6-28-1973

Letter to Herbert Wechsler, Invitation to be National News Council Adviser

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THE PUBLIC, THE PRESS, GOVERNMENT AND FREEDOM

It has now been my pleasure and opportunity to live in the city of Cleveland for about a year. It has been a happy and a fruitful experience, and it proved to be an extremely interesting period. The news media has uniquely contributed to the interest and to the vitality of events.

George McGovern held daily press conferences during the first half of last year, boldly asserting that he had a chance to be nominated for President. No-one believed him because Ed Muskie already had it sewed up. President Nixon said in his Annual Spring News Conference that he was worried lest the Office of President suffer a loss of respect!

1973, too, has witnessed the uncovering of many things. Josephine Baker showed her Follies Bergere form on a harlem stage; Sally Rand unfurled her fan to reveal the age of her feathers; and from the front pages of the Cleveland Press, Mayor Perk's floating hotel mysteriously vanished into oblivion.

I entered the business world, and thus came to live among you during this interesting time, I must acknowledge, because the people of Tennessee committed a marginal error in the ballot box.
But framers of our Constitution made it possible for the people to make mistakes, and they provided for a free press to tell everybody about it. Though a bulwark of our system, freedom of the press has been under serious challenge in recent years—perhaps more seriously than ever before.

We have but to measure the public response to the attack of Vice President Agnew upon the national news media to realize that a credibility gap existed between the public and the mass media. To some extent, I suppose, diminished press credibility is a result of the revolutionary times in which we live; if not the result, at least a concommitant. There is distrust of all institutions that have become larger and more bureaucratic and more remote, and partly for the very reasons that they have become so. These characteristics have become intensified in our times, not only in the media field—what with its increasingly concentrated ownership of newspapers and the networks of radio and television—but also with respect to just about all other business institutions. Indeed concentration, bigness and vertical organization on a national scale characterize our times.

It is unquestionably true that television, radio and newspapers have been and are now offering increasing amounts of investigative and interpretative material. This is enlightening to some but is assaulting to the prejudices of others, and confusing to many. This, too, characterizes our times, because our economy, our government, our society is increasingly complex and sophisticated.
The national suppliers of news reach audiences of widely variant tastes. The audiences themselves are not only better educated but, on the average, they have a greater diversity of interests, higher income and a higher standard of living. But many of that audience have not kept pace with this sophistication. They are sometimes called Bed-Rock America, the Forgotten Man, Middle Americans, Reactionaries, Red-Blooded Americans or what-have-you.

Unlike local media, the national press cannot cater to the narrow, regional, ethnic, cultural or economic interests. This tends to make them appear more remote and out of touch with the common reality prevailing locally. It was to this element that Mr. Agnew most effectively appealed. He touched a sensitive chord with many; not, I believe, with the majority, but surely there was a very vocal group who seemed in unison to shout "Unfair" at the national press.

But should the national press, because of this, cater to the lowest common denominator? Should it cease interpretative reporting? Should it limit its intellectual examination of issues? Should it, in sum, cease or curtail sophisticated reporting and intellectual treatment of the national and international news in the leading country on earth?

I hope the press will continue to dig, to investigate, to expose, to interpret, to examine and to enlighten. The freedom which the Constitution provides for the press carries
with it a responsibility to the public. That responsibility must take on a leadership quality. To accord with this responsibility, the press must, in my opinion, appeal to the best, not to the worst in us.

Of course, there is a contrary point of view and that contrary point of view applies to other phases of our life as well as in an attitude toward the national media. Perhaps the most publicized assertion of it in recent times came from U. S. Senator Roman Hruska when, during the consideration of the nomination of Judge Carswell for the U. S. Supreme Court, he said, "The mediocre are entitled to representation."

The framers of our Constitution devised freedom of the press as a protection for the people and for effective surveillance of government. Freedom from government constraint or censorship is not only essential to freedom of the press, but to the maintenance of all other civil liberties in the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment is a protector of citizens, a guardian of our rights, a protector of the people against tyranny of government.

As I have already said in a different way, but which I wish to emphasize, freedom of the press is a public right--it protects the public's right-to-know, and it protects our freedom to speak, to write, and to publicize the facts of life and our views of them.
Without the freedom of the press, the government of the U. S., with all of its immense power and facilities, could gradually and surreptitiously impose a police-state government upon our people. Without freedom of the press, Americans could lose their freedom as we have known and cherished it--could lose the sanctity of their homes and their right to be secure therein in freedom from unlawful entry, search and seizure. Without freedom of the press, a powerful central government could subvert our political system through which the people remain masters of their own fate and thus perpetuate itself in tyrannical power. It is a free press which serves as a balance against unlimited government and as an independent audit of governmental power.

Indeed, Mr. Chairman, freedom of the press and a representative democracy are inseparable. Sovereignty of the people and liberty of the press are correlated.

Even so, the greatest danger to the freedom of the press may well stem from license of the press. Abuse of power is not confined to government. It can be found in the corporate executive, in the publisher, in the editor, in the exploitive politician.
It is with these concepts and views and with the hope and faith in our institutions of freedom which I hold, that I have agreed to serve on The National News Council. It is designed, and we hope it will become, an institution that packs a powerful objective voice, whose criticisms, championship and recommendations can be ignored by either press or government—but not easily so.

It is my earnest hope that The National News Council can contribute to a strengthening of the channels of communication, that it will contribute to both the freedom and the responsibility of the press.

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