know. But to do that meant risking the story, i.e., clouding my judgment etc., not to mention the emotional toll it could take. It was already emotional, so why make it more so?

I know other journalists said they kept in touch with long-term victims with cards and so forth, but I didn't do that.

Some journalists, while agreeing that journalism is a higher calling, perceive problems with socializing strictly among other journalists. Jim Redmond, a veteran television journalist who anchored newscasts in Denver and Portland for many years, is one of these, and he explains his view this way:

I definitely felt it was a calling. I always thought I happened to make a good living, but I didn't do it for the money. I did it because I thought it was important, a special privilege, and, despite its flaws, helped people better understand their world and make decisions about things both on the personal and political life level.

But I always tried to associate with non-journalists outside of work. It didn't take long for me to figure out that when you went over to the bar for a beer with your newsroom colleagues after work, you were pulled into a back-biting, bitching, gossipy kind of deal with a lot of office political overtones, and I didn't need that. In Portland, one of the news directors always went to the bar across the street from the station after work. People would hang out around him over there because he drank too much and he talked too much when he did. It was quite harmful. It was a good opportunity for me as a young employee to see how manipulative people were (he had lots of friends from work wanting to socialize with him all the time to play him like a fiddle) and how petty. So I stayed away from that.

I hung out with my ski school buddies (I had become a certified ski instructor in college and always taught part time as we moved around the country) and also with my military reserve friends. They were ordinary working folks, not other journalists, and we talked about their concerns, not money. I always felt that it is important to have widely diverse circles of influence within which you function. That broadens you, makes the world a more interesting place, and

avoids the social myopia that results when you run with other people just like yourself. I only have a handful of really close friends who were journalists. All my best friends were not journalists.

## Journalists as Advocates

Later in this book, we will look at the concept of advocacy journalism and how it is being practiced by some in the mainstream media today. But journalists like Redmond worry about a reporter's becoming an advocate or a voice for individual victims. He explains:

Much of this new stream of logic is just for promotional purposes. It's part of the current wave of theatrics. Sometimes reporters are caught up in the human events they cover, and that's understandable. But being so emotionally involved, and countenancing being strongly attached to people and issues you're covering, virtually guarantees that you will subconsciously, if not consciously, ignore any logical arguments or evidence to the contrary. You become an advocate. When that happens you're no longer a journalist; you are a participant and a member of a side.

Commenting on one high-profile journalist, CNN's Anderson Cooper, and his victims' advocacy orientation in covering Hurricane Katrina, Redmond sees problems with this approach. Cooper said in a June 2006 interview on *Larry King Live* that he had "made a promise" to the people of New Orleans that CNN would not leave the story until the cleanup was complete and evacuees could return to their homes.<sup>4</sup> Redmond comments on this approach:

Cooper is a nice guy, and he does some nice things. On the other hand, much of his reporting on Katrina was so focused on the victims he ignored much of the difficulty of disaster response and didn't make much attempt, besides just pro forma gloss, at explaining why some of the "victims" were in such a pickle. There's the issue of all of them who ignored evacuation orders and then apparently didn't expect to be held accountable for their actions. There's the issue of how do you get enough busses into a city to evacuate 50,000 people? The logistics of the whole thing were mind boggling.

That's not to say the response shouldn't have been better. But it so emphasized the easy, sappy, crying people and devastation that it did not help people understand why it was so hard to deal with or why members of Congress who caused much of it by failing to provide adequate funds—as requested repeatedly by the Corp of Engineers to maintain the dikes—were not held accountable for causing much of the tragedy by their decades of pork barreling, etc."

A dilemma—and maybe a rather obvious one at that—exists in this notion of journalists separating themselves from stories (mostly events, often issues) and from the people of those stories. The dilemma is this: How can a journalist fully understand what an event, issue, or person is really like if he or she constructs and maintains a distance in between? On the other hand, if the journalist gets too close to the story and the people of it, the danger of losing a more “objective” orientation could threaten.

## Feeling the Pulse

I was a young assistant city editor for the *Dallas Morning News*, and I recall sometimes late at night when a few of us remaining staff members were still ensconced in the then-quiet fourth-floor newsroom. As we passed the time between the last pages sent to the composing room and the start of the presses, oblivious to whatever else might be going on outside our building, we would joke, “Isn’t it great to have our hands on the pulse beat of this city?” While it was a favorite line said in jest, there was an irony to it: the very people who are assumed by the readers to know exactly what is going on may well know the least because they haven’t left the building all evening. Unless the police scanner started squawking or someone phoned in a news tip about a breaking incident, for all we knew, everything was okay. I always thought it’s a bit like the rhetorical question, “If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?”

The debate over attachment and detachment from stories will be the focus of a later chapter, so we won’t go into more detail here. But it is part and parcel of the concept of the priesthood of journalists, so it’s important to begin thinking about from the beginning.

## Granting Confidentiality

Yet a fourth aspect to this priesthood of journalists is found in the granting of confidentiality to persons who act as news sources. These people, when guaranteed confidentiality, will tell journalists things in private that they would not want shared in public. Much like a Catholic priest, a journalist often hears a kind of “confession” from a source that may or may not involve his or her own behavior but that at least concerns the behavior of others. This source material is vital for journalists, as it helps them to understand situations they are reporting on and to present an accurate picture to the public of what’s going on.

The aspect of journalism's priesthood that requires the granting of confidentiality to a source has been the focus of many newsroom discussions and has kept many reporters awake at night wondering if they have done the right thing. Like a priest, journalists understand they are bound to honor that granted confidentiality. This thinking has given rise to one of the most hotly debated issues in journalism: when—and when not—to grant confidentiality to sources.

Many sources object—some even flatly refuse—to allow reporters to use their names or any form of identity that would cause others to recognize them. The reasons are varied, some more seemingly legitimate than others. Among those reasons are their fears of

- Loss of job
- Personal harm
- Being ostracized
- Damage to reputation

Journalists understand these reasons and often sympathize with them—especially the first two. So a lot of confidentiality is granted by reporters pursuing the goal of getting the story. However, journalists also realize the down side to granting confidentiality to their sources. The two biggest problems are that stories with anonymous sources are often perceived by readers or viewers as less credible than stories in which the source is named and that granting confidentiality means a source can say whatever he or she wants without having to be accountable for that statement or allegation. The next two sections look at the legal ramifications of granting confidentiality and the reluctance of some editors to allow too many anonymous sources to be used by reporters.

## Legal Ramifications of Confidentiality

When it comes to the legal arena, a third major problem surfaces over granting confidentiality. The problem here is associated with anonymous sources making allegations of ethical or legal wrongdoing against another person or persons. If these accused persons decide to sue the newspaper, magazine, television, or radio station for libel—and if the reporter refuses to identify the source of these allegations—the judge can find the reporter in contempt of court. Further, the judge could instruct the jury to presume that—absent an identified source—there is no source for these allegations. Either or both of these outcomes would prove harmful to the reporter and the news operation



involved. On the one hand, there is probable jail time for the reporter; on the other, there is the loss of a libel suit by the news operation.

Such was the dilemma outlined in a seminar called “Anatomy of a Libel Case: Business vs. the Media,” moderated by Harvard University law professor Arthur Miller, which involved journalists, business leaders, attorneys, and judges. It was a roundtable scenario of what the late Fred Friendly, former dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, called a hypothetical case but definitely not a fictitious one.<sup>5</sup> The scenario, or one like it, is often played out in the world of journalism and involves allegations of misconduct made by a source, granted confidentiality by the reporter, against another person.

Because of the way libel law is practiced in the United States, reporters usually have to prove only that they had good reason to believe that what they printed or aired was true. If they can do that, they will—in most cases—at least avoid the heavy punitive damages that make up the bulk of most libel case demands. But proving they had good reason to believe the truthfulness of a statement means showing they had good reason to believe their sources. And that proof is hard to argue if a source—and therefore his or her expertise—cannot be identified.

So the analogy between a journalist and a priest and the confidentiality each grants to the source or confessor can only go so far. Courts will not require priests to reveal the identity of their confessors, but courts can and do demand that reporters reveal the identity of their sources. Therefore, the best advice for reporters is to consider the potential consequences of granting confidentiality to a source, in light of the allegations the source might make and the importance of the story, before granting that confidentiality.

Many journalists are hoping to see a federal shield law become a reality for journalists. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has been soliciting contributions to a campaign to create such a law, believing it would add needed protection to the public’s right to know. In 2008, SPJ raised \$30,000 for the campaign. The signs appeared mixed for the success of a federal shield law, however, as the proposal labeled S.2035 (the Senate’s version of the Free Flow of Information Act, which is also known as the federal media shield law) stalled in voting. On 30 July 2008, the proposal received only 51 of the necessary 60 votes needed for it to proceed to consideration. Said SPJ President Clint Brewer about the situation, “SPJ will continue to encourage its members and public citizens to contact members of Congress and express part of the Society’s mission: to encourage a climate where journalism can be practiced freely. A federal shield law would be a major step toward that goal.”<sup>6</sup>

Aside from the contempt-of-court potential, the granting of confidentiality has taken on other legal ramifications as well. For example, a Minneapolis jury awarded \$700,000 in damages to a Republican Party activist named Dan Cohen when he sued the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press & Dispatch* for breaking an agreement to keep his identity as a source confidential. In that case, the two reporters, Bill Salisbury and Lori Sturdevant, wanted to honor Cohen's request but were overridden by their editors who felt naming Cohen would add credibility to the story.<sup>7</sup>

*Time* reporter Laurence Zuckerman interviewed one of the editors involved and wrote about the incident:

"My responsibility is to readers," argues David Hall, editor then of the *Pioneer Press & Dispatch* and now of the *Bergen* (N.J.) *Record*, in defense of his decision. But critics point out that Hall could have kept the bargain with Cohen by simply attributing the information to a "Whitney supporter." "This is a very simple case," says Hennepin County Chief Public Defender William Kennedy, a Democrat. "A promise is a promise."<sup>8</sup>

## Editors Discourage Confidentiality

A 2005 study of editors belonging to the nationwide group Associated Press Managing Editors found that many of them discourage the use of anonymous sources in their newspapers. Reporting on the study, the Associated Press wrote the following:

Editors at about one in four newspapers who responded to a survey say they never allow reporters to quote anonymous sources, and most others have policies designed to limit the practice. One editor said his paper's rules are so strict they would have disqualified Deep Throat [see later explanation] as a source. The use of anonymous sources . . . has been much in the news recently, notably in a case that prompted a *Newsweek* magazine retraction [in 2005 over a story about the supposed desecration of the Koran by guards at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba].

The Associated Press and the Associated Press Managing Editors association decided to jointly survey American newspapers to find out what their practices are. The project, believed to be the most comprehensive of its kind conducted in recent years, drew replies from 419 publications—about 28 percent of the nation's 1,450 daily newspapers. Editors at 103 papers, nearly all of them in small and mid-size markets, said they do not ever permit reporters to cite anonymous sources in their articles.

“Our policy is to get people on the record. Period,” said Eileen Lehnert, editor of the *Jackson (Mich.) Citizen Patriot*. “Once you operate from that standpoint, you rarely have to reconsider your position.”

Examples of this tightening of policies have been seen since the 1970s when editors, burned by reporters who actually fabricated sources, began implementing new safeguards. One of the most notorious cases involving a fabricated source occurred at the famed *Washington Post*, where a reporter named Janet Cooke fabricated the 8-year-old boy that she focused her entire story on. She named the boy only as “Jimmy,” and the story, titled “Jimmy’s World,” was a tragic account of this young Washington boy who had become hooked on heroin by his mother’s boyfriend. The story won a Pulitzer Prize before the paper discovered there was no “Jimmy” and then suffered the humiliation of announcing the fact to readers, apologizing, and returning the coveted prize.

More recently, Jayson Blair of *The New York Times* and Stephen Glass of *The New Republic* have committed similar journalistic sins, fabricating sources and plagiarizing articles. Each of these reporters—Cooke, Blair, and Glass—lost their jobs as a result of their fabrications and became ostracized in the journalistic community.

## Anonymous Sources in Washington

Anonymous-source reporting is most prevalent in Washington, DC among reporters assigned to cover the various branches of the federal government and their performance. Most Washington reporters say that much of their work would not be possible without granting confidentiality to sources. Indeed, *The Washington Post* series on Watergate, culminating in the resignation of President Richard Nixon, might not have been possible without reporter Bob Woodward’s granting confidentiality to his key source, known for decades only as “Deep Throat” and not identified until 2005 as Mark Felt, former assistant director of the FBI. Any presidential administration—for that matter, any executive department from Justice to Defense—has its share of individuals who are troubled by the practices being followed by its leaders. The decision on whether to become a whistleblower may well depend on the degree of confidentiality such a person may expect from the journalist he or she blows the whistle to. It is up to the journalists to determine the import of the information, vis-à-vis the risks of granting confidentiality, and also to try and determine the source’s credibility and motives for blowing the whistle.

The intricate dance practiced by journalists and politicians in Washington is often a manipulative game of intentional “leaks” produced by government officials who are either trying out ideas on the public to get a reaction without committing officially to them or attempting to burn political opponents, or simply to take revenge on them. The latter, of course, happened in 2003 when a top White House aide decided to divulge the name of an undercover CIA operative, Valerie Plame, to reporter Robert Novak. Plame is the wife of former U.S. Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson, who, in 2003, became a vocal critic of the Iraq War. The disclosure backfired, however, as a firestorm of media controversy ensued, culminating in the arrest and 2007 conviction for perjury and obstruction of justice of I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney. Several journalists were called as witnesses during the trial as to the identity of the source who leaked Plame’s name.

## Notes

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