The Press
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By James Russell Wiggins

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Foreword

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The Press In An Age Of Controversy
Sigma Delta Chi Foundation Lecture
by James Russell Wiggins, former Editor
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I wish to look forward tonight to the journalism of the 1970s and to what I believe will be the most serious challenges of that period.

The broad objectives of daily newspapers of general circulation, I assume, will not differ radically from those the press now has. It will continue to be their purpose to bring to readers an account of what is happening in the world and what people do, say, feel and think about it, and to provide, at the same time, a medium for advertising of a credibility sufficiently high to attract the broad audience and the high patronage of advertisers that is essential to the maintenance of income sufficient to support expensive newsgathering and publishing operations.

I think that it is going to be much more difficult to do this in the '70s than it has been in the past for several reasons upon which I now propose to elaborate.

A changing world, in my opinion, presents the first of the increased difficulties. The American environment of the past 50 years, in my view, permitted newspapers of the widest possible distribution to retain the confidence of a general and almost universal audience because of a broad consensus of politically articulate Americans on many social, economic and political questions, astonishing for the relative accord and unity throughout society on most questions of public policy. The society was not without differences, but the differences among those sharing political power were chiefly about means and not ends. The society was not without its extremists, but they occupied fringe positions that made their objections to, quarrels with and dissent from the incredibly broad central consensus a matter of relatively little concern if not of indifference. The press contributed to this consensus, and the consensus contributed to the press. Differences were neither so great nor so deep-seated that, within the effective political system, all
sides to the prevailing disputes could not share a common confidence in the media. This general harmony made the people indifferent to the progressive concentration of ownership and control of the press and it freed them of the psychological necessity of having newspapers whose committed, partisan and one-sided views accorded with their own. The prevailing trend in this half century was toward a moderation of political views, the growth of a toleration for opposing views, the slow erosion of partisan political feeling and the steady lowering of party temperature in the body politic. These circumstances paved the way for the newspaper of general circulation, eschewing party affiliation or partisan advocacy and advertising its objectivity and its impartiality. And at the very same time that a consensus society made it possible for one newspaper to satisfy most prevailing opinion in a community, the growth of advertising made it more economically profitable for a single newspaper to cover an entire area. The readers became content with one publication where there had been several in a more controversial age and the advertisers became delighted with the unduplicated coverage of a single reliable medium capable of retaining its credibility throughout the relatively limited range of prevailing public opinion.

Even in the 19th century, the emerging daily press was dependent upon the existence of reader audiences composed of men with shared views. As deTocqueville put it in 1840: “A newspaper can survive only on the condition of publishing sentiments or principles common to a larger number of men”. So the fragmenting of parties and opinions and classes and groups, diminishing the numbers sharing common principles, is a matter of the most serious consequences to the kind of press we now have.

The demise of the party press, it is often said, caused the decline of party spirit, factional ferment and violent politics; but it is easy to argue that the decline of faction permitted the rise of the nonparty newspaper of general circulation. In any case, the sort of monopoly or quasi-monopoly daily newspaper press we now have came to be a phenomenon of the age of consensus.

Now I think it takes no seer to perceive that the age of consensus is ending or certainly will be ending in the '70s. I do not say that the characteristic daily newspaper will end with it; but I do say that it is going to be increasingly difficult to retain the confidence of a reader audience of infinitely more diverse views. The more that society divides into irreconcilable fragments, the more difficult it will be
to maintain that universal credibility necessary both to general reader distribution and to advertising profitability in newspapers of general circulation.

The signs of tumult of a new age of growing controversy are all about us. It is becoming increasingly difficult for quarreling and wrangling fragments of society to accept the claims of objectivity and impartiality made for a press attempting to serve them all. Paranoid suspicions that the press is not objective are multiplied by the allegations of distinguished newspapermen that objectivity is not even possible. Bill Moyers of the Long Island NEWSDAY recently said: "Of all the myths of journalism, objectivity is the greatest". Ben Bagdikian is quoted as saying: "In a very real sense, no reporter can be objective". NEWSWEEK thinks "newsmen should be willing to dismiss the illusion that there is such a thing as 'pure objectivity'". If the press cannot achieve sufficient objectivity to convince such practitioners and critics as these, it certainly is going to find it increasingly difficult to persuade audiences ranging from Wallace supporters to McCarthy supporters that there is any such thing as objective truth. And if there is no such thing as objective truth, what are the quarreling factions of an age of controversy to do? They obviously will be strongly inclined to do what newspaper readers and buyers did in the age of controversy that preceded the era of consensus: they will wish to have newspapers that serve them their own brand of "objective truth" — truth tailored to suit preconceived notions and deeply felt prejudices.

Now I hasten to say, I do not agree with Bill Moyers. And I do not agree with Ben Bagdikian. And I do not agree with NEWSWEEK. I still think it possible to be objective. But I am convinced that it is going to be increasingly difficult for newspapers to prove that they are objective. And it is going to be increasingly more difficult for them to maintain the kind of general purpose press that can only exist if readers believe they are objective. A change in the American climate from the weather of consensus to the weather of controversy is chiefly to blame for this, but there are other difficulties that lie within the press itself.

As party battles grow more and more intense in an age of rising controversy, reporters and editors find the role of the Fourth Estate less congenial than it was when political tempers were less excited. The role of the impartial observer no longer seems as rewarding to some journalists. Crosby Noyes of the Washington EVENING STAR recently observed: "Today just about everybody writes editor-
ials to be printed in newspapers or broadcast on nationwide TV. In the process of separating the good guys from the bad guys, the difficult, painstaking and unrewarding business of keeping the public informed on important matters often goes by the board”.

Of course, reporters and editors in times past sometimes found it necessary to gratify the itch of partisanship by the scratch of advocacy outside their profession. I think more of them now wish to do it within the profession — to retain the benefits of a Fourth Estate without accepting its duty to be objective and impartial. As controversy grows sharper, the commitments to the journalist’s detached role suddenly seems too pallid and neutral for young men of high spirit and hot blood. They feel the tug to get on the stage instead of just looking at it; or at least the impulse to yell a few interpolations from the prompter’s box while the main act is going on. Now I think this an understandable impulse and inclination, but I think it cannot be widely indulged without making it impossible for newspapers of general distribution to serve an increasingly diverse audience.

A reporting staff that becomes more concerned with letting the readers know what it thinks than it is with letting them know what public men think can retain one or more of the audiences in a quarreling and fragmented polity, but it cannot hope to retain its credibility with all of them.

If there is no such thing as objective truth, we must anticipate that in an age of controversy, the newspaper of general circulation will have to serve up the several varieties of truth or newspapers of separate identity will arise to do so. If this latter development comes about, it is easy to predict that the subdivision of the economic support of the press will diminish the comprehensive coverage of all but the largest newspapers and lower the rewards of all but a few newspapermen.

Many newspapers, I believe, are struggling with these problems with skill and ingenuity. They try to print the most factual and straightforward report of events and utterance and then, because the literal truth is not always the essential truth, they attempt to carry a view of the same event or speech through the eyes of a frankly subjective viewer. And they try to vary this subjectivity to range over the spectrum of opinion. But it is not a wholly satisfactory device. And it is one that becomes increasingly difficult, awkward and expensive the more are the varieties of “truth” that have to be satisfied.

The American press, I must say, has long had difficulty
with the reporting of public utterance as distinguished from public action. The late William Lyon Phelps once declined an invitation to speak because, he said, it involved four speeches; the one he planned to give, the one he gave, the one he wished he had given and the one reported in the newspapers. I think this trouble has increased. I put it down to three forces that work upon reporters and editors. The first is the election to use the lead sentence method instead of the abstracting method of reporting speeches. The second is the conclusion that literal quotation, even out of context, is safest. And the third impulse, I think, arises from the great improvement in the skill and education of reporters: a reporter barely graduated from the telegraph key and hardly out of the eighth grade was quite content to report what the public man said, but a reporter with degree in law or philosophy can hardly be content with these mean stenographic tasks. He must tell the reader what the public man meant by what he said. And so, increasingly, reports of public speeches tend to be just that: reporters telling the reader what the reporter thinks about what the man said (or the crowd reaction to it) and less about what the public man really said.

Another problem of the newspaper staff, it seems to me, is one to which Joseph Kraft recently addressed himself: a growing alienation of newspaper staffs from middle class America. This is partly, of course, the penalty of success. A little more than a hundred years ago, Alexis deTocqueville described American newspapermen as follows:

"The journalists of the United States are generally in a very humble position, with a scanty education and vulgar turn of mind... The characteristics of the American journalist consist in an open and coarse appeal to the passions of his readers; he abandons principles to assail the characters of individuals, to track them into private life and disclose all their weaknesses and vices". The newspaperman then was of the lower classes — in income, manners, habit, custom, tradition and impulse.

Only 50 years ago, the ink-stained wretches of the newsroom were barely beginning to emerge from lower-class and middle-class affiliations. Starting newsmen were often paid $15 a week; now the starting salary on metropolitan papers is more than $100 a week. The average income in the United States is only $2918 a year — half the starting pay of newsmen — and the average pay of daily journalists is many times the average income in the country. Only 50 years ago, newsmen worked for middle-class pay, lived in
middle-class neighborhoods, had middle-class views, were a part of a middle-class culture — they were middle class. But they have been emigrating. And like all migrant groups in society, they have been eagerly shedding the cultural impediments of their past and embracing the cultural accouterments of what is or what they hope will be their future. They have a tendency to denigrate the characteristics of their former compatriots and imitate those of the new circle in which they move. It is the kind of alienation characteristic of immigrants. By almost every index of American society, the newsman now has emigrated into the upper classes.

No index more completely identifies his class than his vocabulary, and no part of his vocabulary is more upper class than his expletives. Middle-class and lower-class people, when strongly moved or desiring to speak with especial passion and emphasis, resort to profanity; upper-class Americans resort to obscenity. Eavesdrop on the informal talk of urban daily newspapermen for an hour and their identification with the upper classes is unmistakable.

As the middle-class readers of the newspaper sense this affiliation of newsmen, their suspicions as to their impartiality are increased. Many of them, I fear, share deTocqueville's low estimate of newsman of the 19th century America. He then wrote: "The personal opinions of the editors have no weight in the eyes of the public. What they seek in a newspaper is a knowledge of the facts, and it is only by altering or distorting those facts that a journalist can contribute to the support of his own views".

When newspapermen themselves dismiss the very notion of objectivity, they reinforce the deTocqueville view that the press primarily influences by distorting facts; and the great middle class cannot feel comfortable with or confident of the distortions produced by men who do not share its origins, habits, hazards, traditions and hopes.

These natural suspicions of bias are increased by the tendency of newspaper editors and managers to move almost exclusively in the company of the upper classes in their private lives and their inclination to seek the association of the leaders of the Establishment in their public careers. Reporters, to a lesser degree, have the same social and professional orbit.

Almost inevitably, it is upper-class attitudes toward religion, morality, ethics, art, literature and world affairs that have the largest impact upon newspapermen of every rank. To the effects of propinquity are added the consequen-
ces of the fact that the upper class is more articulate. It has both the greater opportunity and the greater ability to make its opinions felt in journalism. This influence is reflected in the rising preoccupation of the press with foreign and national affairs — with the larger interests of the great world. It is to these areas of coverage that the talented and aspiring journalists tend to migrate. And it is the writing of reporters in these fields that inspires the praise of the upper-class readers who, in their turn, influence the owners and managers of newspapers.

The lower and middle classes have no such access to owners, publishers and editors, and reporters and their preoccupation with their immediate environment has less chance to influence newspaper management — and newspaper rewards of promotion and pay. In consequence, city-side staffs generally are less experienced and less well rewarded than other departments of the newspaper. The plight of the cities is not wholly unrelated to the fact that newspapers for a generation have assigned their best men to news and features about the Nation and the great world.

If Mr. Kraft’s indictment has any validity, what should we do about it?

If the generally distributed daily newspapers are not to become the house organs of a fragment of the upper classes in a society where each fragment is increasingly intolerant of the others, some steps must be taken. In my own view, newspapers must make a determined, conscious and calculated effort to keep attuned to middle-class mores, morality, culture, impulse and inclination. The press at one time achieved that result by being overwhelmingly middle class. Now it is going to have to send into that undiscovered country at least as many correspondents as it sends abroad. It is going to have to accomplish by a directed effort what it once achieved by osmosis. It is a price we have to pay for economic progress and cultural change.

One of the means of doing this, I think, is by consciously directing the operations of recruitment so as to frequently refresh staffs with infusions of new talent from diverse sources. Unless we do this, we are going to wind up with like-minded geniuses writing for each other and exciting the enthusiastic acclaim of the newsroom and the universal indifference of the class upon which a press of general circulation has been built.

This refreshment is not going to be easy. Rigidities have been introduced that cannot readily be altered. Newspaper management has increasingly used such tools as the
aptitude test and the skills of the personnel counselor to make sure that it does not employ eccentrics, individualists, deviationists and rebels who might trouble the tranquility of editors even while delighting the risibilities of a vulgar middle class. And the employes of newspapers, through the trade union movement, have incorporated into institutional frameworks the natural hostility of the trade to the non-conformist. A newspaperman who exhibits indifference toward, contempt for or dissent from the religion of trade unionism will find himself in more danger and in greater reproach in the newsroom than an atheist in a congregation of the faithful.

We have been progressively restricting the diversity of newspaper staffs until it will take a conscious effort to get them to re-identify with the great American center without whose support newspapers of general circulation cannot survive.

While it is true that more Americans today are college graduates than were high school graduates a generation ago, it is not true that ALL Americans have college educations and postgraduate degrees -- and metropolitan newspapers of this day are hiring only college-educated personnel, and many of them are hiring a proponderant number of their staff members from a relatively few colleges of almost identical social, economic and political orientation. We must not permit the newsrooms of this country to become increasingly composed of "in" groups, sharing the same general philosophical view, the same slant on the human condition, the same sophistication and the same contempt for "squares" who have not had the same privileges of upbringing, education, background and association.

I think the young people on American news staffs are better equipped than the newsmen of any earlier generation so far as concerns their academic preparation, their technical competence and their serious view of their profession. But I think some of them have been prematurely deprived of a sense of inferiority. I think they are too aware that they have "finished" their education. And I think they are, like the rest of this generation, the victims of an age of oral communication in which there is an excessive confidence in the transmission of knowledge by a kind of gaseous effusion achieved by the rapid circulation of shared opinions within a diminishing circle of the already persuaded. And I think it is increasingly difficult to induce any departure from the accepted wisdom of the group by resort to the tedium of the printed word. The number of reporters who
are really great readers of contemporary literature is not large.

An age of greater controversy, it is my guess, will introduce two other phenomena prejudicial to the impartiality of newspapermen and threatening to the perpetuation of newspapers of general circulation. One is the institution known as the “charismatic” leader; and the other is the institution which, for lack of a better word, I will call the “non-charismatic” leader.

When public issues grow difficult and complicated, citizens find it easier to fasten their likes and dislikes on persons than to sort out the merits and demerits of complicated policy choices. It is less painful to react to the emotional and visceral impulses than it is to undergo the agony of intellectual exertion. The more a citizen has to take on faith, the more mere faith in personalities (or lack of faith in them) dominates judgment.

The late John F. Kennedy was the prototype of the kind of “charismatic” leader that I fear will draw newspaper reporters and editors farther and farther from concepts of objectivity and impartiality. In a world filled with so much that offends, disturbs and disappoints the human heart, it is an unaccustomed gratification to come upon a public man who conforms to the journalist’s conception of both public rectitude and private charm. John F. Kennedy had this impact on journalism to such a degree that he left, in newspaper offices across the land, young — and even aging — men ready to support any Kennedy for any office on any platform at any time. This sort of romantic and sentimental adulation is a phenomenon of an age of controversy in which sentiment is excited and admiration elicited in a greater degree than is likely to occur in a time of tranquility and broad consensus. I think that in an age of controversy there are likely to be more such men and that there are likely to be more newspapermen who will lose their hearts to them. And I think the more there are, the more difficult it will be for the press that is staffed by such adulators to keep the confidence of other segments of opinion.

The institution of the “non-charismatic” character is an equally discernible peculiarity of an age of tumult and controversy. In recent American political life, public men have gained their official positions and retained them by putting together, each in his own way and time, diverse groups gathered into some kind of consensus and polarized about some broad, identifiable central view. But in an age
of controversy, it is harder to put a consensus together in the first place and harder to keep it together after it has been put together. In systems of elective leaders, the intervals of consensus are likely to be shorter and shorter. And the "non-charismatic" leader is likely to be a more common phenomena.

Factionism will increase in intensity as the factions diminish in size. As the size of fragments of the polity shrink, self-esteem tends to alter in inverse ratio. The smaller each segment of opinion becomes, the more intolerant it grows. In these unstable political circumstances, it becomes more difficult for public men to maintain a viable majority. They are as likely to be punished for being too strong as they are to be penalized for being too weak. I suspect that public figures in this country will increasingly witness shorter time spans of popularity. They will frequently face, as President Johnson has faced, the hatred of more and more irreconcilable factions.

In the final chronic stages, these factions will be so intractable that nothing can alter their antipathies or diminish their animosities. I am convinced that if Lyndon Johnson had ended the war in Vietnam; if he had doubled the gross national product; if he had multiplied the individual income of Americans five times; if he had persuaded the Soviet Union to agree to total disarmament and if he had magically abolished all distinctions of class, race and religion, that critics like Arthur Schlesinger would have hailed this transformation by saying that it all could have been accomplished three years earlier if we hadn't had that monster in the White House. Newspaper staffs, buffeted about by this sort of adulation and antipathy, partly fall prey to these conflicting views themselves. And it becomes increasingly difficult to persuade a whole public, composed of violently differing estimates of central public figures, that there is any such thing as an objective view of either the men they have decided to love or those they have decided to hate.

Another phenomenon inside the newspaper profession that is going to make it hard to cope with the age of controversy is apocalyptic journalism. In an age of consensus, a journalistic disposition to dwell on calamity and focus on catastrophe did not disturb the equilibrium of society. But when that equilibrium already has been rendered precarious by the tumult of a hundred factions, apocalyptic journalism, preoccupied with externals, engaged by perversities, fascinated by physical violence and hypnotized by aberration may
produce an almost fatal dislocation. In the tranquil days
of the age of consensus, a handful of pickets at a public
meeting was “news” — perhaps more news than anything
said or done at the meeting. It continues to be regarded as
the biggest news far into an era when picketing and demon­
strations have become commonplace. And a press which
can be excited to mobilize all its resources by a press agent
with enough ingenuity and agility to break a window is
going to become the unwitting accomplice of violence.

Now this is no easy problem to deal with. But if the
press does not try harder to deal with it, readers are going
to come to view with suspicion and distrust a profession
that so makes itself the ally of any faction or group that
is willing to indulge in enough violence to get an appropriate
press response. We are the victims of a psychology fast­
ened upon us in an age of tranquility. An angry crowd that
broke windows and smashed down doors and threw missiles
was “news” in a day of relative tranquility while the quiet
and sober gathering that passed solemn resolutions in a
peaceful proceeding was nothing novel.

The search for news — of which sheer novelty is one
attribute — made “wart” reporters of us all in the days
when things were going well for our society generally. And
it did no harm then. If we paid more attention to what
was bad in our society than to what was good, it helped
correct the bad. But if our preoccupation with the apocalyp­
tic and the disastrous and the irregular persists into a dif­
ferent sort of period, we may find the press not just report­
ing malaise but creating it and abetting it and encouraging
it by such a string of reports of disaster that calamity
seems all-prevading, and the public confidence in the
social order vanishes in a chaos of crumbling public confid­
ence. We have heard Cromwell’s plea to “paint me wart
and all”, and we are responding by painting him all wart.

Another difficulty that the press will have in maintaining
an appearance of and a reputation for impartiality in an
age of controversy arises from our awkward manipulation
of the new visual aids of our profession. It has been said
that the camera does not lie, but the camera does lie. It is
a notorious, compulsive, unashamed and mischievous liar.

I once declined to print a photograph of President Harry
Truman walking across the platform of Union Station before
a backdrop formed by a row of caskets just shipped in from
the Korean War. What that camera said was that the
Korean War was “Truman’s War”, just what thousands of
the President’s critics were saying. But that was not the
truth. It wasn't Truman's war. He didn't start it. He didn't will it. He tried to stop it. And the camera that pictured the caskets of Korean War dead did not have a lens capable of photographing those who might have died elsewhere if there had been no Korean War.

The camera — that allegedly impartial witness — has laid before Americans day after day the photographs of wounded and dead Americans who have laid down their lives in Vietnam, the photographs of South Vietnamese civilians wounded by military action. What the camera has been saying to American readers is that this is a terrible war, and it is right about that; but it has no testimony to submit on the question of whether or not the failure to wage it would have resulted in an even more terrible war. This is the first generation to see a war in its living rooms, to view it every day on its front pages. And if the camera's impact is such that the war is abandoned, and if that results in a greater and more ghastly war elsewhere in Asia or nearer home, the camera will record that disaster with the same impartiality and the same astigmatism, blandly conveying the instant calamity in a way to persuade each generation to foreswear present hardships for future security.

The camera lies because it conveys the impression that it is both omnipresent and omniscient — that it sees all and hears all; but it hears and sees all only on one side, and on the other side, hears and sees only that which serves a propaganda purpose. No, the camera is a liar, and it has told many lies about the war in South Vietnam. And readers, who are increasingly biased about the war, have difficulty in understanding that the camera is a congenital liar, condemned to prevarication by the mechanical limitations of a contrivance that could only tell the whole truth if it were equipped with lenses as all-encompassing as the very eye of God.

The fact that it is not so equipped has caused it, through inadvertence and not through intention, to convey a portrait of police forces throughout the country that is beyond all doubt a distortion. The camera is seldom first at the scene of a crime, a riot, a disturbance or a disorder. The camera usually arrives with the police — just in time to show the police in the act of apprehension, repression, suppression or ejection from the site. Day after day, the front pages of the American newspapers show the brave boys in blue in postures of aggressive assault upon persons in various attitudes of submission, passivity or flight. The camera did not plan it this way, but it is part of its limitation that it usually arrives at the spot when the police are
aggressive, and the persons pursued or subdued by the police have passed over to the defensive. Now, it is possible to say, in words, that the slight young fellow resisting the police just shot his grandmother, cut his sister's throat, robbed a bank or shot at the mayor — but the photograph is silent on this point. It reports what it sees — burly chaps in blue subduing a slight and often prostate person who seems to be the object of brutal aggression. The impact of such pictures upon the mind of readers, over the years, must be almost irresistible. In this and other matters the camera does not tell the truth and because what it tells is not the whole truth, skepticism about the media rises in the minds of readers who know that policemen, whatever their undoubted faults, are not always wrong.

The incredible deluge of news in 1968, I fear, is but a foretaste of the problems that the press will face in an oncoming age of controversy. It is a sample sufficient to demonstrate the inherent difficulty of our situation. Newspaper staffs are going to be increasingly tempted to partisan commitment by the stresses of a more tumultuous age. And it is going to be increasingly difficult to prove impartiality and objectivity to a society that takes increasingly divergent views on the nature of truth and objectivity itself.

I do not know what is going to happen to the daily newspapers of general circulation in an age of controversy. I think it likely that one of two things will happen. I prefer to believe that they will meet the challenge of such an era by acknowledging the increasing difficulties of achieving objectivity; that they will accept the restraints and disciplines required to make staffs deserve a reputation for impartiality; that they will successfully labor to gain from a reader audience that is increasingly critical and truculent at least the grudging acceptance of the press as a Fourth Estate that can be relied upon to stay above and outside the battle.

I think, however, that it is not utterly impossible that a fragmented polity will lead us back to the equivalent of the 18th century party press in which the absence of impartiality will be redeemed by the candor of confessed partisanship at a calamitous cost in terms of comprehensive coverage and professional standards.

Of all the professional groups in America, those employed on urban newspapers of general circulation have the largest interest and concern in preserving a society that is sufficiently homogeneous so that it can accept the possibility of objective journalism. It will be a calamity for the Nation
and for its impartial urban press if the rising controversies of the last half of this century enforce apartheid solutions on the cities, drive newer and wider divisions between the classes, races and religions and sharpen all the anti-pathies between political parties.

A press, guided by its own self-interest as well as by national patriotism, ought to dedicate itself not only to ameliorating the divisive drives that threaten to destroy the foundations of national unity, but also to maintaining standards of objectivity that will survive the doubts and skepticisms of an age of rising controversy.