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## NEWSROOM CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE CRAFT

DON WYCLIFF\*

In his 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*, director Spike Lee also played the lead character Mookie, a young black man trying to navigate the moral straits of his Brooklyn neighborhood during a hot summer when racial tensions are running high. Besides his own instincts, Mookie seemed to have only the guidance of a broken old neighborhood man, played by the venerable Ossie Davis, who advises rather unhelpfully: "Always do the right thing."<sup>1</sup>

Young journalists find themselves in something of the same position in American newsrooms nowadays as Mookie did in his neighborhood. It's not *exactly* the same position because, happily and increasingly, journalists generally come now with at least some formal instruction in ethics, either of a general nature or specifically directed at the practice of journalism. And more and more, the newsrooms they come into have formal, written codes of ethics, although these vary widely in their quality and comprehensiveness and wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

But despite the embarrassments of Jack Kelley and Jayson Blair, once they get to newsrooms young journalists mostly get an admonition that, in terms of its helpfulness on a day-to-day basis, is the equivalent of "Always do the right thing." It could be boiled down to "Always give the reader the truth."

Fair enough, but that doesn't help a whole lot with many of the practical dilemmas that arise in the daily working life of an American newspaper journalist. For example:

- What do you do when the President of the United States, in a ceremony commending the general who has been in charge of the coalition forces in Iraq, lauds the

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\* Public Editor, *Chicago Tribune*. Mr. Wycliff moved into that position after having served nine years as the *Tribune's* editorial page editor. During his tenure as editor, the *Tribune's* editorial page won one Pulitzer Prize, was a finalist for another, and took several other major awards as well, including two Distinguished Writing Awards from the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

1. *DO THE RIGHT THING* (Universal Studios 1989).

2. See American Society of Newspaper Editors, *Codes of Ethics*, at <http://www.asne.org/index.cfm?ID=387> (last updated Sept. 2, 2004) (on file with the Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy). This is probably the most comprehensive collection of editorial codes of ethics in existence. It includes the codes not only of individual newspapers, but also of various influential journalism organizations.

man for his “exemplary” service? Do you write it that way or do you “clean up” the President’s speech and write what he meant, which was “exemplary”? And if you clean it up, how do you respond to a reader like the Episcopal priest who called me at the *Chicago Tribune* and argued that the newspaper was depriving him of important information about the capabilities of the Chief Executive by not writing it as the President spoke it? And if you clean up the President’s speech, do you owe the same indulgence to the state representative who speaks in grossly ungrammatical terms about a measure to improve education in the state? What about a ten-year-old grade schooler who errs grammatically in describing an element of her schoolwork to a reporter? What about that ten-year-old’s classroom teacher? Maybe most important, does “cleaning up” quotes result in greater truth for readers, or less?

- What do you do when a source demands anonymity in print in return for the information he or she possesses? What if your beat is city hall and this is the only way to get this important information out to the voting, tax-paying public? What if the information is, in addition to being important to the public, hurtful to the reputation of a third party? Is it fair to give to a private party access to the megaphone that is your newspaper (or television station or other medium of information) without demanding that the party identify himself? What if a source “burns” you by deliberately lying to you when you’ve promised him anonymity—are you still obligated to keep his identity confidential? And maybe most important, at what point does the doubt and distrust engendered by the use of anonymous sources outweigh the benefit to readers of the information learned?
- Should the identities of minors who are victims or (by formal accusation) perpetrators of crimes routinely be published, or should they be withheld? Why? If they are to be withheld, what becomes of the readers’ right to know about the operations of their public agencies, in this case the police and the courts? Maybe more important, how can readers exercise their rights as citizens to protect themselves from potentially dangerous young people? Is the news medium fulfilling its *raison d’être* if it routinely withholds from publication any cat-

egory of important information, like the identities of criminal suspects?

These examples do not even begin to exhaust the ethical questions that arise in the daily working lives of the women and men who staff the nation's newsrooms. They only hint at the range and complexity of the moral issues with which conscientious journalists cannot avoid grappling. Quite simply, to do journalism now is to do ethics. The wonder is that it took us in the journalism industry so long to appreciate that fact.

Jack Fuller, a Pulitzer Prize winner when he was editorial page editor of the *Chicago Tribune* and now the president of Tribune Publishing Co., tells in his book *News Values* of the era when he was breaking into the Chicago newspaper world, the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> It was a time when the values and practices memorialized in movies like *The Front Page* were still very much alive. It was not at all unusual to overhear an old-time police reporter, calling from the press room at police headquarters at 11th and State Streets, introduce himself to the relative of a homicide victim as "Deputy Coroner O'Malley" and proceed to interview the person and use the results in a news story.<sup>4</sup>

I myself, as a not-very-experienced recruit to the Chicago newspaper wars, worked night-rewrite at the *Chicago Daily News* for more than two years in the early 1970s. It was a time when most killings on the black South and West Sides of the city were routinely dismissed as "cheap." And more than once I took dictated quotes from old-timers that struck me as oddly perfect for the occasion.

Even as these old practices still existed, however, a new era with new standards was beginning, an era in which ethics would loom ever larger in newsrooms. Part of it was the result of the infusion into newsrooms of a new generation of college-educated journalists, men and women who came to the business not just to have a job where they could wear a suit and tie, but who came with a sense of mission about making the world different and, most hoped, better.

Vietnam was a crucible of this new era and for this new generation. The war in Southeast Asia became a defining moral issue of its time largely because of journalism and journalists—Bernard Fall, David Halberstam, Walter Cronkite, and many others who began to report about the war and our nation's con-

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3. JACK FULLER, *NEWS VALUES: IDEAS FOR AN INFORMATION AGE* 44–45 (1996).

4. *Id.* at 45.

duct of it through a lens of moral critique.<sup>5</sup> And even as the nation was divided and convulsed by Vietnam, the American people were learning to expect the news to have a moral shape to it.

Two events of the 1970s, one universally observed and one noted mainly within the journalism fraternity, were crucial in helping to cement in place the new ethics of American journalism.

The well-known one was Watergate, in which the work of two young *Washington Post* journalists, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, was crucial to driving the investigations forward by keeping the American public engaged.<sup>6</sup> The *Post's* coverage of the Watergate episode—and Hollywood's glamorous re-creation of it later in the movie *All the President's Men*—helped establish in the industry and in the minds of the American public certain expectations about how journalists work.<sup>7</sup> Even today I occasionally get a letter from a reader asking whether there isn't a "requirement" that a newspaper have two sources for a piece of information before it can be printed.

This notion of a "two-source rule"—and there is no such "requirement" in journalism—was the rough-and-ready creation of Ben Bradlee to meet the exigency of the moment in Watergate, a moment when he had to determine a standard of proof for and a means of handling two young reporters immersed in one of the biggest stories of his or their lifetimes.<sup>8</sup> But that notion seeped out of the *Washington Post* newsroom and into the collective consciousness of the American public, becoming part of its understanding of the standards by which it could judge all journalism.

The second seminal event was the *Chicago Sun-Times'* 1977 "Mirage" investigative series, in which the paper wrote of the routine corruption among city inspectors and bureaucrats that it uncovered while operating, in cooperation with Chicago's Better Government Association, a tavern on the city's North Side.<sup>9</sup>

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5. See, e.g., BERNARD FALL, VIET-NAM WITNESS: 1953-66 (1966); DAVID HALBERSTAM, THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST (1972); Walter Cronkite, *Changing Attitudes Toward War in Vietnam* (NPR radio broadcast, Aug. 7, 2002), available at <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/cronkite/> (recounting Cronkite's reporting from Vietnam after the Tet offensive and its galvanizing effect on the American public).

6. CARL BERNSTEIN & BOB WOODWARD, ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN (1974)

7. ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN (Warner Studios 1976).

8. See, among many places, Bob Woodward's statement in an interview on National Public Radio. *On the Media* (NPR radio broadcast, Sept. 24, 2004); see also BERNSTEIN & WOODWARD, *supra* note 6.

9. The "Mirage" tavern series began in the *Sun-Times* on January 8, 1978, and ran for twenty-five days.

Actually, the seminal event was not the series itself, but the decision in 1978 of the Pulitzer Prize Board not to give a prize to the *Sun-Times*.<sup>10</sup> The *Washington Post's* Ben Bradlee led the charge to deny the *Sun-Times* the prize because of the misrepresentation involved in the Mirage investigation. Journalists should not employ falsehood in the interest of exposing the truth, Bradlee argued.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, one of those who led the charge on the *Sun-Times's* behalf was Clayton Kirkpatrick, then editor of the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>12</sup> Not only had undercover investigations like the Mirage been generally accepted as legitimate journalistic practice, Kirkpatrick argued, but they had also been honored. In fact, one of the *Tribune's* top newsroom executives at the time, William Jones, the managing editor for news, had received a Pulitzer in 1971 for his work in an undercover investigation of wrongdoing by private ambulance companies.

But in 1978, Bradlee had the better of the argument and the Mirage was denied the prize. Journalism is like any other endeavor: what you reward you get more of and what you don't languishes and eventually withers away. Undercover investigations quickly disappeared from the American newspaper landscape. Transparency became the watchword. And the notion of a journalist representing herself as anything other than a journalist in the course of her work became anathema.

Over time and under the pressure of competition from television and other dispensers of information, newspaper publishers discovered that honesty, integrity, fairness, and all the other virtues that get subsumed under the mantle of ethical journalism could be a selling point, a means of distinguishing their products in the information marketplace. The preamble of my own company's editorial ethics policy, for example, describes the credibility that the paper enjoys in the marketplace as an "indispensable asset."<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, in a dismaying number of cases in the last half-dozen or so years, that asset has suffered grievous damage at the hands of journalists who, for whatever reasons, behaved in grossly unethical ways—Jack Kelley at *USA Today*, Jayson Blair at

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10. FULLER, *supra* note 3, at 47.

11. *Id.*

12. Peter Kihss, *Debate on Exposés Held Up a Pulitzer*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 18, 1979, at B4.

13. CHICAGO TRIBUNE CO., EDITORIAL ETHICS POLICY (2005), available at <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chi-ethicscode,1,6177798.story?coll=chi-newsopinion-utl&ctrack=3&ccset=true> (on file with the Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy).

the *New York Times*, Patricia Smith and Mike Barnicle at the *Boston Globe*, and numerous others of lesser fame at numerous other newspapers.

At industry conferences and seminars, editors have lamented the results of these incidents, each of which affects not just the credibility of the journalist's own newspaper but the credibility of newspapers in general—and this at a time when the callus of public doubt and cynicism about the news media already is hard as cement. And they have cast about for solutions, ways to inoculate their staffs against the disease of deceit.

To no one's surprise, what they've discovered is that there is no vaccine, no way to inoculate journalists permanently and with complete assurance against the temptations to falsehood.

What there is, however, is something most newsrooms are already familiar with and for which there is a constant hunger among the troops: conversations about the craft.

So at the *Sacramento Bee*, for example, current editor Rick Martinez has renewed a predecessor's practice of holding quarterly staff meetings on a specific ethical issue.

At the *Chicago Tribune*, editor Ann Marie Lipinski committed herself in May to meet with every member of her roughly seven hundred member editorial department staff in groups of about twenty-five to talk about ethics, and in particular the contents of a new Code of Editorial Principles promulgated by the parent Tribune Co.

As "ethics coach" for the staff, I've been privileged to participate with Ms. Lipinski in each of the more than twenty such meetings held so far, each at least two hours long. (We hope to finish up with about ten more in early autumn. Then we'll enter what a colleague calls the "after-care" phase, with brown-bags and other meetings on specific, topical ethical issues.) I say "privileged" because these discussions among working journalists have been among the most inspiring things I've heard in more than thirty years in the newspaper business. They have covered issues like those in the series of questions posed at the beginning of this article—issues of source confidentiality and guaranteeing anonymity, of what one can and cannot legitimately do to and with quotations, of the obligations and limitations on our citizenship that we incur because of our chosen occupation, and many others.

Two things have struck me about these discussions. One is that, no matter how many times we may have gone over the same ground, someone can always be depended upon in a future meeting to find a new angle or aspect that illuminates the issues

in a different way. The other is the insatiable hunger among journalists for discussion of this type. Indeed, it wasn't very long after "Ann Marie's ethics sessions" were announced and the first one was held that they became a hot ticket in the newsroom; everybody wanted to know when he or she would get an invitation.

There's one other noteworthy thing about these meetings. It's the anecdote that Lipinski tells about how, in the days just after September 11, 2001, *USA Today* published a story about a young boy in a madrassa somewhere in the Islamic world who displayed to a reporter a photo of the Sears Tower in Chicago and said something like, "This one is mine."<sup>14</sup>

In the weeks and months that followed, she says, she put heavy pressure on the *Tribune's* foreign editor to have his people find that boy. And it was appropriate pressure, considering what an attempt to destroy the Sears Tower would mean to Chicago. But in the end, foreign editor Tim McNulty had to come to her and say that, despite their most strenuous efforts, his people could not find the boy.

Last spring, when *USA Today* published its findings on the misdeeds of Jack Kelley, on the list of his fabrications was the story of the boy at the madrassa with the picture of the Sears Tower.<sup>15</sup>

The point of the story, Lipinski says, is simple but important, powerful and journalistically fundamental: "The truth is always good enough."

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14. Jack Kelley, *Trainees Eager To Join "Jihad" Against America*, USA TODAY, Sept. 27, 2001, at 12A.

15. Blake Morrison, *Ex-USA Today Reporter Faked Major Stories*, USA TODAY, Mar. 19, 2004, at 1A.



