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Insult vs. Information in Today's News Media

Cover Page Footnote

Arthur E. Rowse, a veteran newsman and media critic, retired from U.S. News & World Report after serving on the city desks of the Boston Globe, Boston Herald/Traveler, and Washington Post. He is the author of *Drive-By Journalism: The Assault on Your Need to Know* (Common Courage Press, 2000). This talk was delivered at the Seventh Annual Media Studies Symposium at Sacred Heart University on March 25, 2001.

ARTHUR E. ROWSE

Insult vs. Information in Today's News Media

Before getting into the topic that we have here today, I'd like to say a few uncritical words about the news media. I don't want to be completely negative, because I think that we in this country are very fortunate to have a very broad and diversified news scene. You don't find anywhere in the world the breadth and diversity of sources in this country, particularly with the development of the Internet. However, there are limits, and I think most of you are aware of them. One of the problems in this country is the growing number of people who don't really care. If you asked the general population to define the difference between ignorance and apathy, the answer would come back loud and clear: ``We don't know and we don't care."

It's terrible to see this kind of development, because we need to have an informed electorate if we want to keep our free society vibrant. I don't want to insult you by appearing to tell you things that you already know. Every time I go out beyond the Washington Beltway, which is the dividing line for the *Wall Street Journal* between what it likes and doesn't like, I am reminded of a certain fourth-grade assignment. The teacher asked the students to write an essay about Socrates, and one little boy was quite brief. He said, ``Socrates was a wise old man. He went around the country telling people what to think. He was poisoned." I think there are quite a few media executives who would like to poison me for what I've said in my book, *Drive-By Journalism*, and it's probably one reason why this kind of a book doesn't get reviewed in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*.

Arthur E. Rowse, a veteran newsman and media critic, retired from U.S. News & World Report after serving on the city desks of the Boston Globe, Boston Herald/Traveler, and Washington Post. He is the author of Drive-By Journalism: The Assault on Your Need to Know (Common Courage Press, 2000). This talk was delivered at the Seventh Annual Media Studies Symposium at Sacred Heart University on March 25, 2001.

The news business is about the most sensitive business there is. It just doesn't want to have any outside probing of what it's doing, and yet

it makes a business of probing everybody else. This has caused a lot of the problems that we've had in this country, some of which are not entirely new. About half a century ago, the head of *Time* magazine became worried and set up a big commission to study the role of the media, and put it in the charge of Robert Maynard Hutchins, who at the time was the chancellor of the University of Chicago, so they called it the Hutchins Commission. But without any representatives of the media on the commission, their report got really slam-banged by the publishers, who were the biggest powers of the time. Arrogance seems to be a requirement for becoming a journalist. I guess it's because you feel more important when you write things that somebody's going to buy.

Perhaps the biggest public insult — referring to the title here, “Insult vs. Information” — was the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the ultimate in what some call “gotcha journalism.” The press thought this was manna from heaven. The very best and brightest really took off on this subject, digging for every morsel they could find, whether true or not. But a funny thing happened along the way: the American people seemed to rebel against this type of journalism. Bill Clinton's popularity rating went up to the highest point ever, while the rating of the news business went down to a new low. To this day the media haven't gotten the point; they continue to treat all Americans like dummies. I have to admit that there's a pretty good dummy quotient out there: from the surveys I've seen, approximately half the people in this country don't really follow the news seriously. They don't read a daily newspaper or follow the television evening news. For many people, Jay Leno is their news anchor.

So if democracy is fading, the general public can't be let off the hook. But news media certainly can't be either. For they control the nation's communication, the lifeblood of our democratic system. But didn't the Founding Fathers know what they were doing? Well, I'm not sure they did in this case. They certainly were right in deciding that we needed a privately-owned press. They were right to design the First Amendment to immunize that press from government interference. But they left out something all of us here must have learned when we were in the first grade: the fact that you must use freedom responsibly in order to retain it. This is something that's very hard for today's press to figure out. Press freedom is being used today primarily to make

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money, not to serve the general public. This business has a unique responsibility: to maintain and nourish democracy. Freedom of the press itself will be lost if other freedoms go down the drain. But with the economic pressures now on the press, it's very difficult for members of the press to say, ``We're not being responsible enough here." They continue to behave as if their responsibility doesn't go beyond pleasing their stockholders.

When it comes to insult vs. information, it's important to specify the kinds of insults we are talking about. One is the concentration of ownership. In 1983, Ben Bagdikian, a well-known journalist and critic of the press, became alarmed when he found that there were only fifty companies controlling all the news and entertainment in this country: magazines, movies, music, you name it. So he wrote a book called *The Media Monopoly*. Then the number dropped, and he wrote another edition. Five years ago he looked at it again and the number had dropped to only ten, so another edition came out. When I was doing research for *Drive-By Journalism*, it looked like the number had dropped to five: General Electric, which owns NBC and all the cable spinoffs of NBC; Viacom, the big entertainment company that now owns CBS; AOL-Time Warner, which now owns CNN and is the marriage of the biggest Internet service provider with the largest publishing company in the country; Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which owns Fox News; and the Walt Disney Company, which owns ABC. There are another ten companies, little things like AT&T and Microsoft, that extend that control to nearly all newspapers, magazines, books, music, movies, TV, and cable and satellite systems in the nation.

But even that's not enough control: these companies are now working to form one big monopoly by combining forces. They are trading journalists, and have joint ownership of cable programs, cable companies, and other organizations, including the monopoly called the Voter News Service.

You may recall the recent congressional hearing on the Voter News Service, a subject that was a little touchy for the news business, which wondered if it was surrendering some of its freedom by agreeing to testify before Congress. I thought that the question that should have been asked to these people was, Isn't this a monopoly? Instead, the questions intruded into the journalism process. You had members of

Congress swinging their power around and saying, ``Well, who said this to you? How did you do this? Who was reporting to whom on this? When was it that you think you made the error here?" Such questions, I think, get into a violation of the First Amendment. The head of the Associated Press was the only one who really objected in the hearing, but he went along and swore to tell the truth with everybody else there.

Media power is becoming more and more of a problem. For example, according to Media Metrix, AOL-Time Warner now has a 72 percent at-home penetration. Such power adds a certain arrogance to the top of these mega-media conglomerates that is something to see. I want to quote what Gerald Levin said over a year ago, just eight days before the announcement of the AOL-Time Warner merger. He was appearing on a CNN panel with the editor of *Time* magazine, some journalists from CNN, and an author of a book on journalism. He said: ``The global media is fast becoming the predominant business of the twenty-first century and we are in a new economic age, and what may happen, assuming that's true, is it's more important than government." Can you believe this? ``It's more important than educational institutions and nonprofits." And then he added: ``We're going to need to have these corporations redefined as instruments of public service because they have the resources, they have the reach, they have the skill base, and . . . that may be a more efficient way to deal with society's problems than bureaucratic governments." I thought that was astounding. Why didn't such a statement become news? There were journalists on the panel. It got out to only a few people.

When it comes to deciding what news is, there is a very select group. It's pretty much dominated by the *New York Times*, which is really the Bible for the rest of the news industry, particularly the networks. If you read the *Times* in the morning and turn on the network evening programs, you'll recognize some of the stories there. *The Times* also has over 600 subscribers to its news service, and each one of those news organizations gets a copy of the front page of the next day's *Times* the night before. The *Washington Post*, number two on this list, also has more than 600 clients. So these two papers really set the pace. The *Wall Street Journal* is, I would say, number three in this ranking, and then you have the Associated Press, which used to have real competition from the United Press and then the United

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Press International. Now its only competitors are foreign-owned news services.

The Washington correspondent of the *Palm Beach Post* told me that he could write scoop after scoop, but it has to be in the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* to become nationally known. During the campaign last year, Fox News found out that one of the Republican ads aimed at the Democrats had a subliminal message in some of the panels on the TV screen. The big word "RATS" went right across the screen if you played it back slowly. Fox News reported this, but it didn't become national news until the *New York Times* two weeks later put it on the front page.

The second type of media insult to the general population is the priority of profit that now rules the news industry. In order to understand why the news industry is so determined to downgrade the news, sensationalize the news, trivialize the news, dumb down the news, you have to understand the economics of what's happened. In the final analysis, it's not Rupert Murdoch or Gerald Eisner who really runs the news business, it's Wall Street, through economic pressure. The pressure comes from the fact that so many news organizations are publicly owned. Only a few large chains are not publicly owned. Hearst and Newhouse are two examples. It isn't that journalists are not interested in doing a better job. They are forced by this economic pressure to downsize the news and sensationalize it to get higher ratings, do the quick story that will generate a lot of money for the company, so it can report higher earnings every three months.

You probably saw the news recently about the publisher of the *San Jose Mercury News* quitting. This may be the first time a leading publisher has ever quit on principle: he said he would not be able to cut the news staff any more without destroying the integrity of the paper. A lot of good editors have left for the same reason, including Gene Roberts, who quit the Philadelphia Inquirer, another Knight Ridder paper, like the Mercury News, which lost its publisher. Yet just a month before the publisher resigned, Knight Ridder had announced record earnings. Even record profits are not enough.

Economic pressure on the news began to hurt about twenty or thirty years ago when some leading newspapers owned by families in Louisville, Minneapolis, St. Louis, and other places, became so rich that they couldn't pass on these properties to their heirs without selling

in order to pay estate taxes. Bringing Wall Street into the picture helps: family members on the boards of these companies cash out their stakes. But it puts financiers and accountants in charge of the news business.

The next major insult is the reduced coverage of the nation and the world. Relentless corporate pressure has deeply cut into the amount of news about what's going on in Washington and around the world. Only ten years ago, each of the networks had twelve correspondents to cover Washington. Now it's down to four: Congress, White House, State Department, and Defense Department. This leaves out the biggest part of government, the other departments and all the regulatory agencies, which are important in determining our health and safety. To help determine the damage, I asked nearly 100 reporters on Capitol Hill if they knew of major stories that were not being covered because of cuts in news staffs. Ninety-one percent said yes.

There has been a major increase in regional reporting: reporting that's done, say, by the *New Haven Register's* person in Washington on government contracts that affect the New Haven area. But this really is no substitute for covering the world or the nation. In just ten years, the amount of international news on the main networks has dropped in half. The emphasis has also turned toward incidental things, like volcanic eruptions, floods, forest fires, and all sorts of accidents and tragedies. Editorial attention has turned away from stories about more relevant issues such as environmental changes and social disruptions. In addition, of course, newspapers have been cutting the size of their pages. They say they are not cutting the news because their page margins are narrower, but if you add it up, the amount of news per square inch of newspapers has dropped substantially over the years.

The fourth item of public insult is the increased tabloidization. You know the names: O.J., Monica, Paula, Elian. Who's next? Even the most prestigious news organizations are doing more tabloid-type news. Sometimes they do it in a cute, indirect way. For instance, when Frank Gifford got entrapped by a prostitute who had been paid by a supermarket tabloid, the *Washington Post* wouldn't run a headline saying, ``Gifford Trapped in a Love Nest." The *Post* gave it to its media writer, Howard Kurtz, who took the attitude, ``Look at what

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these other papers are doing: they are reporting that Frank Gifford got caught in a trap. How awful!" Thus, it helped spread the story too. The *New York Times* also is not innocent of setting itself on a pedestal in order to handle such news. You might remember that the *Times* didn't have a very good record on the Wen Ho Lee case. Its editors even felt that they should apologize for making such a big story out of it when the facts did not warrant it, at least as far as we know to this point. But it was a half-baked apology. What about the rest of the news organizations that did the same thing?

It comes down to the point now where supermarket tabloids sometimes act more responsibly than their mainstream cousins. You might recall a rumor that Bill Clinton had fathered a black child in Arkansas. The *National Enquirer* heard about this and decided to conduct DNA tests. While it waited for the results, some parts of the mainstream press printed the rumors. The *National Enquirer* wound up with no story, because it was being more responsible than the rest of the press.

I think the lowest point came during the Elian Gonzalez case, when Diane Sawyer decided to roll around on the floor with this six-year-old boy to entice him into making some political statements about whether he wanted to go back to Cuba. Whitewater was another botched story. The *Times* started it in the 1992 campaign, and this led to three separate investigations, costing about \$60 million. The targets of course were Bill and Hillary Clinton, and the end result was no action against them. Yet this was the subject of huge headlines all along the way, despite the fact that some people in the press were saying it wasn't much of a story. Critics inside the media even tried to get an open discussion at the National Press Club with representatives of the *Post* and *Times*. But they didn't want to talk about it, and they've never apologized.

Another example occurred last May, when the Senate Aging Committee held two days of hearings about abuses in the funeral and burial industry. Among the witnesses was an eighty-one-year-old woman who had already spent \$132,000 on a pre-need plan for her funeral. There was another story about a sealed copper casket that was leaking brown liquid from a mausoleum into a nearby garden. Another was videotaped testimony from an inmate of a federal prison in California, who explained how he had bilked people by selling

pre-need policies. And another witness was Rev. Henry Wasielewski, a Catholic priest to the poor in the Phoenix area, who described what he called nationwide ripoffs. Despite these unusual stories, only two newspapers in the country ran a full account. Yet practically all news organizations in this country received reports on each day's hearing via the Associated Press. The lack of media interest also affects the legislative process. There were nineteen senators on this committee, but only three showed up, because they knew there would be little coverage. When a legislative committee wants to hold a hearing, the first thing it does is call up the reporters that cover that committee, and ask, "If we hold this hearing, will you come?" If the reporters say, "I don't think so, I've got other things to do," there may be no hearing.

During this period, the Eliañ story was in full flower. Every network ran three to six minutes a day about it even though it was not very relevant to our daily lives, our duties as citizens, or our knowledge of public affairs. There was also plenty of room on the network news programs to tell about a Cincinnati Reds home run hitter, some pandas at the D.C. zoo, and some killer bees.

The fifth insult to the public is the exploitation of the First Amendment for profit. This is your friendly media lobby at work in Washington. They are not lobbying for your benefit, they're lobbying for their shareholders. Over the years, they have obtained special preferential rates for postage, exemptions from child labor laws for delivery boys, and exemptions from antitrust laws for papers that compete with each other. The most egregious exercise of media power in Washington involved \$70 billion of your money and mine that broadcasters stole in the form of digital television licenses. Five years ago, this was debated in Congress for fourteen months. The issue was whether the broadcasters should get these new digital licenses for nothing or if they should be auctioned. The Federal Communications Commission estimated that these licenses, if auctioned, would bring in \$70 billion to the U.S. Treasury. Bob Dole said he thought they ought to be auctioned, and John McCain agreed. But the power of the broadcasters was too strong. Not many people want to fight them. During the congressional debate, there were no stories about it on television, except for CNN. And even on television stations owned by newspapers and radio stations, it depended on whether that particular news organizations had television property as to whether they covered

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it or not.

Number six on my list of public insults is the way that news organizations trade their own reportorial negligence for political ads that add to their revenue. The growing gap in the coverage of political campaigns and political events in Washington puts pressure on candidates to pay money to get necessary exposure: the less news coverage there is, the more pressure there is to take out advertising in order to survive in this electoral milieu. In the last California gubernatorial election, surveys showed that news about it on the evening television programs amounted to only one-half of one percent of the total time. Political news is dying at the same time that political advertising is growing.

The number seven insult is trashing Washington for media purposes. The common theme now among TV producers, for instance, is ``Why cover Washington at all? Nobody's interested in what's going on in government, nobody's interested in knowing what their representatives are doing, because in the first place they wouldn't understand anyway. So why should we cover them?" A lot of the print reporters have the same attitude. The most venomous trashing of Washington is on radio talk shows. The net effect is to weaken public trust in government, the foundation of democracy, by encouraging people not to give a damn or bother to vote.

There's one fellow out there who's really pretty kooky, a man named Chuck Baker. At one point, he said, ``If you don't like what they're doing down there, you ought to go out and shoot the SOBs." Well, that's just what one of his listeners did. Francisco Duran decided to take him literally. He got in his car, went to Washington, got his gun out, went over to the White House, and started shooting. A few passers-by were finally able to subdue him.

There was another interesting incident involving Rush Limbaugh. About two months before Timothy McVeigh bombed the Federal Building in Oklahoma City and killed over 160 people, Limbaugh started talking about a ``new revolution." Here's what he said: ``The second American Revolution is just about — I've got my fingers about a quarter of an inch apart — is just about that far away, because these people are sick and tired of a bunch of bureaucrats in Washington driving into town and telling them what they can and can't do with their land." After the bomb went off, one of Rush's listeners called and said,

“Didn't you have something to do with that, Rush?” And he said, “Absolutely not. Not me. You're looking at the wrong person. I don't encourage this.”

Another major insult is the way that political dialogue in this country is being narrowed. What's happened is that the liberal media — if there ever was a liberal media, at least from the point of view of commentary — has turned conservative. You can look at any part of the media and just count it up. Take talk radio. I counted the top fifteen commentators, starting with Paul Harvey and Rush Limbaugh, down the line, and they had a total of ninety-one million in their audience. Only ten of those millions could be called moderate or non-conservative. Take newspaper editorial pages. One way to look at them is to determine who they endorse for president down the road. Since 1940 there have been seventeen presidential elections. In only two of those did the majority of the papers that endorsed a candidate endorse the Democratic candidate: they were Lyndon Johnson and Clinton in his second term. Look at the Op-Ed page. Out of nineteen columnists with the most clients, only three could be called liberals. The most widely circulated ones, such as Cal Thomas and George Will, are very strongly conservative. Television talk shows try to bring in people from both sides on most issues, but what they are doing often is balancing a conservative on one side and a moderate on the other. You don't find many people who are actually from the left, like a Noam Chomsky or a Norman Solomon.

The next insult to the general public is the way the news is censored in order to protect business. This is a big secret in the news media. They are too embarrassed to talk about the pressures, but they are very strong. In fact, when *Editor & Publisher* made a survey just last year, three-fourths of the newspaper editors admitted that there was no longer a real wall between the news editorial department and the business department: this wall was either sometimes or often broken.

There was an interesting case in Tampa, Florida, where a husband and wife TV producing team, Jane Akre and Steve Wilson, thought they had a pretty hot story about a growth hormone in milk being sold in the Tampa area without any labels disclosing it. Then a letter came from the maker of that hormone, Monsanto, to the head of the Fox News Corporation in New York, Roger Ailes, and the roof fell in on

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Akre and Wilson. At first they were asked if they would revise the film a little bit, and they said, ``Okay, we can do that." But the demands kept coming, and they finally balked. The next they knew, they didn't have a job anymore. So they sued the station. After two years, Jane Akre won, but Fox is now appealing and will probably win on First Amendment grounds.

Another problem is the influence of public relations on the news. PR is a huge business that's grown up from practically nothing about seventy years ago. One example of its power came when Hill and Knowlton helped to get us into the Gulf War. You might call it the Hill and Knowlton War. Reporters knew what was going on. They could see the fingerprints of this public relations organization everywhere, but they didn't report it that way. They reported it straight. To win public support for war, Hill and Knowlton decided to set up some hearings in Congress. You and I couldn't do that. They had the connections right up to the White House. A key story in the hearings was told by a fifteen-year-old Kuwaiti girl called Nayirah. She said that Iraqi troops had come into hospitals and dumped babies out of incubators by the dozens, and this showed what animals the Iraqis were. If it was true, it was a terrible story. Hill and Knowlton also got the U.N. Security Council to have a meeting so that the propagandists could tell the same story there. Who was Nayirah? Nobody in the press bothered to try to find out. And of course nobody could go over to Kuwait at the time. This was before the war broke out, when only American troops were allowed there. But about three months after the war, John Martin of ABC News went there and got into the hospitals to check it out. He found it was not true. There might have been one case of an accidental dropping that Nayirah actually saw. A year later, the Kuwaiti government, the royal family, hired a New York investigative company to determine what really happened. It found nothing to the story. But it was too late to affect the decision to go to war.

One of the ways Hill and Knowlton won this battle was by developing VNRs, video news releases. In this business, corporations get TV tapes made and then they hire a distribution company to place them in news programs. *NBC Nightly News*, for example, used part of the Nayirah VNR. There is a listing every year of the top VNRs and their audiences. Nayirah was the fourth-rated one that year. It shows

how powerful paid publicists are in the news business.

There was a more recent case where the government was paying the networks and other news organizations \$1 billion to get the government anti-drug story out. This profitable arrangement was kept secret by the news organizations until *Salon* magazine broke it. That gives you a clue as to where you might find some offbeat stories once in a while: on the Internet.

The final insult is tilting the news towards the privileged few. The average journalist working in New York and in Washington is no longer a person like you and me: people like Diane Sawyer and the other network stars live in another world. It's a world of stock options and parties with big shot politicians, presidents, CEOs. Take AOL's chief executive officer, Steve Case. For the last four years, his salary has averaged more than \$100 million, plus \$1 billion in stock options. It's hard for people like that to equate with the rest of America.

A good example of the disconnect happened a year ago December. There was a month-long trial, involving seventy witnesses, and the issue was whether there was an alleged conspiracy between a businessman and the government in the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. You would think that this would be a pretty big story, even though it didn't involve criminal charges. Like a few other assassinations in the past, this case was complicated. Yet the mainstream press treated it as a nothing story. A reporter for the *Washington Post* said later that most people wouldn't even have known that the trial existed. The *New York Times* ran only three stories about it.

It seems to me that the American people are beginning to react against all this. In the last ten years the total audience for serious news coverage on the national networks, the evening news, has dropped from forty million to twenty million. Newspaper circulation has also tumbled, particularly if you compare it per household. Fewer than half the people read a newspaper daily. The disconnect is getting bigger each day. It's really something to worry about, because a free society can have little future with most people not knowing enough to care, and most of the others not caring enough to know what's really going on.

The House of Representatives doesn't represent many people outside the Washington Beltway. Polls show that people want

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campaign financing reform, they want some sort of gun control, they want better health care: there are forty-five million people now without health coverage. And they want better environmental protection. Yet Congress, no matter which party is in charge, can't deliver. Why? Largely because the media are not doing their job. The media are not telling the full story about what's going on in Washington and the world. We certainly hear about the big money and special interests, but we don't hear about the biggest special interest of all, the most powerful lobby of all: the news media.

The final question comes down to what can we do about this? What can the media do about it? I have two suggestions for the media. One is to set up another commission just as I described earlier, only this time making about half the members from the media and half distinguished citizens from the general public. Then have them investigate the role of the media in all this, and make a report to the American people. There are plenty of topics, as I mentioned before, that deserve investigation. The other suggestion for the media — and I hope this isn't just pie in the sky — is to get people like Rupert Murdoch and Gerald Eisner to meet with the top people in Wall Street and say, Listen, you are destroying the news media. You're destroying our country. You're destroying democracy if you keep pressing us this hard to maximize profits. Is there some way we can wall off the news operations from the rest of the network? Can we wall off NBC news operations from, say, General Electric? And ABC from Walt Disney's entertainment enterprise? Because in the final analysis, the news business is going to go down the drain — along with society itself — if present trends continue. They're losing their audience. They're not going to be worth anything to any investor.

As far as what you and I can do, I think that we have to be more skeptical and we have to look at the possible conflicts behind what news organizations are doing. Why aren't they covering this story? Why are they covering this other story instead? There are a lot of questions you could ask, and I think that this kind of a symposium is a good way to go about it.

I'll wind up with one brief quote from Robert Hutchins, who ran that commission I told you about earlier. He said, ``The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment."

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To which I can only add: Amen.