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**NEWS - INFORMATION**  
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LETTER MAIL

# NEWS

from

## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

W. Willard Wirtz, Secretary

FOR RELEASE: 2 P.M. EST  
Monday, February 27, 1967

Remarks of  
W. Willard Wirtz, Secretary of Labor  
at the  
Overseas Press Club of America  
New York City  
February 27, 1967

The letter of invitation for today's meeting was typical Inside Riesel. Drawing on the literature of subpoena, draft notice, and ransom note, it referred to some public remarks of mine about Where the Truth Lies, and then continued: "I have read with ... intense interest your recent criticism of the press .... I thought you might want a platform to expand your views .... Our people will be delighted to hear you .... The denizens of our club are discerning, intelligent, analytical, and eager."

I wired back: "Yes, Grandma. But what large teeth you have. (Signed): Little Red, White, and Blue Riding Hood."

"Criticism of the press," especially by public officials, is a notably unrewarding, underpaid occupation: like patting a porcupine reproachfully; or wasting a vintage which always comes out -- in the press -- as the vinegary wine of sour grapes. Or bonded hemlock! (I am reminded that the newspaper industry traces its history back to 1454, when Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press, using as his model

a slightly adapted wine press.)

This one-way arrangement governing the exchange of diplomatic discourtesies between government and the press has three possible explanations.

One, so obvious that it might be overlooked, is that the press is always right. (I use "the press"-- with the precedent of this Club's title -- in its generic, anachronistic sense: to include all media which assault the eye and the ear, either separately or simultaneously.)

The second explanation, taking its philosophy from Acton, is that an essential balance against the absolute power of government to corrupt absolutely is the power of the press to be critical beyond criticism.

The third, which somewhat commends itself to me personally, draws upon Mr. Justice Jackson's explanation of the ultimate authority of the Supreme Court. "It is not," he explained, "that we are final because we are infallible. We are infallible because we are final."

Nevertheless, President Riesel and "discerning denizens," your gracious and even "eager" invitation has beguiled me into "expanding my views" a little;

-- Not gracelessly, I hope, but even leaning a little, if wit permits, on the cartoonist's license for caricature.

-- Nor with the slightest feeling of having been put upon personally by the media; for the members of my family are always surprised, and pleasantly, at what they occasionally see of a personal nature in print or on the screen; and I know well by now the responsibility of the public officer to combine the talents of prize-fighter and punching bag.

-- With full recognition, furthermore, that it takes two to make the news; and therefore with a complete willingness to put on one of any pair of shoes we find that fit, or even pinch a little.

-- Yet not entirely idly either. For if coming here on these terms seems more than a little quixotic, it is in the belief: First, that if the idea of democracy should ever be invalidated it would be because it came about that more and more people knew less and less that was true about more and more that was important; Second, that this is the direction of things today; Third, that the responsibility for this lies significantly, though by no means entirely, with the mentors of the mass media.

Indeed, the "expanded view" is that in consequence of our sometimes equal sometimes separate misdemeanors, a considerable part of what the public reads and sees and hears about the conduct of its public affairs is such a diluted and artificially colored version of fact and truth that if it were a mouthwash the Federal Trade Commission would divide three-to-two on whether to let it on the market.

Perhaps that is the answer: A Pure Speech and Press law recognizing the consumer's equal need for protection against what gets into his stomach through his mouth and what gets into his head through his eyes and his ears:

-- So that speeches would include a note at the beginning: "Not written by the speaker. Prepared for another occasion, and altered to fit this audience. All classical references taken from Bartlett's Familiar Quotations or Elbert Hubbard's Scrap Book. All statistics conveniently adjusted. Cholesterol content 82%. Low calories. No proteins. Sweetening added. Paragraph 23: Poison. Shake head well after hearing."

-- And there would be a box, at the head of the next day's story of the speech: "Written by Jones, who wasn't present, from ticker item filed by Smith, who wasn't there either. All quotes from speech taken out of context. Reported crowd reactions, including pickets, dubbed in. Headline written by Shrudlu, who can count but cannot read English. Dangerous if taken seriously or without a large grain of salt."

Recognizing the possibility of delay in any attempt to meet this situation by such measures, I turn to its more serious consideration.

There seem to me two central considerations. One involves the issue, by no means new, of the extent to which the coverage and content of the nation's and world's "news" is properly controlled or influenced by what is judged to be the public's (even if not the public) interest. A second, probably more basic point, has to do with the relationship between democracy's vital communications processes and the broader technological revolution.

I

I don't suppose anybody ever fully recovers from reading, as a child, the Chicago Tribune. I should also confess to being momentarily under the influence of having last week written my second -- or possibly third -- letter to the 'editor' in fifty years, only to see it put by the New York Times herself to the petty little editing deceits of a misleading sub-head added and the punch-lines tucked more inconspicuously into the end of the preceding paragraph. So there is the danger of too broad generalizing here from narrow experience.

I thank Heaven, nevertheless, for being spared the fate of living in the land of the heathen I read about each morning on the way to work; and count it the largest value of education to unlearn the inherited belief that if anything has managed to get itself into print it must be so.

It isn't a matter of truths and lies. There are, to be sure, always a handful of correspondents, columnists -- and politicians -- hungry enough to eat on their own knowingly false words, cold enough to use whole cloth, shameless enough to say or print what they know isn't true. They don't last long and rarely do lasting damage.

The problem is rather with the truth that lies -- when it is turned against itself by someone's passing off part of it as the whole; by putting in words that deliberately mislead the reader but leave the writer ample alibi; by adding an

adverb; by some trick juxtaposition of words and facts; by leading a story with some little sick fact that infects everything that follows.

I press the point, however, only in terms of the broader question of whether it is right that the Nation be given a selective coverage of what is happening to it and where it is going.

It could be no more than a matter of amusement that the press conferences for the AFL-CIO Executive Council meetings at Bal Harbour, Florida had to be moved to a larger room this year because the open tensions within organized labor attracted so many more than the usual number of correspondents.

And if it is a matter of routine reporting to describe any expressed difference of point of view between members of the Administration in Washington as "discord" or "dissension" or "a controversy" or a "feud" -- but to imply that any unanimity which emerges is the accord of parrots or puppets -- surely no foul would be claimed.

But when the coverage of a major address by some public official seeking earnestly to find the common wisdom about how to achieve peace for the world is led by an account of fifty student hecklers, with pictures of the pickets in an adjoining front page column, and the speaker's point appearing on the carry-over page -- it becomes fair to ask whether the news editor and the makeup man are putting circulation and civilization in the right balance.

When, among a generation of youth working harder at its books than any before it and announcing its ideals of service by over-subscribing the Peace Corps, only its maverick draft card burners, drug addicts, and lovers of four-letter words are publicized in the press -- it is a fair question whether that press is more interested in its own future or that of the human race.

When there is reported diligently (as there should be) every incident of isolated indecency or immorality at a Job Corps camp, without putting it in the context of tens of thousands of inherently decent but previously deadend kids being pulled back at those camps from what would otherwise have been lifetime commitments to indecency and immorality -- it seems not impertinent to ask whether it is truth or Mammon that is being served.

Whose side is the press on in the civil rights revolution? Any self-righteous answer about neutrality on the side of truth leaves the question of what ethic there is -- except selling more papers -- for giving daily front page advertising to any white supremacist or non-white racist who coins an ugly phrase or whose dementia drives him to murder -- while there is only occasional notice on the inside pages of the rest of a Nation's throwing off the shackles of centuries' bondage of bigotry.

This overstates it. But not much.

Nobody wants the press to play pollyanna. But why shouldn't the causes of riots be covered as fully as their consequences? I wish



there were front page pictures every day in every New York paper of the alleys and the hallways and the schools in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant -- instead of stories about breaking the faith in Bimini.

When the worsening of any condition (a strike, for example; or an increase in the cost of living) is almost automatically front page news, but its significant improvement gets little or no attention -- it is a fair question why the press takes trouble as its special client, except that it pays so well.

I'll say it first: that what I have done here is, in its lopsideness, exactly what I have been complaining about in the press.

All right, let's talk terms.

If we do, there will be no proposal about your stopping the bombing. In fact it better be made clear again that nothing said here asks any quarter as far as criticism of government by the press is concerned.

There is a great deal in the Acton point; and less reason, probably, for concern about criticism between press and government than about cronyism.

Successful personal communication depends, in general, on the confidence in each other from which it starts, and improves with familiarity. That can't be relied on here. It would probably be better if we didn't even know each other by first name -- at least during working hours.

Another footnote: Growing up wanting to be a newspaperman, I thought of "a scoop" as one of the magnificent professional achievements. Now I find it usually comes from "a leak" -- something that has a market price: making the leaker look good, either on this story or the next one. You pay it. We accept it. Usually nobody is hurt. Sometimes the casualties are colleagues, competitors, occasionally the truth, always the integrity of the relationship. I'll salute the man on the beat who says to me: "You've got a leak? Don't tell me. Call a plumber."

Even "briefings" and "back-grounders" and "off-the-record sessions" leave me uneasy. Their value is unarguable. So is their danger. Their intimacy is soft, and this relationship needs to be tough and uncompromising.

So I speak for what I guess is only an obvious ethic: That the press must be critical of government; but that neither the press nor the government is entitled to the pursuit of self-regarding interest; and that neither is entitled to administer the truth on any accept the truth's own terms, or by consulting the tastes of those who don't know the truth.

## II

I strongly suspect, however, that all that has been said here so far involves at best no more than what Gerald Johnson calls -- labeling his own product -- The Superficial Aspect.

Indeed there is something demeaning, and mean and small, about

a discussion of democracy's essential process -- for communication is nothing less than this -- in terms that seem to come down to an arrogant assessment of people's personal integrity.

There is, I think, an infinitely larger, more basic, problem.

It is probable that this is one more area -- possibly the most critical of all -- in which there is a developing and unresolved issue of whether Man is going to prove able to master his own invention.

It could be fairly insisted, contrary to the assertion from which these remarks started, that there is actually available today -- with television, tel-star, and the rest of contemporary communications technology -- not less, but more, information than the public has ever had before about what is going on in the nation and the world. We can watch every evening two newscasts that exceed in their coverage and excellence any previous form of reporting. A good many of the Sunday afternoon televised panel interviews are superb instruction. The promise of educational television is apparently soon to be kept. There is more, sometimes much more.

Yet with all of this, what democracy's working majority is getting is only ounces of new understanding about the megatons of new knowledge which is the monopoly of a smaller and smaller minority. We get more information than those before us did, but it is a diminishing part of the much more rapidly increasing available vital knowledge.

The technology of communication is probably advancing as rapidly

as any. The technique of it -- and its product in terms of people's increased understanding of all that is happening -- is not.

Nor have we even started to evaluate the relationship between, on the one hand, the explosion in the physical and life sciences and in technology generally (including communications technology), and on the other, the social sciences (including the whole fact of communication).

It is only one of the more obvious manifestations of this relationship that the attempt to compete with television seems almost unquestionably to have affected the newspapers' emphasis on certain types of news. It has the effect a new tabloid coming to town used to have. Instead of looking for what the newspaper can do better -- the tendency is try to be more spectacular -- to beat the newcomer at its own game; to get to press faster, regardless of what this may mean in terms of less complete coverage. But it goes much deeper than this.

It isn't, surely, just coincidence that the individual's interest span is shortening in direct relationship to the increasing complexity of the problems he faces; or that people's apparent interest in dissensions and discord and sordid exhibitions at home -- a blasphemous book, for example, about a human and national tragedy -- rises just as their stakes in the critical game of world diplomacy increase; or that there is an accelerating tendency (or so it seems) to reduce vital issues to

catch-phrases just as those issues become increasingly complicated and so more defiant of phrases that evoke automatic reactions.

Any assumption that this is all because the human race is degenerating to the point that people are something that happens when dalmatians interrupt their pursuit of fire-trucks to spend a few minutes with Pavlov's poodles is plainly absurd.

It is closer to the point to suggest that there are portents of a crisis in democracy's vital process of communication so far only vaguely sensed -- in C.P. Snow's Two Cultures, and perhaps in Marshall McLuhan's cryptic suggestion that the media has become the message -- and that the sterner prospect is that unless the science of communication (not just its technology, but its whole technique) advances as rapidly as the science of life and space and physical energy, the loser in that race will be democracy itself.

Perhaps it is still too soon, but not much, to question the validity of the propositions -- so important in the philosophy of both politics and the press -- that there are "always two sides to every question" and that "differences of opinion" are in themselves healthy. This is right, surely, at the present point of our understanding of human and individual relations. Yet there isn't the slightest evidence that there is any more reason to assume a lack of fundamental verity in human affairs than in the physical sciences. It may well be only much harder to find -- and yet at the same time increasingly important as advancing technology reduces the tolerance for human error.

Sir Robert Walson-Watt, the "father of Radar," relates the story of the earnest student of affairs who asked Einstein why it is, since we are clever enough to release nuclear energy, we cannot solve apparently simpler political problems. Einstein answered: "It's quite simple; it's because politics is vastly more complicated than physics."

Nigel Calder, distinguished editor of New Scientist, exaggerates the point for emphasis when he suggests that "all technological proposals should as a matter of course, be energetically opposed by someone if only so that the dilemmas and uncertainties surrounding them can be exposed and the complex technical and social issues aired." But a fellow science-philosopher, Gerard Piel, publisher of the Scientific American, develops the same thought more meaningfully in his assertion of a "supertechnological logic" that Man must assert and master if he is to be the beneficiary and not the victim of his own invention.

It is hard, frankly, to see a "supertechnological logic" developing in a relationship -- between government and the media -- which has always denied and defied even a "subtechnological logic." In fact this relationship has been completely illogical ever since government abandoned direct communication with its constituents -- when the only "media" used were a pair of leather lungs and a pair of horses -- and began to rely increasingly, as population and invention advanced, on

the means of communication supplied by those ordained to criticize it. Democratic government is the only enterprise in the world which turns virtually all of its public relations and customer contacts over to agents fiercely committed to the exercise of a Constitutional freedom to make government always look as bad as it sometimes is.

Nobody would suggest or permit one degree of that freedom to be sacrificed either to increase efficiency or to serve any plain or fancier form of logic. Democracy's only claim to either efficiency or logic is that democracy is still working.

The problem and the prospect nevertheless remain. The tolerance for human error gets smaller and smaller as the machinery of civilization becomes more and more intricate. The price of ignorance, carrying a working majority, goes up. "The world," A. Powell Davies said once, "has become too dangerous for anything except the truth." There is increasing reason to question whether there are lasting differences between the standards of truth the scientist learns by and those the rest of us live by.

I have said earlier how important it seems to me that the day-to-day working relationship of government and press should be distant enough to breed respect. I venture, nevertheless, and in conclusion, this only half-formed hope:

-- That it might be possible in some way to at least start a dialogue between some of us who carry responsibilities that are the same time separate and mutual -- about both the common and the sometimes conflicting obligations we have.

-- That this might even take the form of a series of cross-the-table discussions -- seminars of Scribes and Pharisees (they called themselves, as I remember it, "the pious ones") -- at which we could discuss nothing more immediate than the relevance, if any, of what we are doing and how we are doing it to the future -- if any. If there were ever such a meeting, no matter how modest, it would be the first time I had ever sat down to discuss what I suppose is the most critical part of anything -- and everything -- government does.

One other hope: That nothing said here has managed to conceal an immeasurable respect, admiration, and affection for the gentlemen -- and ladies -- of the press. I share fully Thomas Jefferson's judgment, although none of his felicity in expressing it: that if there should ever be room in a lifeboat for only one as between the press and the government, posterity would dictate that they proceed in that order.