

The Destructive Dialectic: The Decline of American Journalism And What to Do About It

By Ted J. Smith III

This is a very difficult time to offer a diagnosis of the problems besetting American journalism. Even in the best of circumstances, the sheer volume of material disseminated by the media presents daunting challenges to the analyst. In an election year, those challenges are greatly magnified, both by the heightened activity of the press and by the need to adjust for the distortions of partisan political concerns. Worse, in this election year the press is undergoing a profound transformation. All of the old standards have crumbled and, although the ultimate outcome is uncertain, it is evident that some fundamental redefinition of the role of journalism is taking place. Finally, these changes are evolving in a context of unprecedented cultural turmoil marked by a radical disjunction between an increasingly alienated and aggressive intellectual elite and large segments of the American public.

Given these complexities and the inevitable constraints of time, it is perhaps best to begin my remarks by noting certain exclusions. First, it will be necessary for me to make a number of rather sweeping assertions and evaluations without offering much in the way of supporting evidence. I believe all of these claims are well-grounded, and most of you should be able to find confirmation of them in your own experiences. But anyone who is skeptical or uncertain should not hesitate to ask for my proofs.

Second, we find ourselves today at the beginning of what may be an historic new era for the American media. Last night, after weeks of carefully orchestrated publicity, the title character in *Murphy Brown*—a television sitcom produced by an individual publicly associated with liberal Democratic causes—delivered a smug, pretentious, and grossly sophistic diatribe against the Republican vice presidential candidate. The calculated exploitation of entertainment programming for partisan political purposes during an election campaign marks a radical departure from the past, so radical that even *Time* magazine has questioned its propriety. Regardless, the fact of its occurrence implies that those who control the entertainment media have now decided that it is perfectly acceptable for them to use their access to the public to influence the course of the electoral process. This raises a number of fascinating issues concerning the activities of this segment of what John Corry has called the “dominant culture” of the artistic and intellectual elite. But there is no time to give these issues the consideration they deserve, and so my focus will be restricted to the news media.

The third and perhaps most difficult exclusion concerns the issue of liberal bias in the media. The difficulty with this issue is that it deflects attention from other problems of greater importance. I will therefore comment only briefly on bias and then move on to those other problems.

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There is no longer any real question about the existence of liberal bias in the press, at least as far the major national media are concerned. Most of them—and I would explicitly include CBS and NBC television news, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the Associated Press, *Time*, and *Newsweek*—have been clearly, even blatantly biased in their coverage of the 1992 campaign. This conclusion is confirmed by the findings of several systematic studies that have already appeared or are just now being released. Foremost among these are the results reported by the scrupulously nonpartisan Center for Media and Public Affairs, whose director, Dr. Robert Lichter, will be speaking from this podium next week. But anyone who watched the network television coverage of the two conventions must have been struck by the gross disparity in the way the two parties were treated.

Journalists, Not Candidates, Shape the Campaign. Beyond simply promoting Clinton and the Democrats, what is arguably more important in coverage of this election is the fairly open attempt by journalists to dictate the substance of the campaign by determining which issues will be discussed. It is clear that journalists see only one key issue, the economy, and only one realistic solution, which is to dramatically increase both government spending and taxes. Not surprisingly, the economy and the need for increased spending and taxes have dominated coverage. It just so happens, of course, that this pattern of emphasis coincides with the Democratic view.

In addition to their efforts to move the economy to the top of the campaign agenda, it is equally important to note the attempts of leading journalists to deny Republicans the opportunity of offering their own agenda. There have been two very clear instances of this in recent weeks.

The first instance centers on “family values.” Among journalists and other members of the artistic and intellectual elite, the initial response to this issue was ridicule. But the ridicule soon hardened into trenchant and often contemptuous opposition. Increasingly over the course of the summer, any appeal to traditional values was depicted by journalists as “divisive” and “intolerant.” The Republicans nevertheless persisted with the issue, and, in the week after Labor Day, the coverage turned ugly. Within the space of a few days, a spate of stories appeared in a variety of print and broadcast media which not only stressed the intolerance claim but also directly attacked what is now routinely called the “religious right.” The low point in this process occurred on September 11—the day that Bill Clinton addressed students at Notre Dame and George Bush addressed the Christian Coalition in Virginia Beach—when the CBS evening newscast aired a feature story entitled “Hard Right.” Shallow, vicious, and shrill, it depicted the religious right as, in essence, an evil horde of fundamentalist neo-fascists working to seize control of the Republican Party in order to impose their bizarre religious and moral beliefs on the rest of society.

“Hard Right” is part of a continuing assault on what elite journalists see as the driving force behind the family values debate. In the course of that assault, a remarkable inversion has emerged. It takes the form of a claim that religious beliefs should not be allowed to play any role in the determination of public policy on moral issues. By the way they structure their coverage, journalists indicate that it is perfectly acceptable for people who are bound together, say, by the practice of sodomy to organize and express their views on moral issues. That’s fine. But somehow people who are bound together by a set of religious beliefs are, specifically because of that, rendered unfit to comment on moral issues. In essence, journalists seem to be arguing that only secular beliefs may influence public morality. This is a very peculiar notion, especially in a country where more than 90 percent of the citizens profess a religious faith.

The second instance is the treatment of the draft issue. As many of you are aware, there have been a number of revelations in the last few weeks, some of them in major news media such as the *Los Angeles Times*, about Mr. Clinton’s efforts to avoid the draft. They indicate that not only

did he pull some strings to avoid military service, but also, on several occasions both in 1969 and undoubtedly today, that he lied to various people. Normally, of course, journalists delight in exposing the mendacity of politicians. But this time their response has been strangely subdued. The charges have received relatively little emphasis in the press, and there has been a marked effort, in particular by the *Washington Post*, to explain them away. Typically, this has taken the form of a bland acknowledgement that Clinton has not handled the issue very well, followed by the claim that it all happened twenty years ago and the suggestion that no intelligent person attaches much significance to it anyway.

But the Republicans have continued to stress the issue and so, last Sunday, journalists began another ugly counterattack. This time it surfaced in a massive front-page article in the *New York Times* entitled "The Favors Done For Quayle: A New Look At Guard Stint." Despite the suggestion of the title, the article contains absolutely no significant "new" information. Nor does it establish that any illicit favors were done. To the contrary, while it repeats all of the attacks on Quayle from 1988, it also includes enough information that a careful reader will be able to see that the attacks are completely unfounded. Why publish such a dated and pointless piece? Clearly, the *New York Times* is serving notice to the Republicans: "If you keep pushing the draft issue with Clinton, we are going to begin pushing the draft issue with Quayle." And if the lavish coverage in other news media over the past two days is any indication, the *Times* is not alone in its determination to neutralize this issue.

In short, there can be little doubt that many of the major news media are expressing clear biases in this campaign. But this fact should be interpreted with some care. In the first place, it must be recognized that the media have been aided by a Republican administration and a Republican campaign widely criticized as inept. Having spent the Reagan legacy, the Bush camp is now riven by internal conflicts. Journalists smell blood and they are attacking, as is their normal wont.

I also detect a certain note of desperation among television journalists. I think many from the three major networks sense that they are losing their grip on the public—certainly their ratings show that—and that this may very well be the last presidential election in which they can exert any significant influence. So they are going for it all on this one.

We have to recognize that their coverage could tip the scales in a close election. In fact, it may already have done so. But it is equally important to avoid any simple assumption that the liberal bias in coverage will lead necessarily to a particular electoral result. Large segments of the public are aware of that bias, and they are beginning to react very strongly against it.

The Press as Political Adversary. There is, for example, the current unprecedented situation where the Republican Party has openly declared its opposition to the press. This opposition is codified in the section of the Republican platform dealing with PBS, which includes the statement: "We deplore the blatant political bias of the government-sponsored radio and TV networks." Similar sentiments dominated the Republican convention, where hundreds of delegates sported anti-media buttons and crowds on the floor directed chants and jeers at the television journalists sitting in their booths above them.

It is no small matter when one of only two major parties in a democratic society sees the press as its political adversary. But the concern with media bias extends far beyond the ranks of conservative Republicans. For example, a poll released today by the Times Mirror Corporation provides clear evidence of a growing negative reaction among members of the general public. In that survey, 54 percent of those interviewed indicated agreement with the statement that "news organizations have too much influence on which candidate will become president." The poll did not ask directly about political bias, but two questions give a clear indication of how the public

feels. When respondents were asked who they think most newspaper reporters and television journalists favor in the election, 52 percent said they believe journalists favor Clinton, while only 17 percent said that journalists favor Bush. They were then asked: "How often do political preferences of journalists influence the way they report the news?" A full 49 percent of the public answered "often"; another 35 percent said "sometimes." Given these findings, it seems evident that the public is not just passively accepting the biased coverage. The public fully understands, and shows signs of rejecting, what journalists define as news.

In fact, the situation has deteriorated to such a point that serious discussions of media bias are now beginning to appear in some of the very media that are most often accused of bias. For example, in a major article that appeared several weeks ago in the *Washington Post*, Howard Kurtz treated conservative concerns about biased campaign coverage as a straight news story.

Bias Not Central Issue. All of this means that it is difficult to predict exactly what the impact of media bias might be in this election. Certainly it must be recognized that that hand can be overplayed, and thus its impact is not a foregone conclusion. But more important, I would argue that bias itself is not the central issue in trying to understand what is taking place in journalism today. To the contrary, I believe it is only a symptom of a much wider and deeper problem. That problem is the precipitous decline in quality of routine coverage, both political and nonpolitical. What we see now, especially on television, is reporting that is more and more frequently based on the "tabloid" model. The result is coverage that is routinely dominated by sex, violence, deviance, intense emotionality, and extravagant sensationalism. Worse, I would argue that if you look carefully at coverage of most major issues today, much of the supposedly factual information it provides is either false, seriously distorted, or, at best, highly controversial. In my opinion, this decline in news quality is a much more serious problem than media bias because it means that our entire discussion of public policy is being distorted by inaccurate and misleading information.

Even journalists are beginning to become concerned about this situation. In May of this year, the Times Mirror Corporation asked a sample of over 400 journalists and news executives in the print and broadcast media whether they agreed or disagreed that "there was a line between the tabloid press and the mainstream press that is now being eroded." A solid majority of 54 percent expressed agreement with the statement.

Given that even journalists believe the distinction between serious and tabloid journalism is breaking down, it is crucial to ask why this has occurred. I will argue that the problem has arisen because the press has discarded almost all of its traditional restraints. As a result, it has become a predominantly destructive force in American society. But to see exactly what is happening, what the problem is and what the solution might be, it is first necessary to look at how the press has gotten to this point. So, if you will allow me a few minutes, I would like to embark on a brief historical tour of American journalism to show how we got to here from where we were.

Journalism's Checkered Past. At the time the First Amendment was written, the press was a vastly different entity than it is today. In the first place, it consisted only of print media: books, pamphlets, and a relative handful of very small newspapers (35 in 1783, only one of those a daily). Primarily local in their orientation, these early newspapers were often somewhat amateurish productions assembled by a printer with the assistance of a few leading citizens or a handful of ardent supporters of some political party or faction. Unlike other powerful institutions in American society, the press was not constrained by a formal system of checks and balances. One obvious reason for this is that the press at that time was not an institution, but a collection of individuals. Further, because freedom of the press was seen as merely an extension of individual freedom of speech, there was no effort to place it under special constraints. Like speech, it was assumed that most inaccuracies in the press would be corrected through open debate in the free

marketplace of ideas. This assumption was reasonable because newspapers at that time were often overtly partisan. As a result, they not only propounded their own political point of view, but attacked their opponents, including their opponents' newspapers. It was this clash among partisan newspapers that provided the principal check on the power of the press.

The partisan model of the press only lasted about fifty years. It began to change in the 1830s with the emergence of the mass circulation "penny press." Instead of producing a product that was relatively expensive and appealed only to the elite few, the penny press was designed to provide an inexpensive newspaper that appealed to the urban masses. As a consequence, some profound changes were instituted in journalism.

First, the daily format and the need to attract a mass audience necessitated a constant flow of interesting news. This requirement called into existence a new group of professionals—journalists—to provide that need. Before this time, the role of journalist as we know it did not really exist. Second the commercial nature of the press encouraged a very significant change in coverage. Because newspapers were now commercial enterprises, profit was a central concern. Profit derived from advertising, and advertising was based on circulation; thus pressures existed to ensure that a newspaper would not alienate large numbers of its potential readers. Accordingly, newspapers became markedly less partisan and more populist in their reporting, and the new ideal of journalistic objectivity eventually emerged.

As a result of these changes, the press entered what might be called its "professional" stage of development. The transformation from the partisan to the professional model was essentially complete by the 1920s. By then, journalists were organized as a professional group governed by institutionalized norms such as the ideal of objectivity.

The emergence of the professional model led to fundamental changes in the way the press approached the political process. Instead of newspapers being *participants* in the debate, as they were in the original partisan model, they now sought only to *reproduce* the debate in their coverage. Political participation, at least in theory, was restricted to the editorial pages.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach. As long as journalists do a good job of providing accurate and complete accounts of the political debate, there is no necessary distortion of the political process. But notice how profoundly the press itself has changed, from a congeries of conflicting individuals to a powerful, unitary, and closed institution staffed by a self-selected and self-governing professional elite.

Ideal of Objective Coverage. The model of the press as a professionalized institution that exists solely to provide the public with objective accounts of the events of the day is still the "official" view of the journalism. But this view has long been attacked by elite journalists, beginning most notably with Walter Lippmann in the 1920s. Their critique is twofold. First, the ideal of objective coverage is impossible in principle because journalists, like all people, are prisoners of their own subjective views. Second, and more important, objective reporting is undesirable in practice because it tends to reinforce the status quo by focusing attention primarily on the views of established leaders, institutions, and groups.

A great deal of pressure developed among intellectuals during the 1930s and 1940s to reform a press routinely castigated as biased and conservative. This agitation bore fruit in 1947 when a group known as The Committee on Freedom of the Press, chaired by Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago, met and developed a new model of democratic journalism. Known as the "social responsibility" model, this view envisions the press as the Champion of the People and their interests. No longer merely a passive purveyor of information, the press is now assigned an essentially active role in society.

This role has two major components. The first, which might be called the "bird dog" function, requires journalists to continuously scrutinize all aspects of society to discover new problems and inequities which must be resolved. The second is the familiar "watchdog" function, in which the press provides an ongoing critique of the character and performance of established leaders and institutions.

The diffusion of this view among journalists can be seen quite clearly over the past thirty years. The first time the social responsibility model exerted a decisive influence on coverage was in support of the civil rights movement, where it was greatly aided by the powerful images of the new medium of television. It then gradually dominated reporting of the Vietnam War and reached its most dramatic victory in the Watergate scandal. Although seldom acknowledged as such, it is now established as the operative philosophy of the press.

In practice, this means that the press has adopted a predominantly critical posture. Journalists have positioned themselves as autonomous and neutral critics, not necessarily *of* society, but somehow *outside* and *above* it. From this vantage, they conduct a relentless critique of all policies, leaders, and institutions.

Adoption of this critical posture has several profound implications for the larger society. First, it encourages journalists to think of themselves as the only true representatives of the people in what is presumed to be their continuing conflict with a corrupt, ineffective, and unresponsive government. This is a rather curious notion in a representative democracy, but the attitude now permeates journalistic rhetoric. Second, the idea that journalists should continuously review the operations of society in an endless search for new problems and inequities transforms the press into an essentially political institution actively committed to a program of progressive reform. That program assumes that if an imperfection exists it can and should be addressed. This carries with it a powerful implied obligation for all citizens. No longer may we simply move along our separate paths, enjoying life as we can. Instead, we are all lifelong conscripts in an ongoing struggle for perfection. In most instances, of course, the only institution capable of addressing these imperfections is the federal government, and all citizens are expected to support its expansion. Thus the critical posture of the press also entails an inherently statist (and ultimately totalitarian) bias.

Journalists as Power Elite. If these were the only implications of the new model, it might be considered tolerable. But more careful examination reveals that the whole notion of a social responsibility view of the press, the whole concept of journalists as autonomous and neutral critics, is grossly and intrinsically flawed. Consider first the fact that it concentrates great power in the hands of journalists, a tiny, unelected and unrepresentative elite. It is not generally recognized how small a group this is. A 1981 study estimated that there are only about 112,000 full-time journalists in the United States. By way of comparison, there are about three and one-half million teachers, over 600,000 professors, and 135,000 architects. The press is also strongly hierarchical in the sense that it is dominated by a handful of elite media and the few thousand journalists who staff them. In large measure, it is these few individuals who determine the tone and content of national and international news in the thousands of smaller regional and local media. Finally, journalists, especially in the elite media, tend to be quite homogeneous in their views and backgrounds. As a group, they can be characterized as overwhelmingly liberal, cosmopolitan, and secular in outlook. None of these traits is characteristic of the population as a whole.

Journalists have always enjoyed considerable power in American society. In recent years, several factors have combined to greatly increase that power. These include court decisions which make it essentially impossible for a public figure to sue successfully for libel and state "shield" laws which protect journalists from having to reveal the sources of their information.

But above all, journalists have discovered the power inherent in their almost complete control of access to the media and, therefore, to the American public. In fact, the only people in the country who have unlimited access to the public are journalists. Everyone else, even the President of the United States, may address the public only with the permission of the media, and then what they say is often edited by journalists. In short, by controlling who may speak in the conflict of ideas, journalists have found that they can strongly influence what is said.

This situation should be deeply disturbing to all those who care about American democracy: Journalists have emerged as exactly the kind of active and powerful elite that the Constitution sought to preclude. And unlike other elites and institutions, this one is no longer constrained by any effective system of checks and balances. When journalists became professionals, they adopted a "gentleman's agreement" to the effect that no journalist should publicly criticize the work of his professional colleagues. Thus public criticism and debate, the one check on journalism presupposed by the original partisan model of the press, has been eliminated. It has been replaced only by a purely internal, and notoriously ineffective, system of ethical and professional standards.

The mere existence of such an elite—small, unrepresentative, active, powerful, and unchecked—creates an enormous potential for abuse. And some would argue that that potential has been fully realized in recent years. But even in the absence of political abuse, the inherent flaws of the social responsibility model ensure that it will produce systematically defective coverage.

Accentuate the Negative. If journalists are primarily concerned with discovering problems, inequities, and abuses, their coverage will necessarily be dominated by negative information. And, in fact, one of the most common findings of scientific studies of media content is a pronounced negative bias in routine reporting. This bias is produced by the more or less systematic exclusion or minimization of positive information, a process indistinguishable from censorship. Whatever theoretical justification might be offered for this practice, its effect is to seriously weaken the democratic process. In the final analysis, a democracy depends for its survival on the quality of the political judgments of its citizens. Citizens are likely to judge wisely only if they are presented with the full range of relevant information, both positive and negative; they must know what works as well as what doesn't, what succeeds, not only what fails. By systematically suppressing positive information, the critical posture of the press fundamentally distorts political debate and undermines democratic decision-making.

Other difficulties derive from the circumstance that it is journalists who are acting as the critics. Now criticism is a very easy thing to do. My cat manages it quite nicely each time I offer her a can of food. But while criticism is easy, thoughtful criticism is a supremely difficult endeavor. At a minimum, thoughtful criticism requires four qualities: intellect, special expertise, reflection and an attitude of judiciousness. It is therefore instructive to ask how often journalists are likely to possess these qualities.

We may grant that most journalists are relatively intelligent and well-educated. On the other hand, some are not, and journalism does not have a reputation for attracting the most brilliant minds in our society. One reason for this may be that the one skill required of every journalist is an ability to write or speak interestingly for a mass audience, that is, at about the sixth-grade level. This is not the kind of requirement that would be likely to induce the best minds to enter the field.

The second requirement is expertise. We live in a society where the explosion of knowledge has led to extreme intellectual specialization, yet journalists are still educated as generalists. As a result, it is very common to find journalists either offering or orchestrating criticism in fields where they lack the qualifications to obtain even entry-level employment.

It is assumed that intelligence and expertise, given reflection, can produce insight. Unfortunately, reflection requires time, and we know that, for a journalist working on deadline, time is a rare and precious commodity. Indeed, journalists routinely work under time restrictions that any scholar would consider absurd.

The last requirement of thoughtful criticism is judiciousness, which consists of carefully balancing the pros and cons of a matter to arrive at a reasoned and nuanced judgment of worth. But all of the pressures in journalism—the demands for drama, simplicity, immediacy, and impact—militate against such judgments.

The sad truth is that journalists are almost uniquely unfitted, in terms of abilities, temperament and circumstances, to perform as thoughtful critics. And I believe their deficiencies are evident in the appallingly poor quality of much routine news coverage, especially on television. Perhaps the most disturbing feature of this situation is the pathetic ease with which “critical” journalists are manipulated by public policy advocates armed with the ubiquitous “studies” that so often dominate the news. With very few exceptions, these studies are grossly flawed and tendentious. But because journalists lack the training to adequately assess their worth, and because the studies frequently offer dramatic “evidence” of supposed problems and inequities, they are disseminated to the public as accurate and true. As a result, discussions in virtually every major policy area, from the environment to the economy, are polluted with false and tendentious information.

Observer or Critic? A final set of problems derives from a fundamental contradiction in the current practices of the press: Having embraced the essentially critical posture dictated by the social responsibility model, journalists still claim that their reporting is governed by an ideal of objectivity. The difficulty, of course, is that you cannot be simultaneously critical and objective. To be objective means that you favor no position over any other; to be critical means that you have adopted an order of value that ranks positions along a dimension of better and worse. In practice, journalists have sought to resolve this contradiction in two ways, both disastrous in their implications for public discourse and the formulation of public policy.

The first practice applies when journalists are operating in their “bird dog” mode. Whenever a new problem or inequity is discovered, it is typically portrayed as a gross and blatant departure from completely consensual social values. Thus there can be no doubt about the need to deal with the issue, and anyone who opposes reform is depicted, quite simply, as evil. Given this Manichean analysis, questions of objectivity do not even arise. For example, in the quest for homosexual rights, the value invoked is tolerance, which is treated as absolute and universal. Anyone who opposes homosexual rights is therefore portrayed as a malevolent bigot. Or again, on environmental issues, the need to protect our fragile and beautiful planet is assumed as a fundamental and unquestionable truth. Thus anyone who opposes an environmental initiative can expect to be depicted as a selfish and greedy despoiler, an advocate of pollution bent on raping Mother Nature.

In short, anyone who dares to oppose the journalistic agenda can expect to be treated quite negatively by the press. Not surprisingly, many people, especially politicians, have decided that opposition isn't worth the cost. The result is that a great many issues—important issues, with far-reaching implications—are now being decided with little or no meaningful debate. Two recent and dramatic examples are the trillion-dollar Americans with Disabilities Act and the new Clean Air Act. Both impose draconian regulations covering vast areas of American life, both will be enormously, perhaps even ruinously, expensive, and both were passed with almost no public discussion of their likely effects.

The second practice applies more generally to those situations where journalists are evaluating the performance of policies, leaders, and institutions. Here the inherent contradiction between objectivity and criticism becomes acute: How is it possible to offer a neutral evaluation? It appears that journalists have sought to resolve this dilemma by adopting universal perfection as their standard of judgment. This produces what I call omni-principled criticism, a kind of destructive dialectic in which a given action or commitment is criticized from all possible perspectives. This is the source of the strangely schizoid nature of much media commentary, where journalists will first attack from one side of an issue and then change sides and attack from the other.

A good recent example of this practice involves the aid for victims of Hurricane Andrew. For several days after the storm, media coverage was dominated by complaints from the victims in Florida that the federal government was not moving quickly and forcefully enough to meet their needs. President Bush responded by proposing a \$7.5 billion aid program. But still the coverage was overwhelmingly negative, as Governor Chiles (and some congressional Democrats) attacked the proposal as insufficient. Bowing to the pressure, Congress added a few billion to the appropriation and the President signed it into law. At this point, ABC, which had given massive coverage to the complaints of the governor and his constituents, abruptly changed position and began criticizing both Congress and the President for heedlessly spending so much money at a time when the federal deficit is approaching \$300 billion.

Great Luxury of Irresponsibility. The problem is that omni-principled criticism is unanswerable. Once a political figure takes a public position on an issue, often in response to demands for action by the press, he cannot switch sides without being condemned as inconsistent. This makes it very difficult for him to defend his position when journalists change to the other side to attack. Journalists, of course, are free of any such constraints. They can be as inconsistent as they please because no one has the power to call them to account. Journalists also enjoy the great luxury of irresponsibility. Their task is simply to search out problems and demand that they be solved. They do not have to show what the solutions might be, nor even that it is possible to solve all of the problems they identify simultaneously. Perfection is their sole concern; someone else must discover how it can be achieved.

The result is an approach to public policy that can only be described as wildly unrealistic. On one hand, the criterion of perfection leads to unlimited expectations about what can and should be done to improve society. In the coverage of the 1992 campaign, for example, note all of the improvements that journalists have demanded: national health care, more stringent environmental regulations, expanded social benefits, a solution to the problems of welfare, plus, at the same time, moderate taxes, more jobs, economic growth, low inflation and a balanced budget. Unfortunately, no one has ever proposed a clearly workable way of achieving all of these things simultaneously. The best that can be hoped for is some compromise that balances desires with realities. But however much is accomplished, it will certainly fall short of perfection, and so will be judged a failure by the press.

Endless Litany of Defeat. This is far from a trivial matter. In their efforts to resolve the contradictions inherent in the new social responsibility model of the press, journalists have adopted unreasonable standards for evaluating American policies, leaders, and institutions. By these standards, whatever we do or attempt is doomed to failure, and coverage of our society has acquired the character of an endless litany of defeat. The result is a growing disillusionment with our political system among the general public that threatens to fatally weaken the foundations of American democracy. Of course, while the public is increasingly disenchanted with government, it is also very critical of journalists, who now receive about the same confidence ratings in the polls as politicians and used car salesmen. So this new model of the press has not been without

its price for journalists, and it is an open question whether they will end by destroying society, the press, or both.

If our society is to survive and prosper, I believe there must be a dramatic change in the way the press approaches its responsibilities. Fortunately, a simple and effective solution is available. The core problem of contemporary journalism is a lack of meaningful accountability. This suggests that all that may be needed is a return to the original partisan model of the press. That model assumed that debate within the press—including criticism of other journalists—would correct most inadequacies of coverage.

I believe this is still a workable approach. If journalists would simply expand their critical focus to include the media, we might very well see a dramatic improvement in the quality of public discourse. For example, if the producers of *60 Minutes* knew that their biased and inaccurate stories would be publicly criticized by *20/20*, we might get better stories. Or again, if an advocacy group released a flawed and tendentious study, and got savaged for its efforts by the press, we might get better studies. And if some journalists were willing to point out the smug inconsistencies of their colleagues, we might get more responsible criticism. The notion is very simple: All that is needed is to extend the conflict of ideas to include the press.

The “Gentleman’s Agreement.” But would the press be willing to institute such a change? While there are certainly no assurances, several factors suggest that reform is at least possible. All of the relevant surveys show that many journalists are deeply concerned about the declining quality of coverage and the corresponding loss of public confidence in the press. There is also cause for optimism in the fact that many print journalists, appalled by what they see in the broadcast media, are very close to abrogating the “gentleman’s agreement,” at least as applied to television. As a further incentive, sustained and careful scrutiny of the press would be likely to produce many fascinating—and highly newsworthy—stories of hypocrisy, venality and fraud. Finally, and perhaps most important, it must be recognized that many journalists are truly idealistic in the sense that they believe their calling is to serve the public interest. For these individuals, it will be increasingly difficult to ignore the growing public outrage directed at the press.

It is not at all clear that the press will institute these reforms. But certainly it is our responsibility to insist to journalists that they provide us with the kind of critical coverage—including criticism of their own work—that we have a right to demand. In the long run, our best hope is that journalists can be led to rediscover their own traditional method of separating truth from error.

