Losing the Game:

Celebrity Journalism, Washington's Media Elite and the Erosion of Press Credibility

© Mark Mantho

It's obvious to anyone watching closely, or hardly watching at all, that the rise of celebrity journalism and the media elite -- personified by the Washington press corps and the three broadcast networks -- has had a deleterious effect on journalism, the political process, and American culture as a whole. Why has this phenomena occurred? What are its antecedents and characteristics, and what might be done to rectify the situation?

Contrary to popular opinion (at least among ink-stained wretches of a bygone era), "the good old days" before celebrity journalists and Washington's media elite ascended the throne weren't all that good. There was far less cynicism and grandstanding, but there were also problems, "lapdog journalism" preeminent among them.

In his book <u>Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics</u>, political scientist Larry Sabato has outlined general trends in Washington political reporting since the 1930s, each corresponding to a particular epoch in American history. The first of these dates from the New Deal era through about 1966. Political coverage during the early part of this period was characterized by rigid adherence to the journalistic shibboleth of objectivity, which later gave way to interpretive and investigative reporting. Yet for more than 35 years, the unwritten rule was that the private activities of public officials weren't published, unless those activities effected official conduct.

Franklin Roosevelt, who manipulated the Washington press with a craftiness unparalleled by any of his successors (save perhaps Kennedy and Reagan), was instrumental in nurturing the policy of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Courting the press assiduously with frequent news conferences and off-the-record tidbits, Roosevelt succeeded in winning a lot of working reporters over to his side. More importantly, his tenure in office (1933-45) coincided with the crisis years of the Depression and World War II, and many publishers and journalists felt reporting on Roosevelt's health (never mind his private peccadilloes) would undermine his effectiveness as President of the United States. Thus, according to Larry Sabato, of the thousands of press photographs taken during the Roosevelt years, just two depict the polio-stricken president in a wheelchair. During the '44 campaign, publishers such as *Time-Life*'s Henry Luce (a life-time Republican) refused to print information about FDR's failing health -- despite the fact that this development had been increasingly obvious for years.

Similarly, Roosevelt's affair with Lucy Mercer also went unreported, though many in the Washington press corps knew of it.

This hands-off approach wasn't reserved solely for FDR, even in cases where personal behavior plainly effected the performance of official duties. George Herman, of CBS News, serves up a familiar anecdote:

> When I first came to Washington, there were a lot of senators who were well-known as terrible drunks. One of them was Herman Welker of Idaho. Once, (I remember that) he burst out of the Senate Republican Cloak Room just in time to hear a unanimous consent motion on something like declaring National Pickle Week, shouting "I object" and falling over in a dead faint on the floor, and being carried away. No reporter, including the reporters covering his state, ever mentioned to the voters that their elected official was drunk on the Senate floor.

Many political reporters during these times can remember similarly ignominious scenes, each starring a different member of Congress. In Feeding Frenzy, Sabato chronicles the alcohol-fueled exploits of Louisiana's Russell Long, one-time Democratic Majority Leader Hale Boggs, and a host of their colleagues (all of whom held significant committee chairmanships). Even the infamous Joe McCarthy, a man who from 1950 to '54 wielded tremendous destructive power (and was hated by much of the working press besides) was immune from disclosure of damaging personal information. Sabato notes that McCarthy habitually "carried liquor in his briefcase and swallowed half-sticks of butter so that he could hold his spirits -- all observed by reporters, and all unreported."

At this juncture, interpretive journalism, in which reporters place the news and newsworthy in some kind of coherent context for their readers, was regarded with suspicion by most editors and reporters. The practice of objective, "just the facts" reporting was the style accepted by most of the journalistic establishment. Hence, in 1950, when Joe McCarthy began naming names and destroying lives, the Washington media reported every outlandish charge faithfully, because McCarthy was a U.S. Senator and what he said, regardless of its veracity, was by definition news. In the book Joe McCarthy and the Press, former journalist Edwin Bayley shows how McCarthy's understanding of that fact, and his knowledge of the news cycle (the pressure to meet deadlines, beat the competition, and supply a continuous stream of fresh news) allowed him to rise to a frightening level of prominence. As John Steele, who covered the Senate during the '50s, told Bayley, "there was little opportunity in those days to break out of the role of being a recording device for Joe. I felt trapped. We (in the Washington media) bear a terrible scar because of that period." Eric Sevaried, one of the few journalists to speak up during the height of McCarthy's reign of terror, chastised the Washington media when he wrote, "our rigid formulae of so-called objectivity, our flat, one-

dimensional handling of news, (has) elevated the influence of fools to that of wise men; the ignorant to the level of the learned; the evil to the level of the good."

The perils of being "stenographers to power" aside, another example of a lapdog mentality in the Washington media of yore was its kid-glove treatment of dashing young John F. Kennedy. In his 1987 book Behind the Front Page, veteran political reporter David Broder of *The Washington Post* recalls that even as a junior senator, Kennedy manipulated the Washington press with Roosevelt-like aplomb. "Kennedy could turn an interview into a bull session, artfully picking the reporter's brain for useful information and gossip. His own candor in such discussions was breathtaking; the degree of confidentiality they seemed to assume suggested an intimacy with journalists that was not really there." By creating this false sense of camaraderie, providing easy access to reporters and showing off his beautiful wife Jackie, Kennedy skillfully finessed the Washington media into providing largely favorable publicity as early as 1954 -- publicity that came in handy when he made a bid for the White House three years later.

Broder, then a green reporter for the defunct *Washington Star,* writes that during the campaign of 1960, JFK "converted a significant portion of the press corps covering him into a cheering section." Broder remembers that as the candidate criss-crossed the country that fall, Kennedy staff members and the reporters assigned to cover his campaign frequently engaged in strategy sessions, to the point where it was often difficult to tell them apart. After Kennedy became president, close relationships between senior administration aides and selected journalists continued -- as long as their reporting remained positive. Broder observes that the good press Kennedy enjoyed while in office was due in large measure to "the willingness of many in the Washington media to be manipulated. Those who swapped partying stories with the president willingly participated in glamorizing and sanitizing the private life of John Kennedy. Those granted privileged access to him and his top aides often wrote their stories with the goal of keeping that access intact." (The most famous example of Kennedy's persuasive power over the media was the pressure brought to bear on *New York Times* publisher Orvil Dryfoos in 1961, when JFK successfully neutered a front-page story on a planned U.S. invasion of Cuba.)

Kennedy managed to keep his dalliances with women out of the papers, a remarkable feat considering the sheer number of them and the fact that White House reporters were, as Broder suggests, plainly aware of what was going on. (Indeed, Washington corespondents reporting on the '60 campaign dreamed up a catchy slogan for the Kennedy effort in Wisconsin -- "Lets Sack With Jack.") Debate among journalists still chokes the air as to whether Washington reporters should have blown the whistle on the strenuously libidinous president. Most who covered JFK in those days contend that reporting such details "simply wasn't done" at that time, and they have a point. Up until at least younger brother Ted's mishap at Chappaquiddick, editors and publishers considered

the bedroom antics of public officials strictly off-limits. (Washington reporters knew of the extramarital liaisons of Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Johnson, yet information about them never reached the public.) Personally, what a politician does with someone of legal age doesn't interest me in the slightest, and in general, I believe newspapers should stay away from printing the gory details. Still, President Kennedy's affair with Judith Campbell -- then the lady-friend of mobster Sam Giancana and thus a serious security risk and potential blackmail threat -- poses an interesting question. Had they known about it (all available evidence suggests they didn't), would the Washington media of the early '60s have reported the salient facts? Probably not.

It's also vital to understand that even in "the good old days," there was a media elite centered in Washington, and that career-enhancing relationships between top journalists and politicians were hardly rare. The first wave of Washington's most prominent corespondents -- columnists like Walter Lippmann, Joseph and Stewart Alsop, Drew Pearson, Arthur Krock and James "Scotty" Reston -- were all on intimate (though not always friendly) terms with presidents, cabinet secretaries and members of Congress. From the early '30s through the late '60s, elite journalists -- a short list largely limited to the influential band of columnists listed above -- played an important part in shaping public opinion and policy.

Walter Lippman, who had exchanged letters with FDR for years, nonetheless promoted Newton D. Baker of Ohio for the Democratic nomination in 1932. Lippmann actively lobbied Roosevelt insider Felix Frankfurter (later appointed to the Supreme Court) to switch his allegiance to Baker. He also wrote a famous broadside attacking FDR which caused a sensation upon publication, and by virtue of the clout his name and opinion carried,

Author Larry Sabato observes that Dwight Eisenhower first met Richard Nixon through *The New York Herald Tribune*'s Washington corespondent, Bert Andrews. *The New York Times'* Arthur Krock, a long-time friend of (and, some would say, publicist for) Jack Kennedy's father Joe, induced his agent to publish JFK's first book, Why England Slept, and lobbied friends to bestow a Pulitzer on his second, Profiles in Courage. One of Washington's most enduring journalistic legends, Walter Lippmann, helped compose speeches for Theodore Roosevelt while at *The New Republic,* and called many a president by his first name. David Broder relates that Kennedy speechwriter Ted Sorenson brought a draft of JFK's inaugural address to Lippmann, who proceeded to make minor changes and then lauded it in his column as "a remarkably successful piece of self-expression." Another Washington legend, one-time *Washington Post* Executive Editor Ben Bradlee, who has admonished reporters to steer clear of personal entanglements with those in power, built a career on his mutually beneficial friendship with John Kennedy. In the late '60s and '70s, *The New York Times'* Reston wrote speeches for the Nixon White House.

Therefore, while the Washington media of today has mutated into an elite of immense social and political influence, it's important to remember that it didn't spring up willy-nilly, and that despite fond memories, the Washington press of yesteryear were far from perfect.

***

"Celebrity journalism," a phrase coined by media critic and current *U.S. News and World Report* editor James Fallows, has actually been with us since the days of Horace Greeley and Ida Tarbell. Much later, radio correspondents such as Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, and Howard K. Smith made a name for themselves reporting from Europe during World War II. Listeners depended on these journalists to deliver the latest war news, and probably attached an air of authority to them, but this was largely the extent of their influence. Yet with the advent of television, and its growth into the dominant source of news for most Americans by the '60s and '70s, something changed. Far more than radio, television brought "newscasters" into millions of American homes, connecting recognizable names with equally recognizable faces and fostering a sense of familiarity and intimacy, however artificial.

The "golden age" of television, from, roughly, 1949 through 1957, produced the medium's first real celebrity journalist, Edward R. Murrow of CBS. Nowadays people recall Murrow as the conscience of the early to mid '50s, exposing abuses against migrant workers ("Harvest of Shame") or bringing down Joe McCarthy on "See It Now," and he is credited with providing the nascent business of TV news with needed credibility. (It should be remembered, however, that Murrow didn't shy away from hawking cigarettes on air or conducting frothy celebrity interviews, nor that his demolition of McCarthy took place very late in the game, after the senator had already self-destructed.) The most visible -- and trusted -- television newsman after Murrow was Walter Cronkite, also of CBS (who, like Murrow and Smith, had successfully made the jump to TV). It is a measure of how powerful Cronkite became by the late Sixties that Lyndon Johnson was said to realize that Americans had turned against the Vietnam War, and his presidency, when "Uncle Walter" began questioning both during his nightly newscasts.

Still, Cronkite didn't create celebrity journalism as we know it today; that dubious honor is largely reserved for Don Hewitt, Mike Wallace and the rest of the gang at "60 Minutes." As James Fallows writes in his book Breaking the News, " '60 Minutes' changed TV journalism for one simple reason: it made money. Before the program's rise to popularity in the early 1970s, network news operations had been 'loss leaders' (and) through this period, news divisions were subsidized by the rest of the network." Yet by the mid '70s, "60 Minutes" (benefitting mightily from its Sunday time slot directly after NFL football) had perfected a simple but revolutionary formula for success. Essentially, Hewitt, the program's producer, injected entertainment values into television news to a degree that hadn't been attempted previously. Taking his cue from non-news TV shows, Hewitt

sought to make "60 Minutes" provocative and "sexy," presenting viewers with a regular cast of characters -- attack-dog Mike, bemused, affable Harry, sour curmudgeon Morley -- and plot-lines that followed their ongoing escapades from week to week. In addition, "60 Minutes" emphasized the twin pillars upon which all "good TV" is based: drama and conflict. Specializing in embarrassing revelations, the program supplied its audience with a steady diet of governmental malfeasance, corporate greed, and general human stupidity. Not surprisingly, it was a hit.

The success of "60 Minutes" hastened the emergence of celebrity journalism by defining its correspondents as "personalities" and placing them at the center of the stories they were ostensibly covering: Mike Wallace became more famous for being Mike Wallace than for any particular story he might break. (Despite his reputation as a hard-news purist, Wallace began his career in 1940 at a Detroit radio station as an actor, announcer and narrator for entertainment programs like "The Green Hornet" and "The Lone Ranger." In 1949, he appeared as an actor and spokesman in Navy enlistment films, and in the early '50s actually appeared on Broadway in the play "Reclining Figure." Like Murrow before him, Wallace also did cigarette ads at one point in the late '50s, bringing in "six figures," according to the book <u>60 Minutes</u>, by Axel Madson.) Unbeknownst to viewers, the real legwork for "60 Minutes" -- background research, lining up sources, tracking down leads -- was done not by the celebrities of show, but by a platoon of producers and reporters. Wallace, Reasoner, Safer, et. al. would merely parachute into a story, provide the star power for a taped interview or two, then hop on a plane and repeat the process for the next scheduled shoot.

It's hard to overstate the effect of these developments; network news became increasingly personality-driven, more superficial, ever more obsessed with ratings. The driving force behind this transformation, as Jim Fallows notes, was that "60 Minutes" was the first news show to turn a profit, an advancement crucial to the evolution of celebrity journalism. When broadcasting executives woke up to the possibility that aside from simply burnishing their network's reputation, news divisions could actually *bring in revenue,* they began to dole out big bucks for on-air "talent," in expectation of even bigger advertising returns.

The sea-change in how television delivered the news became evident by the mid-point of the 1970s and accelerated rapidly as the decade drew to a close: In 1976, Barbara Walters received a million dollar contract from struggling ABC in hopes that her star power might jump-start ratings; Dan Rather scored an even larger sum upon taking over Cronkite's job in 1980, and readers of *Time* were treated to the then-strange sight of Rather splashed on the cover of the magazine, hyped as the herald of TV's brave new world of "journalism." In the early '80s, ABC imported the slick graphics and whiz-bang pacing of sports programing into their news division by naming Roone Arledge its president -- thereby creating the smoothly vapid look of network news that endures to this day. All of this might not have come to pass were it not for "60 Minutes." The program set the standard by

which all other television news would be judged, both in terms of the elements of packaging deemed necessary for ratings success and the profit margin they were expected to ensure.

Watergate, too, played a major role in shaping the culture of celebrity journalism. Larry Sabato, author of Feeding Frenzy, echoed many other media critics when he observed in his book that many ambitious young people were attracted to journalism in the wake of Watergate not by the possibility of serving the public interest, but rather by serving their own desire to be famous. As semi-celebrity journalist Steve Roberts told Sabato when musing about the legacy of Woodward and Bernstein, "A lot of reporters run around this town dreaming of the day that Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford are going to play them in the movies. That movie ("All The President's Men") had more effect on the self-image of young journalists than anything else. Christ! Robert Redford playing a journalist? It lends an air of glamour and excitement that acts as a magnet (which draws) young reporters to investigative reporting." In short, journalism was now seen as a route to celebrity status, for print reporters as well as their electronic counterparts.

The '80s produced another seminal development in the creation of a media elite dominated by celebrity journalists, one which would refine the star system in new and more troubling ways. The Washington-based political talk show was, in itself, nothing new. The networks had a long-standing tradition of public affairs programing, from "Meet the Press" to "Face the Nation;" PBS had "Agronsky and Company" as well as "Washington Week in Review." Then, in 1980, along came former Jesuit priest cum Nixon assistant John McLaughlin, who created "The McLaughlin Group" (and later became the star attraction of CNN's "Capital Gang"). If "60 Minutes" had pretensions toward delivering hard news, albeit in eye-catching fashion, McLaughlin entertained no such delusions. Instead, he focused on black and white, all or nothing "analysis" of political events, featuring panelists from the hard left or hard right -- no moderates allowed -- to further polarize debate and highlight extremes; he encouraged shouting matches, shrill pronouncements and snap judgments (McLaughlin: "On an Olympic scale of O to 10, 0 being a bellyflop and 10 being a triple-gainer with no splash -- placid water! -- what would you assign to Bob Dole in his choice of Jack Kemp?" Fred Barnes: "Nine point five." McLaughlin: "Nine point five? Eleanor?" Eleanor Clift: "Oh, 8.9; a little wobbly on the landing...").

"The McLaughlin Group" spawned an entire political talk show industry, and, like "60 Minutes," created a formula that brought in advertising dollars as well as viewers. Along with "20/20," "Primetime Live," "Dateline NBC," "48 Hours" and a plethora of other tabloidesque TV news programs, a host of political talk shows now glut the airwaves. "This Week," "Crossfire," "Crossfire Sunday," "Capital Gang," "Capital Gang Sunday," "Equal Time," "Hardball with Christopher Mathews," "Evans & Novak" -- the list is endless, and disturbing. Says *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz,"TV talk shows have transformed the landscape of journalism because so many

people on the print side of the business, who, at one time would have been satisfied just to be on the *Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times,* now want to have their own talk shows. They want to be famous, they want to be celebrity commentators. And that has really altered the ethic of journalism business from gathering facts to popping off and serving up opinions."

The ethical dilemmas that plague journalists who participate in the high-volume, food-fight environs of the talk show whirl are manifold. As noted above, the coin of the realm in TV-land is polarization and overstatement. In Breaking the News, James Fallows relates that when Paul Magnusson and some of his colleagues from *Business Week* submitted to coaching on how best to succeed as political talk show panelists,

> The guy who was instructing us kept saying the same thing over and over to different people. He'd interview us on the screen and then play back the tape. He'd say, "When I asked you this question, you gave me a long answer! You should give me a much shorter answer! If I ask you whether the budget deficit is a good thing or a bad thing, you should not say, 'Well, I think it stimulates the economy but it passes on a burden.' You have to say, 'It's a great idea!' Or, 'It's a terrible idea!' It doesn't matter which."

This kind of advice has a twisted logic when one considers the traits valued by the medium of television -- brevity, drama, conflict, and so on -- but obviously distorts interpretation of news events, a practice that requires nuance and context. Viewers are offered an extremely narrow prism through which to judge the affairs of the day, and, needless to say, a paucity of useful information.

Jim Fallows, himself a one-time panelist on political talk shows, describes the process and preparation involved:

> "Washington life is organized around 'the week' -- the newsmagazines announce a theme for the week on Monday; in the *Washington Post'*s newsroom editors discuss what will be 'Topic A' for the week's coverage; the story builds through the weekdays... To be on the talk shows is to have a role in the week. On Monday and Tuesday people tell you that they saw you over the weekend (on a talk show). You work on your stories and interviews through Thursday at lunchtime. On Thursday afternoon you get a call from the show's producer's telling you what the topics will be for the taping the next day. You check the Nexus files on Thursday night for subjects you don't know anything about, and on Friday morning you work up one-liners, predictions, and comebacks to use on the show. The taping for Saturday night programs is late on Friday, and when it's over the producers say, 'Great show! Great job, everyone!' On Saturday you meet people for dinner moments after they finish watching you on TV."

Compelled by talk show producers to be "interesting" on a myriad of complex topics, Fallows observes that there are two approaches celebrity journalists and those aspiring to that status employ to meet the demand: they either bluff their way through the program, making confident proclamations regarding issues they know little or nothing about, or they reduce their analysis to the level of pure politics ("did Clinton have a good week or a bad week?"), tossing off predictions with studied nonchalance. Christopher Hitchens, a senior contributor to *Vanity Fair* and no stranger to the talk show biz, contends that although political talk shows are promoted as spontaneous free-for-alls, they are in fact pre-rehearsed and staged: topics, "face time," the exact wording of questions and even their answers, are often plotted out in advance by conference call.

In 1996, the PBS program "Frontline" aired "Why America Hates the Press" and interviewed some of the better known talk show regulars, including Jack Germond, a respected political reporter for *The Baltimore Sun* who also appears on "The McLaughlin Group." When asked whether he felt his guest stints on the show compromised his journalistic integrity, Germond responded this way:

> I think there's an awful lot of trash on television. I contribute to it, to some degree, by being on "McLaughlin." People ask me, "Why do you do that terrible show?" And I say, "Because it put my daughter through college and medical school." I don't make any bones about it. I wouldn't do it for nothing. But it's not my main... it's two hours a week. It's not... it's not my... it's not who I am. It's not my living.
> I don't... you know, I just don't feel tainted by it. It doesn't... it's not important to me. If other people give it a lot of weight, that's not my fault. That's sort of a cop-out, I guess, but I have to rationalize it somehow, don't I?

Germond's comments speak volumes, providing a quintessential example of the "when in doubt, rationalize" creed of celebrity journalists. Media critic Kurtz was also interviewed by "Frontline," and summed up the ultimate consequences of the dummed-down political talk show. The implied message to viewers, he told producer Steve Talbot, is "that political issues are not really serious, that they're just sort of fodder for the Washington rhetorical game, that the things panelists are shouting about don't really affect people's lives, (and) that nothing will ever really change in Washington.... It gives people the sense that politics doesn't matter. It gives people the sense that it's just a game."

The celebrity journalists that are regulars on political talk shows these days blur the line between news and entertainment as never before: you might see ABC's Cokie Roberts giving a relatively objective account of Fred Thompson's campaign finance hearings on Friday, then see her slamming his prosecutorial acumen mercilessly only two days later on "This Week." Once again, the

public is left stranded without a moral compass; is this person a reporter who delivers the news in a forthright, unbiased fashion, a commentator, or some muddled marriage of both?

As corrosive as the double identity/food-fight ethic of political talk shows is, it's only half the story. For as any astute celebrity journalist knows, there is a direct correlation between these talk shows and the jackpot over the rainbow: the lecture circuit. Beyond mere ego-gratification, it is the staggering amount of money to be made by speaking to corporate and trade sponsors that entices most journalists to make the talk show rounds in the first place. The cycle goes like this: a journalist, be he from the print side or the television side, works up enough of a reputation to gain the crucial first berth on a talk show. If he provides the requisite goods (slam-dunk put-downs, cynical analysis, etc.), he's asked back, and if he *really* excells at the game, the program gives him a regular gig. From there, it's all down-hill.

Almost immediately, offers come pouring in to speak before the Left-handed Lesbian Trade Organization or the AARP. In addition, our hypothetical hack might join his brethren on "The McLaughlin Group," "Crossfire," or "Capital Gang" (specify Saturday or Sunday cast, please) as part of a travelling sideshow. Regardless, the financial reward will be handsome indeed: Fees range from around $5,000 to $10,000 for those at the "low" end, while big stars like the *New York Times'* Bill Safire ($20,000), ABC's Sam Donaldson ($30,000), or Cokie Roberts ($35,000) can command an awful lot more. (Ted Koppel, who has since kicked the habit, raked in as much as $50,000 in the late '80s.) Celebrity journalists jet into town, give a canned speech and crack a few well-rehearsed jokes -- frequently both their remarks and their "spontaneous" quips are identical from confab to confab -- and jump back on a plane, several thousand dollars richer. Not bad for a couple hours' "work."

The naked greed displayed by celebrity journalists who indulge in this orgy of me-too capitalism ("buckraking," as Howard Kurtz has dubbed the practice) is only one of its unsavory characteristics. Another, much more serious ethical danger lies in the very real potential for conflict of interest. If a celebrity journalist accepts an honorarium for speaking before an industry or corporate group, can they really turn around and report objectively on the very same group? The words of long-time Washington hand (and celebrity journalist) Ben Bradlee of the *Post* are instructive: "If the Insurance Institute of America, if there is such a thing, pays you $10,000 to make a speech, don't tell me you haven't been corrupted. You can say you haven't and you can say you will attack insurance issues in the same way, but you won't. You can't."

Whether Cokie Roberts has been corrupted or not (something we may never know, since she adamantly and categorically refuses to discuss her lecture activities), her conduct in the Philip Morris Affair demonstrates the problematic nature of buckraking. As Alicia Shepard of the *American Journalism Review* reported, in early 1995 Roberts and her husband Steve were invited to speak to a conference at a Palm Beach, Florida, golf resort, sponsored by tobacco-maker Philip

Morris. Their joint fee was estimated by lecture agents to be about $30,000. The fact that either of the Roberts' might be called to report on or offer commentary about the ongoing smoking debate apparently didn't dissuade them from accepting the engagement. Moreover, at the time ABC was fending off a $10 billion libel suit regarding a "Day One" piece alleging that a cigarette company had fortified its product with extra nicotine to increase the likelihood of consumer addiction. The name of the cigarette company? Philip Morris. On top of all this, two months prior to the conference, ABC had issued ethics guidelines severly limiting the circumstances under which correspondents were allowed to speak to groups that lobby Congress (something Philip Morris has been known to do). "In short," notes James Fallows in Breaking the News, "there were plenty of reasons not to go." As weeks passed Cokie evidently saw nothing wrong with keeping her promise to Philip Morris. But then, at the last moment, Mrs. Roberts phoned Event Links, the affair's organizers, and declined to appear. She was "sick or something," according to Nancy Schaub, a spokesperson for Event Links. Steve Roberts, however -- hale, hearty, and free of ABC's conflict of interest rules -- did show up. He gave a speech, and collected the $30,000.

(Fallows' book also features another interesting tidbit about Steve and Cokie Roberts, one which exemplifies a trend toward "diversification" by celebrity journalists. In 1994, the enterprising pair attempted a joint column. United Feature Syndicate, the column's distributor, proffered a promotional notice: " 'People often ask us what it's like around our house at dinnertime,' says Steve Roberts. 'What do we talk about? Do we ever disagree?'.... (The column presents) "down-to-earth discussions of today's issues from the Roberts' perspective as journalists, Washington insiders, and also as parents and working professionals.... Whatever the issue, Cokie and Steve Roberts get right to the heart of it to uncover what's really important to your readers.")

The point of all this isn't so much whether corporations and trade groups receive favorable treatment in exchange for the money celebrity journalists accept from them; few believe this is the case. Yet, as an agent who books journalists for speaking engagements notes, "(sponsors) are not necessarily getting something immediate, but they're establishing a *relationship*." Therefore, it seems wholly legitimate to ask whether, having shared a few drinks, dinner, and perhaps a round of golf with their hosts, celebrity journalists -- even unconsciously -- are more likely to go easy on them and the interests they represent. How objective can one be in such circumstances?

(In fairness, it should be noted that all three broadcast networks, as well as the major newsweeklies, have recently instituted at least some prohibitions against journalists speaking for hire. How rigorously these prohibitions are enforced, however, is another question. CBS, for example, defended the $20,000 a health insurance group paid Lesley Stahl by pointing out that Stahl doesn't regularly cover health care issues for the network; Media and political analyst Jeff Greenfield pulled in $12,000 for speaking to the National Association of Broadcasters, with ABC

using the same basic justification -- despite the fact that Greenfield handles media issues. The ubiquitous Cokie Roberts was allowed to speak to members of a business conference sponsored by the Junior League, even though a for-profit corporate entity actually paid her fee. It seems that the new guidelines contain more than a few loopholes.)

"Too many journalists, these defenders of the First Amendment," " says the *Post's* Howard Kurtz, "take the view that we are private citizens, and we don't have to discuss whether we make 10 or 20 or 30 thousand dollars talking to the National Association of Wigget Manufactures. And these are the same folks who call for full disclosure from politicians about any financial matter. Increasingly, part of the public anger at the news business comes from this sense of arrogance, this double standard, that it's okay to go moonlight and take money form corporations if you're a journalist -- but you won't talk about it publicly."

In larger terms, how insular have the talk show/lecture circuit elite become from the public they claim to serve? *The New Yorker's* James Wolcott supplies a clue:

> (Political talk shows present) their regulars' own luxury-skybox view of American politics and society.... Assurance fluffs up their every pronouncement, because they have permanent thrones. There are no term limits on pundits. Not having to answer to angry constituents, they make everything sound easy. They dispatch imaginary troops overseas as if snapping their fingers for a taxi. Welfare cuts? No problem. Slash government payrolls? Make it so.
>
> While they assail elected officials for pandering to special interests, their own speakers' fees are skyrocketing and those who call their ethics into question are dismissed by ["Crossfire" and "Capital Gang" regular Robert] Novak as "little weenies" who are "jealous." (The dying words of a hack: "I did it for the honorarium.")

When print reporters who should be out covering the important news of the day are instead chained to Washington in hopes of landing a spot on a talk show -- and possibly slanting the stories they write with an eye toward being provocative enough to do just that -- then there is plainly a problem. Those lucky enough to be anointed as regular guests have to stick close to the capital as well: after all, they've got a show to do. Inevitably, the reporting suffers, since talk show participants wind up using the same Washington-based sources again and again. Beyond this, political talk shows and buckraking celebrity journalists send an obvious, dispiriting message to the American public: politics is entertainment, civic participation is for suckers, and journalists -- like the politicians they cover -- are only in it for the money.

***

This message merely lends added credence to the perception that celebrity journalists and the rest of the Washington press corps comprise a media elite that is arrogant, out of touch, and in bed with governmental power brokers. Washington's annual press galas -- especially the two most prominent, the White House Correspondents and Radio-Television dinners -- are a case in point. As the *American Journalism Review* succinctly puts it, these $100-plus dinners (and the before-and-after parties that accompany them) offer Beltway journalists and pundits the opportunity to "suck up to sources, gawk at Hollywood starlets and schmooze with politicians." Tickets are extremely hard to come by. Competition for "A List " guests is fierce, since everyone who's anyone is expected to rate the company of a Very Important Person or Star Of The Moment. Dressed to the nines, elite journalists alight from stretch limo's with their highly prized trophies (er, guests) -- big stars like Kevin Costner, influential policy-makers such as Madeleine Albright, or, less desirably, one of the capital's omnipresent lobbyists. The effete nature of these events can be glimpsed by this giddy-as-a-school-girl anecdote reported in *AJR* by Alicia Shepard:

> *New York Times* Washington Editor Andrew Rosenthal encountered actor Dennis Hopper at the White House Correspondents dinner in 1995.
>
> "I just went up to him and said, 'I know this is stupid, but you are so cool,' " Rosenthal admits. "It's not ridiculous at all," Hopper replied. "Say it again." Rosenthal did. "Would you say it one more time?" asked Hopper. "So I did," says Rosenthal. "I also saw Mary Steenburgen... she had an incredible glow."

One wonders if Rosenthal has any inkling of how smarmy and sycophantic his words make him appear to those unaccustomed to the rarified social strata of Washington's media elite.

Not surprisingly, Washington's press dinners are notable for their tone of self-congratulation. Perhaps more than anything else, they paint a portrait of a media elite besotted with itself and its insider status. "The narcissism is almost terminal and the sense of self-inflation and importance is not healthy," says celebrity reporter Bob Woodward, who no longer attends the dinners. A typical scenario might feature bigfoot journalists Ted Koppel and Peter Jennings bloviating amiably over a four-course meal with their equals in power Trent Lott and Richard Gephardt, while NBC's Andrea Mitchell and husband Alan Greenspan (chairman of the Federal Reserve) share a laugh with Janet Reno. Sipping champagne and munching his duck paté, *Newsweek*'s Howard Fineman can be seen chatting up Hollywood director Rob Reiner.

Is it any wonder that the average Joe, tuning into the White House Correspondents dinner on C-SPAN, is struck silly by the obscene unreality of such a spectacle? The *Post*'s David Broder, interviewed by "Frontline," provided an accurate (if possibly unwitting) critique of the Washington

press dinners. "A few years ago Ann Richards, when she was governor of Texas, was the Gridiron speaker," recalls Broder. "As she came to the lectern and looked out over this audience in, you know, white-tie, tails, gowns and so on, she said in that wonderful Texas drawl of hers, 'So this is what you all do on Saturday night up here. I can't imagine why anybody thinks you're out of touch.' "

The interested observer doesn't have to look too hard to see that the succession of glitzy media bashes (beginning in January, there is one a month for the next six months) amount to an ongoing stroke-fest. The president, recognizing the PR utility of throwing the press a bone, makes a command performance at the White House Correspondents dinner and cracks a few ingratiating jokes. At the Gridiron dinner, Washington journalists, equally attuned to the benefits of being on the president's good side, entertain him with a burlesque show. Similarly, members of Congress, the Cabinet, and corporate bigwigs attend the galas to promote good relations with temperamental journalists -- while the Washington press and its celebrity gods take the opportunity to cozy up to them in return. The politicians and lobbyists get a chance to push their agenda, flattering journalists by agreeing to be their guests, and, in a round-about way, inoculating themselves against negative stories in the process. The media folks (save the network stars), beholden to their guests for putting in an appearance to begin with, puff them up with an obsequious comment or two in hopes of picking up the latest gossip.

Like the political talk shows, these soirees also send a message to average Americans: Washington journalists, politicians, business interests and Hollywood types all belong to the same class of elites, the same exclusive club. If the whole thing seems "incestuous" -- the word most often used to describe the relationship between the media elite and the powerful groups they are supposed to be covering -- that's because it is.

If the media elite and its celebrity journalists are insular, they're also arrogant and out of touch. For years conservative politicians, and a sizable portion of the public, have decried the "liberal bias" of the national press. Kenneth T. Walsh, in his book about the Washington press corps, Feeding the Beast, quotes a 1995 survey by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press which indicates that the charge has some basis in fact. Sampling a cross-section of American citizens, the poll found that more than half of them believed homosexuality should be discouraged, 2 out of 5 said they attended church or synagogue regularly, and 39% described themselves as conservative. The same survey found that 8 out of 10 national journalists believed homosexuality should be accepted, only 1 out of 5 attended religious services, and just 5% considered themselves conservative. Walsh also includes a '95 poll conducted by *U.S. News and World Report* which found that 50% of those surveyed thought the media was "strongly, or somewhat in conflict, with their goals," while only 40% felt the media were "strongly or somewhat friendly" to their goals (a rating

below even politicians and lawyers). These figures attest not only to a schism in values between average Americans and the national press (many of whom are, of course, concentrated in Washington), but also to the low regard most people have toward journalists in general. Part of this derision doubtless derives from attitudes about local reporting, but it's a fair bet that a large chunk of it is directed at the Washington press corps.

The Washington media elite also has remarkably thin skin. "You'll be stunned to know that journalists don't like criticism, perhaps even less so than politicians," reports media critic Kurtz, who, when detailing the buckraking scandal, received many a chilly reception from co-workers and celebrity journalists. "Oh, man! It's amazing," exclaims *Washington Post* ombudsmen Geneva Overholser. "Both the arrogance and the defensiveness. It's inexcusable! Who are we to be beyond or above criticism? It's unbelievable. And it's a real problem. I mean, the reader correctly thinks, 'Well, now, wait a minute. Would you exist if we didn't buy you?' We wouldn't, and yet we can hardly be bothered." Overholser also observes a lack of respect for the public that the Washington media is supposed to assist. "Sometimes I'll approach editors or reporters and I'll say, 'I have this interesting question from a reader." And they sort of look at me like, 'You're listening to the reader?' "

Retired Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming, who currently co-hosts "The Long and the Short of It" on PBS with former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, has had a long and volatile relationship with the Washington press. For years, Simpson carried around the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, harping to anyone who would listen that the media elite routinely ignored its tenets. His criticism prompted a cynical, sarcastic column by the *Post's* Joel Achenbach, which concluded, "the truth is, this Code of Ethics is a load of malarkey. Whatever malarkey is. No self-respecting journalist would be caught near the thing." Simpson issues a telling (and familiar) indictment of the Washington media's arrogance in his book, Right in the Old Gazoo: A Lifetime of Scrapping with the Press:

> I can't honestly think of a profession more infected by hubris than journalism. What I find vexatious and tiresome -- and I think many Americans would agree with me -- is the absolute unapologetic nature of so many in that profession. I have often seen someone hammer a journalist in a letter to the editor, but I have damn seldom seen a reporter answer the letter with an apology, or even an acknowledgment that he or she might have been wrong. Instead, most Washington journalists offer an indignant and haughty self-defense, usually backed with the puerile pronouncement: "I stand by my story. "

This kind of arrogance and remoteness from everyday Americans has not always been the hallmark of Washington's media corps. Forty years ago, the typical Washington reporter (not the Lippmann's and Alsop's of the world) hailed from a working-class background and may not have graduated from college; he lived among regular people and probably made less money than many of his neighbors. He was in touch with their problems and concerns because he was one of them. Yet in the early '60s, *New York Times* Washington bureau chief James Reston began hiring "the best and the brightest" straight out of Ivy League schools, precipitating the notion of Washington journalist as professional. With the spectacular success and resultant notoriety of Woodward and Bernstein during the Watergate era, the celebrity journalism of "60 Minutes," and the creation of the star system in network news divisions, the character of the Washington-based media changed forever. Those who cover the political beat in Washington are more likely to be well educated, have upper middle-class roots, and live in the suburbs. Today, as Ken Walsh points out, the average salary of White House correspondents is $80,000 a year -- and sometimes well in excess of that amount. According to "Frontline," the income of prominent network stars is predictably stratospheric: Tom Brokaw and Katie Couric reportedly earn over $1 million annually, Sam Donaldson $2 million, Dan Rather, $5 million, and Peter Jennings "several million" (an exact figure was not obtained). According to *USA Today,* Diane Sawyer and Barbara Walters each make seven million dollars a year (!), while Ted Koppel, poor wretch, makes just six.

All of the above factors contribute to the disconnect between average Americans and the media elite, and the Zoe Baird case is good example of how this disconnect plays out in the real world. In 1993, when Baird was nominated by President Clinton for the post of Attorney General, it was revealed that she had hired an illegal alien as a nanny. Most Washington journalists and opinion-makers didn't think this would create a problem for Baird. Why? Because a lot of them had done exactly the same thing, or knew someone who had. Says the *Post'*s Kurtz, "all of these journalists, many of whom know all about the illegal baby-sitter market, went on various talk shows and said: this is no big deal, everybody does it. When the public got the story, they had a very different view of it, and in about eight days, Zoe Baird's nomination was history. Journalists, who were once society's outsiders, who you were more likely to find wearing a Fedora, sitting at the corner bar having a beer, today would rather be going to a fancy Georgetown party with Senator so-and-so and business leader so-and-so. Rather than identifying with the plumbers out there, we identify with the policy-makers and politicians. "

When Ken Walsh wrote about the Baird incident in Feeding the Beast, he interviewed a Clinton aid who worked in the White House at the time. "I think the American people thought it was more than a little odd that a $500,000-a-year corporate lawyer couldn't find a regular baby-sitter,"

said the man. "That's about the best example of who is out of touch -- all of us in the White House, to be sure, but also all of you in the media."

***

This, then, is the state of our media elite -- from the food-fight talk shows and buckraking celebrity journalists to the insular self-importance that permeates the nation's broadcast news divisions, best-known papers and news magazines. What's to be done, if anything? Unfortunately there are no quick fixes, and the situation won't change today or tomorrow. Even so, here are a few modest suggestions:

* As David Broder suggested during his "Frontline" interview, Washington journalists -- especially the elite variety -- and TV's star reporters should do a lot more work outside "the Beltway echo chamber" that encourages conventional wisdom and too often reflects only the views of those in power. This would, to a significant degree, reconnect Washington journalists with average Americans and the issues they care about. Other, more diverse voices would be heard, and more stories of real use to news consumers would likely appear, instead of the inside baseball, horse race political reporting that people are so sick of.

There will always be reporting on governmental policies, but there should be more stories about how those policies are playing out in the country, and follow-up pieces analyzing the effect they eventually have -- minus the tired angle of how a given policy will effect the next election. In addition, an added benefit of getting out of Washington and reporting from the hinterlands might be a reduction in elitist arrogance, as journalists realize that the views of people outside the loop are as valid, if not more so, than those that prevail in the capital.

* Lamentably, political talk shows like "The McLaughlin Group" and "Crossfire" aren't going to go away as long as they bring in viewers and ad revenue, but news outlets might establish "term limits" for the celebrity journalists and wanna-be's who populate them. I admit that this is unlikely to happen, since participants are walking billboards for their employers, but perhaps some principled producer or editor will finally decree that enough is enough. (Hey, it could happen!)

*Print and electronic media outlets should issue an outright ban on speaking fees. If journalists want to speak before corporate and trade sponsors *on issues that they do not cover,* fine -- but not for money. Failing this, journalists should be required to turn over all profits to a charity, or charities, of their choice. (The network's star anchors have gone this route in recent years.) Failing *that,* journalists should be compelled to disclose how much they make from speaking fees, and who is paying them out, *in a timely and comprehensive manner*. Publication of that information might arrest the more egregious ethical lapses, since buckraking journalists would be forced to weigh the cost of cash vs. credibility. Even if the information only makes its way into *AJR* or onto media-related web pages, it would be out there, and that's a start.

* How about creating an ombudsman not only for nightly news broadcasts, but also for each of the prime-time news programs as well? In the case of the news broadcasts, time could be reserved every Friday to air viewer grievances as well as story detractions and corrections, while news magazines like "Primetime Live" and "Dateline" could do the same at the end of each show. It wouldn't hurt to have more -- a lot more -- ombudsmen doing their thing at major newspapers and news magazines, either. (In her "Frontline" interview, *Post* ombudsman Overholser estimated that nation-wide, there are fewer than 40 ombudsmen working today.) Fantasy-land? Maybe, but wouldn't this development be welcome? Wouldn't it send a *positive* message that network news divisions respect their viewers and are willing to be more accountable to them?

* Perhaps most important, the National News Council, which "died of neglect" in 1984, should be revived. Journalism -- particularly the infotainment style of "journalism" purveyed by broadcast news programs and magazines, and the insider sort practiced by Washington's media elite -- desperately needs an industry watch-dog. The Council could be comprised largely (but not exclusively) of respected individuals from the field who care deeply about its future, such as Fred Friendly, Ben Bagdikian and Marvin Kalb. Conceivably, the nation's media outlets might be persuaded (or shamed) into ponying up the dough to ensure the Council has the financial resources necessary to be effective. Again, I realize I'm in the land of wishful thinking, but possibly the Council could institute a broad code of ethics modeled on those advanced by the Professional Society of Journalism, and, with the cooperation of news organizations across the country, disseminate and enforce it.

If a national peer review board with widely-known standards of conduct were established, maybe some of the worst excesses of the current media environment might at least be curbed, if not eliminated. The media elite and its celebrity journalists would be more accountable, particularly if rules barring honorariums and overly-friendly relations with power brokers were instituted. Washington journalists will, of course, continue to have relationships with those in power, and the practical necessity of maintaining contact with these sources is obvious. But celebrity and Washington-based journalists need to knock off the unseemly fraternization exemplified by the press galas described previously. Some kind of peer review system, by whatever name, needs to remind high-visibility Washington journalists that they are *reporters* first and foremost. By emphasizing the ideals journalism has traditionally stood for ("Come on, you guys, don't you remember why you became journalists in the first place?"), a board of true believers beyond ethical reproach, like Friendly or Bagdikian, might succeed in doing just that.

The simple knowledge that the press is actually willing to police itself would do wonders for the profession's credibility, since much of the public disgust aimed at the media elite, in particular,

stems from the conviction that it is unaccountable and out of control. How different perceptions might be if this remedy came to pass!

Alicia C. Shepard, who has covered their shenanigans in *AJR,* makes a valuable point when she writes that although celebrity journalists and the Washington-based media elite aren't representative of the profession as a whole, the amount of attention they receive can make it seem that way. At present this fact translates into a distorted view of reality, both in terms of what pundit-journalists deem newsworthy ("Who's up? Who's down?"), and in terms of how Americans view the national media ("they're all a bunch of arrogant assholes"). That's the bad news. The good news -- potentially, anyway -- is that celebrity journalists and the media elite really are only a tiny fraction of the journalism world.

If some or all of the recommendations delineated above were taken to heart, I suspect animus toward the media elite would abate -- because in important respects its power would diminish. Certainly a pecking-order would remain, both in news rooms and at the networks, in which certain journalists get the plumb assignments and make more money. And yes, network anchors and well-known correspondents will always be with us, but being famous doesn't necessarily translate into star behavior, or star treatment. A prominent journalist can still be a thoughtful, sober reporter; Jim Lehrer and his colleagues on "The Newshour" are one example of this, and locally, R.D. Sahl of "New England Cable News" is another.

I believe the celebrity journalist/media elite nexus will undergo a positive transformation in the next ten years or so. Things could get worse, to be sure, but I think members of the club are starting to get the message that if they want to preserve their credibility, their behavior has to change. These folks aren't stupid; they know they're hurting journalism, and they know that people are turning away in droves. Editors, producers and elite journalists *can* right the ship before it's too late. For anyone who cares about the pursuit of truth -- and that is, ideally, what journalism is all about -- let's hope so. Consider the alternative.