WALL STREET JOURNAL

18 AUG 1970

STAT

Approved For Release 2004/10/12 : CIA-RDP88-01314R000300320009-9

A Debate: Do Newsmen Have the Right...

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By A. KENT MACDOUGALL

A newspaper reporter has as much right to picket the White House as his publisher has to eat lunch there with the President.

Publishers express their views, usually illiberal and often unreasonable, on their editorial pages. Lacking access to any such powerful forum, reporters take to petitions, placards and the streets to exercise their Constitutional right of free speech. Publishers don't consult their employes before formulating editorial policy; why should employes ask the publishers' permission before peacefully protesting?

There's no reason to believe that political activism will compromise a reporter's accuracy and fairness. A well-trained reporter with pride in his craft won't allow his beliefs to distort his stories, any more than a Republican surgeon will botch an appendectomy on a Democrat, or a Catholic carpenter will do slipshod work for a Protestant homeowner.

Publishers, who abhor activism on the part of their employes, have traditionally been political activists themselves. Benjamin Franklin, publisher of the Pennsylvania Gazette, conspired against the crown and helped overthrow its rule here. Horace Greeley, founder and editor of the New York Tribune, agitated to abolish private property (slaves) without compensation. Both men were revolutionaries, yet their newspapers were among the most respected of their day.

Then there was William Randolph Hearst, king of yellow journalism, who ran successfully for the House and unsuccessfully for mayor of New York. William F. Knowland, editor and publisher of the Oakland (Calif.) Tribune, became a Senator. And Warren G. Harding, publisher of the Marion (Ohio) Star, made it all the way to the White House.

Nowadays, Presidents often reward friendly publishers with cabinet and diplomatic plums. Oveta Culp Hobby, chairman of the Houston Post, was the first Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. Walter H. Annenberg, owner of TV Guide and the Morning Telegraph and a long-time admirer and supporter of Richard M. Nixon, is ambassador to the Court of St. James. If publishers can publicly serve, why can't reporters privately act?

Reporters who express outrage at this country's course in Indochina don't threaten their newspapers' independence and integrity. What threatens this independence and integrity are men like President Nixon and Vice President Agnew. They complain the press is one-sided. What they mean is, it should be one-sided—but their way. While Mr. Agnew criticizes TV commentators and editorial writers whose views differ from his own, Mr. Nixon tries to assure a favorable press reception for his report on the Cambodian invasion. He invites 38 news executives (predictably, none from the "unfriendly" New York Times or Washington Post) to a closed-door briefing whose proceedings are then embargoed for five days until the President completes his report to the nation.

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This article and the one below grew out of a discussion between two staff reporters of this newspaper.

Reporters rightly resist being co-opted like this. At a number of papers across the country, they are demanding a more direct voice in the editorial product. A Washington Star reporter recently criticized his paper's endorsement of the Cambodian invasion in a letter that was co-signed by 29 colleagues and ran in the Star's letters column. Sixty-seven employes of the New York News placed an advertisement in the New York Times (after the News refused the ad) to publicly disassociate themselves from their paper's pro-war editorials.

Do public stands by reporters undermine the public's faith in unbiased news reporting? Or is it the publishers' hobnobbing with the politicos that undermines this faith? According to a recent Gallup Poll, only 37% of Americans believe that newspapers "deal fairly with all sides" in presenting news of political and social issues, as against 45% who don't. However, the public's disenchantment with the press began long before the Vietnam war. And if one recent act of self-censorship is any guide, the public has more reason to be suspicious of news executives than of news reporters.

The incident involved Peter Arnett, Pulitzer Prize-winning war correspondent for the Associated Press. Mr. Arnett watched U.S. soldiers loot a village in Cambodia and reported that fact. The story ran the way Mr. Arnett filed it on the AP's foreign wires. But the looting incident was deleted from the U.S. wires. In response to queries, the AP manage ment admitted an "error in judgment."

Some publishers fear that reporter activ ism will be bad for business. Hawkish reader may stop buying a newspaper if too many o its reporters take dovish positions. By tha logic, the publishers should stop running edi torials, some of which are bound to alienat some readers.

Will the New York City Bar Associatio lose influence because its outgoing and incom ing presidents, Francis T. P. Plimpton an Barnard Botein, were among more than 1,00 lawyers who lobbied in Washington agains the war? Will "Catch 22" flop at the box of fice because its lead, Alan Arkin, heads committee of actors opposed to the war? Wil women stop buying Revlon lipstick becaus one of the company's vice presidents, Paul F Woolard, is acting chairman of the Corporat Executive Committee for Peace?

Of course not. Any more than readers an advertisers have shunned the Saturday Re view because of the peace activities of its out spoken editor, Norman Cousins. In the las five years, the Saturday Review's circulatio has jumped 55% and advertising revenue ha more than doubled. The magazine has jus won the 1970 Citation of Merit for journalisti excellence from the American Society o Journalism School Administrators. The cita tion praises the Saturday Review for, amon other things, "enlightened awareness of th great issues of our times."

Even if political activism were bad fo business, which it clearly isn't, newsme would be justified in continuing to speak ou against unspeakable barbarisms in Southeas Asia. A reporter's duty to conscience an country supersedes any obligation he ma have to the corporation for which he works. I his country is embarked on self-defeating ad ventures, he must do what he can to rescue it not by hiding or distorting the truth but b telling it. President Kennedy said he migh have canceled the ill-fated invasion of Cuba i 1961 if the New York Times had disclosed al it knew about the invasion plans. As it was Times executives deleted crucial details fron a reporter's story and the bloody fiasco at th Bay of Pigs went off on schedule.

If the present Administration continues t ignore verbal dissent and continues to esca late the war, anti-war newsmen and othe concerned citizens may be expected t escalate their opposition.

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