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IF NOT OBJECTIVITY, HOW ABOUT HONESTY?†

MATTHEW V. STORIN*

I added a disclaimer to the beginning of my talk, which is probably not a bad idea at a law school. It probably should go something like, “If I’m so boring that you fall asleep and tumble out of your chair, I’m not responsible.” More appropriately, it’s the view of, I guess, an ink-stained wretch, of someone who spent his entire life in the newspaper business. So I did want to put some perspective on what I was going to say tonight.

I was a journalist for thirty-eight years, and I have the utmost respect for nearly all of my former colleagues. I took a few risks in risky places as a reporter, but I knew others who took enormous risks and some who died doing this work. A friend and former colleague from the *Boston Globe* was killed in Iraq just two years ago. So I want to say that what I hear from some politicians and some bloggers and other advocates of the failings of work-a-day journalists, I often don’t recognize. Most of the journalists I have known, whatever their faults, were motivated by noble intentions. And of course, being human, we all have failings, and I’m not saying that journalism can’t be greatly improved. In fact, I essentially agree with much of the criticism that has been uttered here previously tonight, although Bill did start to lose me when he got to Hitler. I had enough trouble identifying with Eric Alterman as a journalist. In most cases, it’s important work done for idealistic reasons, and very few of the journalists I’ve known ever got rich doing it.

† On March 31, 2005, the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* hosted a symposium entitled *After Objectivity: What Moral Norms Should Govern News Reporting?* Mr. Storin was the fourth speaker at the Symposium. See also William Donohue, Truth, Ideology, and Journalism (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 711 (2005); Kenneth Woodward, Neither ‘Objective’ Nor ‘Post-Modern’ (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 719 (2005); Marco Bardazzi, Four Elections and a Funeral (Mar. 31, 2005), in 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 727 (2005).

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Objectivity is something that, wonderfully, can only be discussed in a nation with a free press. Even in Japan, where the press club system almost forces cozy relationships between government and sources, this topic would have a much different feel. Much of what is in a daily newspaper—and I generally tend to talk about newspapers because their information is complex and comprehensive so you get more of a critique out of it—I think it's by and large immune from this discussion. Something like the Schiavo case is obviously ripe for distortion. But if you take, for example, the coverage of the murder of the husband and mother of federal judge Joan Lefkow in Chicago, it's just one, although a dramatic example, of a story where you just hope the reporters get the facts straight; and that's what they are trying to do. The overwhelming majority of stories in any edition of any daily newspaper fall into this category. The news organizations make plenty of errors and misjudgments that have nothing to do with ideology. For example, from what we know today, the *New York Times* coverage of the investigation of Wen Ho Lee, who was suspected of stealing classified information from Los Alamos, was grievously flawed. There were a number of claims that the coverage was biased against Lee's Asian background, a weakness that I think would be inconsistent with a liberal bias. In my time as a newspaper editor, I came to believe that about eighty percent of the criticism that the newspaper received was colored by the prism of the critic. His or her real complaint was that our version of reality did not agree with what he or she believed to be the truth. That did not always make the critic wrong, of course, but often it did, or appeared to. On the other twenty percent, we had clearly done something wrong.

But getting to the heart of the matter, let me stipulate that I think it is true, that most journalists—at least most that I have known—are liberals. They might not classify themselves that way, although the polls that Bill [Donohue] mentioned would indicate that they do, because a great number of them are not really that ideological; but in fact, that is where they would fall. They are less likely to be partisan politically in any great sense, though some are. Their greatest biases are these. They believe that the press should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable and by definition in today's society that probably makes them liberals and might make them Democrats. They believe most passionately in good stories. Those stories usually involve tension, conflict, and deflating the powerful or the hypocritical. These trump ideology in many cases and especially party affiliation. One would only need to read the coverage of Bill Clinton pre-Monica with Whitewater and, of course, post-Monica. Bill

Clinton didn't think any better of work-a-day journalists than George W. Bush does, and truth be told, the feeling is about mutual both ways. But Clinton did have one advantage: journalists generally thought he respected their craft and their mission, while they're probably less sure of that with George W. Bush.

But passion and opinion in a reporter are *per se* not a bad thing, if they are controlled. I myself was never really that comfortable with such journalists. Sy Hirsch of the *New Yorker* comes to mind, but perhaps it took a really dedicated anti-war partisan to dig out the atrocities in My Lai in Vietnam, as Hirsch did. It's up to his editor to keep him under control. It would be wrong to have a whole newsroom full of such people, but obviously, Woodward and Bernstein worked up quite an emotional head of steam when they were pursuing the Watergate investigation, and sometimes, one just has to step back and see such efforts in the context of a free press and a free society.

The funny thing is, in my experience, I find that the people most critical of the liberal press, at least those in Washington, D.C., say Karl Rove, President Bush's political aide, are really not haters of the press. They just view these journalists as another force to deal with. A guy like Rove probably rolls his eyes at some of the ideologues on the right that he hears from as much as he rolls his eyes at what he considers reporters with an axe to grind. He's a pro; and at the end of the day, he'll chat with these folks from either camp at a cocktail party. It's all part of the business he does. And when he rails against the press, it's just a tool of his trade, another way of making a point.

I, for one, don't resent criticism of the so-called "liberal press." If you step back and look at our democracy as a whole—yes—the press tends to be liberal just as CEOs of corporations tend to be conservative. Some, in fact, own news operations. Sumner Redstone, the CEO of Viacom, could have fired Dan Rather on the spot when CBS mishandled the Bush military service story. Redstone did own up to voting for Bush, but he knows that he can't go and do something like that.

I will agree that one real weak spot in the establishment press is religion. Most reporters are not churchgoers. They may respect religion in some abstract way, but they don't admire it, nor empathize with it. And in the wake of the last presidential election, you noticed that they're trying harder on this front, but in my opinion, most of them just don't get it. This is definitely a problem. I do in fact know a number of reporters, editors, and news directors who are regular churchgoers, but even these tend towards a secular point of view. This is one area in which I hope our Gallivan Program for Journalism, Ethics, and Democracy

here at Notre Dame will over time make a difference by producing more journalists who are at least comfortable with religion.

In the end, everyone brings opinions and cultural influences to the keyboard or the camera. The most important quality to strive for is honesty: honesty with yourself, honesty with your audience in describing motivations of sources or areas where you could not obtain authoritative information. Also, professionalism, the effort to be fair, which Ken [Woodward] alluded to. These qualities are important for everyone, but the higher one goes in the news organization, the more important they are.

An editor-in-chief or broadcast news director can exert tremendous influence in this regard. When I became editor of the *Boston Globe* in 1993, it was considered overwhelmingly liberal, not just in its editorial page, but in its news coverage. I set out to change that. Sometimes that led to strange bedfellows, no pun intended, such as Cardinal Law, who I think respected my efforts in this regard. And it was a rude shock to the Kennedy family, especially after we broke the story of Michael Kennedy's improper relationship with the family babysitter. When Michael tragically died on a ski slope a year later, that particularly inflamed emotions between the family and the *Globe*. In fact, the last time I saw Joe Kennedy, the former Congressman, he was screaming at me across a table in a public restaurant, which didn't seem like the best place to do that. But as Cardinal Law learned, and I implied earlier, the story trumps all other considerations, and I doubt he feels quite so warm and fuzzy about the *Boston Globe* today.