

9 AM - 1890s On journalism, narratives and belief

“Mornin’. How’s the newsroom working?”

“Busy but quiet. Not as tough a day as tomorrow will be, scrambling to get tabulated election results on the pages. Have you put some thought into an editorial for tomorrow?”

“I’ve been trying to avoid it.”

“Why?”

“We may be poised to elect a liar, a cheat, and a thief and those who should have investigated before the election may have willingly papered it over as if it does not matter. Who framed the story? What are they trying to accomplish? A frame within a frame is slippery recursion, and people learn so little about recursion that it will come back and snap ’em in the ass. All this may be the case, but today is not the day to say so in an editorial.”

“No, you can’t teach someone something they are unprepared to learn.”

“Editorially, we’ll stick to the issues and deal with consequences when it’s time. We also need to write on how the campaign hammered predetermined narratives throughout.”

“Narratives?”

“Frame narratives—the story within a story—became popular in novels just before the turn of the century a hundred years ago. Today, network television news pushes the producer’s point of view as the narrative. Without narratives, National Public Radio would lose its style and *60 Minutes* would have no plot line.”

“That doesn’t speak well of journalism.”

“Journalism shows symptoms of academic abuse. History should be mined for what is useful; it’s dishonest to leave out what

threatens one’s prejudices. Will and Ariel Durant’s histories make pseudo-historian Howard Zinn’s contrived narrative seem laughable. Journalism has forgotten the difference between Herodotus’ descriptive *Histories* and the thematic narratives of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. Journalism serves readers poorly when it imposes a presumed narrative that overpowers the events.”

“What makes you so pessimistic about journalism?”

“About 40 years worth of experience.”

“That’s flip. You speak as if you have serious concerns.”

“I think journalism is dead. The real question is when did it die.”

“Die?”

- It might have been the fawning of NBC/MSNBC’s Chris Matthews admitting to a tingle going down his leg discussing a presidential candidate during 2008 campaign.
- It might have been the rampant Bush Derangement Syndrome going on since the 2000 election.
- It might have been CBS News anchor Dan Rather’s conviction in 2004 that the Texas Air National Guard memos were legitimate. The documents were exactly reproduced using present-day default Microsoft Word settings that used proportional spacing, raised superscript characters and apostrophes rare for typewriters of the early 1970s.
- It might have been the absence of journalistic outrage at the 2003 Islamic Danish cartoons that religious fundamentalists considered offensive.
- It might have been the 2003 admission by CNN news chief Eason Jordan that the network enjoyed a special relationship with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq that caused CNN not to report Iraq’s human rights abuse.
- It might have been CNN’s *Point/Counterpoint* theater whose only journalistic highlight came on the *Saturday Night Live* parody of it, with the epithet, ‘Jane, you ignorant slut!’
- It might have been fostered by J-school dreams of becoming the next celebrity journalist like Woodward and Bernstein after their 1973 Watergate reporting.

- It might have been the ‘Gotcha!’ journalism that CBS’ *60 Minutes* made notorious in the late 1960s.
- It might have been the 1968 leap away from news into opinion made by Walter Cronkite after he was taken in by the Vietnam War *Tet* Offensive propaganda campaign.
- It might have been the parody of Helen Thomas’ entire career as a White House correspondent.

“Why does it matter?”

“The only way journalism will revive is if you decide if you want to reclaim it.”

“How?”

“Make it better. Subscribe to quality press only. Read and react to it. Identify misbehavior. Label what is wrong and laugh at it. Hold the press responsible.”

“But, why does it matter?”

“Individuals, journalism, and society are interrelated. Individuals, journalism and society overlay each other like concentric circles. What is important to one is important for the others. If you don’t hold one accountable, it warps the others.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“If we don’t make the connection clear, you’ll have no foundation upon which to build society.”

“Psychiatrist Carl Jung’s collective unconscious suggests people can assume things without checking their work. If your task as an individual is to make your map of reality most accurate, how should you wish others to represent themselves to you?”

“Accurately.”

“How would others wish you to represent yourself to them?”

“Accurately.”

“How would you wish to represent yourself to others?”

“Accurately.”

“How would feel if you discovered others misrepresented themselves to you.”

“Cheated. Angry. I’d feel they did not respect me.”

“And yet you tolerate ‘political spin’ without so much as a squawk. You tolerate lies as part of normal discourse. You tolerate ‘appearances’ when ‘substance’ matters. Why?”

“I have no answer.”

“In the 1890s, Henry James used frame narratives in *Turn of the Screw* to insert a tale within a tale. Characters in his story tell stories with changing points of view so, in the end, you don’t know which view, if any, to trust. In the stilted and abstract campaign that, thank God, ends today, frames matter more than facts. Each cardboard cutout candidate is so crafted that jaded handlers don’t notice their distance from reality and, if they did, they would not let *you* notice. Candidate imperfections are buffed and polished into oblivion, so no one notices how much rust has set in around them.

“We are poised to elect someone from whom the mainstream media has shielded us on purpose. We don’t know how these candidates acted in the past, which leaves us unable to project how they will govern in the future. Candidates play us with *faux* outrage, driven by politics, not principle. That tells us how they think of themselves, us, the world, and all that has gone before. History is absent from the equation for mainstream media, voters, pollsters, pundits, and, hell, even supporters.”

“Back that statement up.”

“Easily. Footprints are everywhere. Pick a medium. Newspapers? TV transcripts? Blogs? Books? Like spoor in the woods, writing leaves sign any tracker can follow.”

“Then why do people support such candidates?”

“Long explanation or short one? Novels over a century lay out a more telling theme than just this election but they are like statistics, a blunt instrument one can use to either to tease out useful understanding or destroy the evidence. Follow the trail left by Modernist, Post-modern, and Post-colonial novels and even Post-post-modern novels—and it ties together the last century or so of literature. They reflect the environment in which they were created. Novels freeze popular thought of their

time and promote concerns through their then-current community. The seeds of novels reflect what occupied the minds of philosopher academics at the time, and reflect the soul of the community, the science, the politics, the culture—the life as they *saw* it, not how it was. We have toyed with frame narratives for a century, unable to put them in their place. They represent the structure on which situational ethics is built—much principle having crumbled in 20th century politics and philosophy. Absent foundations, we live in a nasty time where charlatans would gamble the future of society for temporary personal power. To them, power matters more than country, culture, or society. To them the candidate is the ticket in. To handlers it's only a game.”

“A game?”

“Damn straight. Those who label mistakenly themselves liberal or progressive are today’s *sans culottes*—the mob engine that rode to power in the French Revolution and collapsed for needing constantly to be fed, as leaders of the French Revolution discovered to their regret.”

“Aren’t you the optimist! So, we’re screwed.”

“Not so. All it takes is a change of mind.”

“Do you suppose the likely winners today know what they are getting into?”

“What is the difference between ‘I don’t know’ and ‘I don’t care’? It doesn’t matter to them. Whoever offered this guy the presidency considered him their ticket to power.”

“But why would they do that? How could they do that?”

“The tools they chose to use show lack of respect for voters and society. If they understood what they were doing or if they cared—character would not let them use such tools. What’s more, their understanding of history is so . . . so . . . superficial.”

“Why superficial?”

“Talking with my wife this morning, on our way to work, the conversation reminded me of Joseph Conrad. He criticized his century as filled with, ‘The truth for which you have forgotten to

ask.’ Imagine the modernity lived by Conrad, whose hard experience exposed the political fiction of his time. In 1897, Conrad wrote in *Nigger of Narcissus*, ‘by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel... before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.’”

“I’m not sure what you are driving at.”

“Modernity is a trial for anyone in one’s own age—self-reference, questioning, and doubt. Being caught up in modernity—the awareness of now—takes one out of now and into a meta-consciousness that is sometimes helpful and more often a hazard. The more time spent looking at yourself and your place in time, the less time you are fully engaged in ‘now.’

“People seldom see their place in time. They can’t even manage today. They haven’t the habit to say, ‘From this moment until bedtime, I don’t care what time it is, my world will be the fun of what’s happening now!’”

“What has that to do with today’s election or the campaign leading up to it?”

“One of the plot threads in the book *The History Boys* has a teacher in an English grammar school encourage students to invent facts to game a testing scheme that will allow them to enter Oxford or Cambridge Universities, a lesson that winning matters while ethics does not.

“I would venture that history gets treated with less respect now because it’s reputation is suspect as different narratives of ‘history’ get used. Rather than ‘histories’ it’s the past that needs to be treated with respect.”

“I’m not sure how to respect it, or, for that matter, what it can be used for?”

“What is the use of history, uncertain as it is? A weight? An oppressor? An education? An opportunity? We all play against it. Different flavors of humanity single themselves out for special treatment because of it. They claim, ‘We are more oppressed

than you are!' because they continuously try to turn yesterday into competitive advantage."

"We all live under the crushing weight of the past."

"Not always. Every now and then, when someone sees the past more clearly, the weight of tradition is lifted . . . for a time. Then the past isn't an oppressive weight, it's light and nutritious food for the selective eater who discovers within it some threads of history worth examining."

"That's a shade too enigmatic for me."

"To those ignorant of history, the present is what is oppressive. History is not so far away that what has happened once can't repeat today. Do you dare discount that possibility?"

"History is littered with crushing tragedy caused by unrestrained, unexamined animalistic rage. For us to project more such behavior into the future should bring thoughtful people to their knees. The only way to avoid this future hell is to plumb the past to discover its weakness and marshal its strengths."

"But how?"

"Medusa, the gorgon, represents the past—an underworld creature, with hair of writhing snakes—amorphous, constantly moving, changing shape, ready to strike at the inattentive, and equally deadly to those who fixed their attention directly at her."

"I didn't expect mythology as justification. So far, you make as much sense to a layman like me as Freud's Medusa interpretation makes sense as an image of castration suffering unresolved conflicts with her father Zeus who raped her."

"Explanation, not justification. There is more than one way to interpret Medusa. Find value that works and use it."

"Seeing history as Medusa teaches you how to use the tool to better your own future. Perseus slew Medusa, with the help from the gods Athena and Hermes who provided winged sandals, a helmet of invisibility, a sword, and a mirrored shield to avoid looking directly at Medusa."

"Great! Give me winged sandals, invisibility, a sword, a shield, and the future is mine!"

"The Gorgon's deadly head, according to mythologists like Jane Ellen Harrison, 'was made out of terror, not the terror out of the Gorgon.'"

"What's the difference?"

"History is filled with writhing, senseless terror, waiting to be repeated. Douglas Adams, who understood that, had Zaphod Beeblebrox, in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, face the crushing awareness of the nothingness of the universe and its supreme lack of purpose. He understood and survived while others, unprepared and reduced by the horror of that understanding, became gibbering idiots."

"Look closely, if you dare, at the complexity of the American Civil War, with both sides fighting well-reasoned positions founded in the Bible, the Constitution, and history, systematically killing off 600,000 civilian and military sons and daughters, each side convinced of their moral right. Try to make sense of the tragedy of Severinus Boethius, one of the last Roman officials, in the service of King Theodoric the Great."

"Who was Boethius?"

Boethius wrote the *Consolation of Philosophy* in the early 500s while imprisoned and awaiting execution by Theodoric for charges of treason that were probably unfounded. *Consolation of Philosophy* was singularly responsible for projecting the writings of Aristotle and Plato from Boethius' prison a thousand years into the future. According to some records, Boethius was executed by tying a wet sheet of rawhide tightly around his head, so that as it dried, it crushed his skull."

"Looking for sense in history could drive us mad. Either paw the rubble of the past for understanding and justice, or, better yet, keep history at a distance as fair warning how quickly the angry sea can tip you overboard. Look too closely at the past and the rage and despair can poison the reader. Softly reflected in Perseus' mirrored shield, hope and invention remain intact to negotiate a more solid future."

“History is another country. We don’t live there, but Perseus’ winged sandals take us there, even though it’s located far away. Invisibility offers the chance that we can learn enough about the need to defend ourselves before we actually have to do so. The sword reminds us that the past, the present, and the future require us to find the courage to stand up for ourselves. Was Perseus born courageous, or did he discover along the way some source of courage?”

“You’re asking me? How would I know?”

“Some people would have you treat courage as a vocabulary word. Others would tell you stories of courageous people for you to emulate. While they mean well, wisdom seldom works that way. How would you do it?”

“I’m not sure if that is an assignment or a game.”

“Generations forget themselves and go stupid over time. Hubris grows. ‘Hey! I’m the center on my universe and must be right!’ Literature is called to refocus the magnifying glass of consciousness to remind humanity that the lessons of history are there for their benefit and, if forgotten, will bite them in the ass.”

“You tie history and journalism together. Do you mistrust journalism?”

“That crept up on me a decade ago. At *Woodstock ’99*, the notions that the press carried around were preconceived and laughable. Our newspaper and just one other went into the event to report squarely what could be seen.

“After that, when Internet’s blogging first became popular, I spent time reading journalism blogs and responded occasionally where I thought comments were mistaken. Academic journalists showed themselves to be profoundly disinterested in real-world experience from those of us in the journalistic trenches. They, who accused President George Bush of living in a bubble, lived in their own bubble, unwilling to listen to critics.

“That came to a head with a New York *Times* article that framed a narrative that Bush was irrational because of his religious faith. Accusing Bush of faith-based governance, the journalists practiced faith-based journalism. The journalists were convinced

their preconceived notions had to be right. As believers, they were unwilling to consider the possibility they might be wrong, and used any means to undercut opposing arguments.”

“That’s irrational.”

“Try to point out irrationality to those whose world appears rational to them. These journalists believed. I was appalled. I approach journalism differently. To me, a journalist is one who, despite years of experience, approaches each new assignment with tools, but with little baggage.”

“Why would journalism be different for them?”

“The world they grew up in splashed Watergate on the front page, cast Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford as the protagonists in the motion picture version, and manufactured journalistic drama every Sunday night to the tick, tick, tick, of CBS Television News’ *60 Minutes* stop watch, complete with unnecessary trench coats.

“Watergate’s profoundly useful journalism put television heroes of the olden days like Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers out to pasture. It fostered dual unintended consequences: journalists became celebrities, and ‘Gotcha journalism’ became every college kid’s dream, destroying, among others, Stephen Glass, who perpetrated serial fraud at *The New Republic* in the 1990s.”

“Of course, journalism has enjoyed a peculiar reputation since Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell romped in *His Girl Friday*, the motion picture version of *Front Page*.”

“Journalism is a symptom, not a disease. Journalism didn’t sour on its own. Those who became journalists had to be lovingly disabled beforehand to be ripe for the harvesting. I think a book on the subject would have a title like *50 Years of Bad News* but don’t expect J-schools to buy it for students—too uncomfortable for them. As a result, we get hit jobs, sensationalism, below the fold justice, and double standards. We get editorials that tell us what ‘must’ be done rather than an explanation of what is important and why.

“It’s funny to hear journo-types say ‘we’ve created a crack investigative team’ when the useless information they generate is distracting noise. By God, they have a tool and they are going to use it. It’s like the weather cam. It may be foggy out, with nothing to be seen, but they will burn 30 seconds of airtime, and call it news, to show you the nothing that they see.

“Today’s ‘If it bleeds, it leads’ is a clichéd judgment of news value, not news worthiness. Journalists seldom distinguish between the two. Too often, the habit is to mistake the scale of news value—the priority of where to place competing news on the page—for an indication whether something is news at all. They are two separate judgments. Is this news? If it is, where does it fit relative to other news?”

“I’m sure you love pundits.”

“Pundits often get to pundit again because they have punditted before, not because they are worthwhile. I am supposed to trust refugees from the government revolving door, whose predilections are well-known, whose analyses have been flawed at best, whose observations add neither clarity nor insight, and whose best hope is not to make egregious blunders lest they get trashed by the outrageous fortune of the next Nielsen Ratings.

“I reserve my deepest disappointment and greater anger for what passes for journalism. Charged to work for you and for me, they seem not to understand that that is their job. And even if they knew to work for us, they do not know how to perform that job. They are degreed and they are popular—credentialed morons, loved for what they do wrong.”

“Hey! I’m a journalist, too. You’re cutting damn close to my heart!”

“If I had included you, you would not be working in our newsroom.

“The first fault of national-level, mainstream media is that they undermine the accuracy of your mental map of reality rather than improve it. The Associated Press, for instance, reports as news that current unemployment has reached an all-time high.

“That’s true, isn’t it? A milestone worth reporting.”

“A milestone, certainly, but more likely a millstone, because, while true, it is not useful. Journalists are obliged to differentiate between information and news. Instead, they report their content absent context.”

“What context. How would I know it’s not in context?”

“You shouldn’t have to. AP should automatically include the context. Unemployment reaching an all-time high is less significant than the last high reached almost 30 years ago, because today 30 percent more people are working. As big as the absolute number might be, it’s a smaller percentage of the total workforce today than back then.

“In Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, new wave educationist Thomas Gradgrind snookered the community just as AP has snookered our community with its preoccupation with facts at the expense of understanding. I wave AP’s performance in front of our state bureau chief regularly, but what can he do if AP management is unprepared to recognize it or be embarrassed? The challenge to AP remains unanswered: ‘You’ve got a job to do that you don’t do very well. Is it that you don’t know any better or that you hope no one will notice?’

“AP is just one news source.”

“No need to single them out. Listen to Canadian Public Radio on National Public Radio. When a *Rolling Stone* journalist claimed the press has adequately vetted American presidential candidates, the *As It Happens* anchors accepted the statement unchallenged. Do we need to itemize the uncanny ability for the press to turn away from its job? How dare so-called journalists accept the notion that if other journalists say something that somehow provides adequate proof.”

“So what is the purpose of journalism?”

“Journalists are charged to find the good questions to ask. We need better questions. For the last 40 years, journalists were taught to be an objective reporter of facts.”

“Objectivity is important.”

“Well, that’s Dickens’ Tom Gradgrind again. Facts alone do not

necessarily provide an accurate map. That flaw that Dickens could see in 1854 should not be beyond those who live today.

“How so?”

“Journalistic success is measured by popularity on TV and in print. Does popular equate to good?”

“If not popular, what would measure good?”

“If journalists didn’t exist, what would you do yourself?”

“I’d have to go to a lot more meetings and events.”

“But *why* would you go?”

“I am affected by what they do. If I go, I can vet their decisions, and act on them.”

“Precisely. Based on what you learn, you change your understanding of the world around you. News helps improve the accuracy of your mental map of the world that represents the sum of your sense experience. That map is the only tool available to make important decisions that affect your life. If so-called journalists hired to improve your mental map of reality don’t tell you what you need to know to plan your better future, they offer only entertainment that, however interesting, is not news.”

“Have we forgotten this?”

“Did journalists ever know? I mean, despite what journalists tell you—especially when they give each other awards—journalism doesn’t have a stellar history.”

“It doesn’t?”

“According to author Eric Burns, in the 1500s, a man some call the father of journalism, Pietro Aretino, was actually extorting money from people to write good things about them. He trashed those who wouldn’t pay.

“Some father of journalism.”

Some time later, at the time of our founding fathers, journalists were downright scurrilous. Thomas Jefferson, perceived as a fine, upstanding, principled man known as the father of his political party, financed journalistic propaganda under the table. The

great Jefferson compartmentalized misbehavior in one part of his brain so as not to appear inconsistent to the rest of his brain. Rationalization of behavior like Jefferson’s hasn’t changed for people today.”

“Wouldn’t today’s journalists jump on that kind of behavior? Wouldn’t they have learned to avoid such simple flaws in their reporting? Wouldn’t they notice and reject such flaming blunders in their work and that of their peers? Wouldn’t they care?”

“If journalists don’t see such things as blunders. . . then the flaw lies further back—built in to the system that helps them learn to see. They have never been taught to notice. . . by teachers who never noticed themselves.”

“That’s quite a damning indictment to make with just one or two examples.”

“Want more to back it up? Okay. There is enough evidence that for all the talk of ‘bias’ today the real problem is ‘blunder.’ Legions of journalists’ mistakes today often go unnoticed by readers and viewers. Which mistakes do you want to consider in detail: gotcha journalism, stylistic abuse, ignorance, statistical misuse, gullibility, amnesia, misrepresentation, misplaced tolerance, misplaced judgment, silence, overused or underused language, or the ubiquitous politics?”

“I give specific examples to the community in presentations about the press. When people are taught by example to recognize abuse they become inoculated against the disease. They learn to defend themselves against shoddy journalism. A subset of examples are enough to show the types of mistakes popular journalists make every day that go unnoticed.”

“Unnoticed?”

“Readers don’t slam the newspaper down in disgust or punch at the remote to turn the channel. There has to be a particular place in Hell for bad journalists.”

“I can see the poster: ‘Danté for Journalists.’”

“Do you realize how deep down the Hell of Danté’s *Inferno* bad journalists would be found? Not until deep into the eighth of the nine levels! Danté described Hell this way:

Level 1 for virtuous pagans,
2 for lust,
3 for gluttons,
4 for waste,
5 for the angry, sullen, and slothful,
6 for heretics, and
7 for those who do violence.

“Level 8 sets aside 10 ditches for bad journalists, if you include putting some pimps, panderers and seducers in Ditch 1 along with the journalists.

Flatterers go in Ditch 2.
Ditch 4 is reserved for fortunetellers and
Soothsayers call Ditch 5 home
Hypocrites suffer in Ditch 6.
Ditch 7 houses the thieves.
Ditch 8 must be a large one to hold evil counselors
and deceivers,
Ditch 9 needs room for the sowers of discord and
scandal.
And, ah! Ditch 10, for falsifiers.

“Some journalists would find themselves down even lower, because Circle 9 claims the treacherous. Who do you think would suffer at the ‘Gotcha Journalism’ level?”

“Has to be CBS’s *60 Minutes*—the poster child for such abuse. If they didn’t invent it, they certainly perfected it.”

“Don’t forget the White House press gaggle whose propensity was to pounce on George W. Bush or his press secretary if they refused to respond according to the journalist’s pre-determined frame narrative. The transcripts are full of examples.”

“And Sunday wouldn’t be Sunday without CNN, MSNBC, and NPR’s David Gergen, *Washington Post*’s E. J. Dionne, ABC’s George Stephanopoulos and the rest of the feature pundits. They play preconceived irrelevancies as the main storyline: preaching which candidate ‘won’ a debate. They

might have illuminated significant policy differences presented in the debate, but that would waste NPR’s precious Daniel Schorr ‘Let’s talk about me’ time.”

“Populate the rest of that ditch with all the broadcast journalists who close their set pieces with overblown last sentence zingers—that final pontification before sending it back to the studio.”

“What’s at the next level?”

“Outrageous Style—CNN’s Anderson Cooper earned front and center at that level with his Academy Award theatrics during Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. No one misplaces emotional righteous indignation like him. ‘The hell with accuracy, give me pathos!’”

“I can see CNN’s theme, now: News you can abuse: Misplaced fear and anguish repeated *ad nauseam* on the hour.”

“Don’t forget ‘Location, location, location!’ By God, if you can read the same story from the Baghdad Green Zone as in the studio on 52nd Street you have added ‘drama’—pronounced, of course, with a flat ‘a’ as in ‘gramma.’”

“The Iraqi Green Zone is as far removed from fighting as New York. The byline suggests first hand knowledge, but the reporter is AWOL. Reliance on press releases and phone interviews leave both the newscaster and the viewer clueless.”

“Strewn throughout that level are newscasters teasing news with come-ons instead of news, just to keep readers’ attention past the commercial break—‘Breaking news’ that isn’t worth breaking, repeated every eight minutes.”

“Yesterday’s news is presented breathlessly and fluffed into features. Action! Go for action.”

“I think junk science deserves a level of its own. If there were an award for the decade—I mean, *60 Minutes* is so 1968—it would be awarded to journalists who present junk science as news: ‘If the population continues at this pace . . .’ is as silly as saying, ‘If my lawn keeps growing at this pace, the whole world could be overrun!’”

“What’s the next level?”

“Well, Danté had sub-levels, and the ‘Misuse of Statistics’ is a kind of junk science. Journalists love ‘Milestone Journalism’. It should be called ‘Millstone journalism’ because it drops quality like a boat anchor. Numbers are no substitute for reporting news.”

“There is a consensus among scientists . . .’ is a certain ticket to this level. Consensus isn’t bad science; it’s no science. Science is about understanding the mechanics of causation, not whether a majority are believers. So-called consensus science is bad reporting, and identifies charlatans who would pick your pocket, given the chance.”

“That’s a version of reporting polling results when popularity does not imply good sense and does nothing to move forward the understanding of candidates.”

“This is too easy! Trumpeting high gasoline profits misrepresents small profits on large sales and ignores governments reaping windfall taxes. Emphasizing income disparity does not recognize the improved quality of life of many in recent years.”

“Missing Comparatives create a double standard of reporting. It distorts context to report an administration fired 8 U.S. attorneys without mentioning that 93 were fired by a previous administration. Besides, what matters is not the number of attorneys fired, but the reasons why.”

“For another example, few report that the meme—the popular symbol—‘culture of corruption’ extends to both sides of the Congressional aisle.”

“It’s hard to order the levels of journalistic hell, but one of the deeper levels has to be reserved for gullibility. Gullible journalists suffer from mental viruses. Their immune systems have been compromised. When major media channels accept and promote both *Photoshopped* and staged pictures unchallenged, that’s ‘fauxtography’ not photography.

“News teams rush to photograph and interview pathetic staged demonstrations even when chanted clichés are embarrassingly juvenile, pathetic, and nonsensical. They call

it being balanced and objective when it’s neither one. Bogus stories fed to news organizations are run without challenge by organizations unwilling to recognize or retract them. Run with the rumor and never look back to fix the damage.”

“Shall we put ‘Celebrity fetishism’ at this level—when someone known for well-knownness is presumed to have expertise about something else? Reporters and photographers surround stars from, say, *The West Wing* as they walk the halls of Washington’s Capitol Building when closer examination of their message shows them selling style rather than substance, mouthing a script they do not understand.”

“Cronyism is one of the nastier habits at this level, like coverage written to protect franchise players such as NBC practiced with high profile leak investigations that involved marquis commentators like Tim Russert, Andrea Mitchell and David Gregory.”

“Historical amnesia also belongs at a deep level. The press reports legends, not news, when popular notions are reported instead of what solid historical scholarship substantiates happened. No one reports, for example, that virtually every major politician on both sides of the aisle expressed concern over reports of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction before the war.”

“More than five years later writers continue the urban legend promulgated by CBS, the *Washington Post*, and the BBC that George W. Bush served a fake turkey in Baghdad over Thanksgiving in 2003, when even the New York *Times* issued a correction in July, 2004.”

“Deeper down in hell, almost to the bowels, has to be ‘Misrepresentation.’ CNN made self-censorship deals with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. To keep access in Iraq, CNN’s Eason Jordan compromised its content. They tempered it to what they believed would be acceptable to Hussein. When news is not fully accurate and representative, it cannot be called news.”

“Along that line, networks and national press parrot popular fictions like ‘Bush lied, people died’ when what happened is much more complex. Like the many reasons laid out for

United Nations support, with which many independently concurred, and that administrations before the one that went to war supported the 'Iraq Liberation Act of 1998,' the no-fly zone, and bombing Iraq. News organizations tolerate politicians revising their personal histories to suit the political winds of the day. For too many journalists today, history begins at dawn."

"So does 'Misplaced tolerance' fit in at this level, or does it deserve its own? Journalists abdicate their responsibility to label bad behavior what it is. Either they try to get a free pass by claiming they are only being 'objective' but, mired in their own moral relativism, they don't seem to recognize when they see it that abuse of individuals is always wrong."

"There is enough of it to fill a level of its own."

Misplaced judgment is slightly different from misplaced tolerance. News anchors like CNN's Lou Dobbs act as if their judgment is so special it should take the place of your own. He gives extended diatribes on offshore jobs in a way that presumes to do your thinking for you."

"In doing that, he misses half the data you need to know to make your own decisions. As some jobs go offshore, other jobs that we do better come onshore."

"One of the more insidious practices that deserves a level of its own is 'Silence'. The newly configured U.N. Human Rights Council is run by countries with long records of human rights abuse and, so far, has ignored most human rights problems. Where is that reported?"

"Double standard silence lets Congressional leadership get away claiming, 'Inserting Congress into an international crisis while ongoing would not be helpful' but, at the same time that leadership travels to, say Syria, to insert itself into an international crisis."

"Another kind of silence is perpetrated simply by moving lips: A newscaster says "A says X and B says Y" absent any digging to the accuracy of the content to distinguish noise from news."

"But that just represents an ordinary news day."

"One level should enshrine those who have abused language through over- or under-use."

"It's easy to tap journalists destined for those levels. Journalists belong there who use euphemisms like 'insurgents' when more properly someone who randomly kills civilians to instill fear is a 'terrorist.' Calling something a 'civil war,' or refusing to call it a civil war is more than simple judgment, it's a commitment to accuracy."

"More insidious than that is labeling some politicians by their philosophy, but not others, as if the label is derogatory. Now one would not want to prejudice, but it is surprising over the last decade how much malfeasance reported a Republican involved and, when a Democrat was involved, overlooked the Democratic label. Who can say it was conscious or unconscious? But it is flawed by any measure."

"What about politics itself?"

The press regularly commits politics . . . which is okay, when readers and viewers understand. MSNBC's Keith Olbermann is the poster child for turning news into entertainment regarding anything against Bush. Entertainment is not a sin. Suggesting that it is news is the sin."

"I think we have more levels than Danté did, but we have more sinning to work with. I'm sure our list isn't complete."

"We really haven't found a place for those transfixed by their own celebrity. With so much to lose, they remind me of heavyweight fighters in a championship bout who never step out of their defensive posture. But a short list is good enough to help people recognize journalistic failings when observed. It prompts people to put the press side-by-side to compare and contrast reports. It hones the skill to detect journalistic inadequacy. Once they learn to exercise their smell detectors it becomes easier to turn the page or punch the button."

"But where do you start?"

"Reliable journalism can be found in the most unreliable publications and programs. Journalism's ability to function within the external world is not at issue, but its attention to a

useful frame of reference is. 'Objectivity' and 'fairness' do not differentiate what is at issue. Journalists who regularly make mistakes seem to have no yardstick to recognize those mistakes. Unable to differentiate news, information, and opinion, they seem not to understand journalism's purpose."

"Which is . . .?"

"Which is to help a reader improve his or her mental map of reality—help the individual know enough that he or she can plan a better future and better society. My reading habits have changed and so should yours. Don't read to be informed; read to understand. Decent journalists should appreciate the difference and help."