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## Journalism and the art of story selling

### Paying for news sets dangerous precedent for profession

JENNY MAGEE

Columnist



there is nothing we can do about it." As a future journalist, my first instinct was to defend the industry by placing the blame on the audience. After all, its not our fault people care more about tabloid-style escapades than hard news.

It is easy to blame other people and rationalize, but it is not easy to recover the lost respect that results from such unethical practices. Professionals have to think about the lasting effects of their actions. Writing a check to get an interview with Tonya Harding may have seemed like a pretty good investment during the scandal. However, these small invasions on the foundation of journalistic honesty and truth will scar the entire industry.

Journalists like O'Reilly are selling themselves and the industry short. But, luckily, not all of today's journalists support the practice of paying for stories. Dan Rather, co-anchor of "CBS Evening News" and Walter Cronkite, a former CBS anchor, both have denounced the use of checkbook journalism. Cronkite even urged action by the National Association of Broadcasters and the Radio-Television News Directors Association.

Pressure from these groups could have important impact," Cronkite said. "A firm stand by peer groups would be likely to strengthen the hand of legitimate news organizations, notably the networks, in resisting this disturbing trend."

Cronkite realizes that the acceptability of paying for stories could destroy the integrity of the journalism industry. And he should be commended for having the foresight to care about how the industry is perceived.

Journalists have the responsibility to inform the world of current events in an unbiased, objective manner. That duty, as is the case with every professional duty, should transcend potential mone-

change are not. Trends within professional fields are imitated faster than a popular movie star's fashion preferences. And trends, whether good or bad, have the potential to change the field forever.

Doctors used to make house visits. And a check-up used to cost two dozen eggs and a homemade apple pie, not \$65. The average trial used to take two weeks not two months, and there wasn't C-SPAN to provide complete coverage of the trial for people at home.

The examples of changes in professional fields over the years are endless. Some were conscious, some were unconscious. Some were a result of changing technology, some were a result of changing attitudes. Some were good, some were bad.

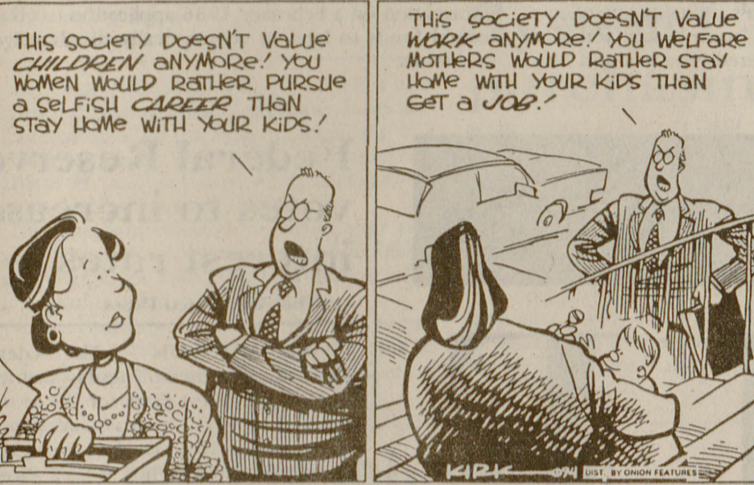
Change may be necessary, but certain types of change are not. Every major decision and new practice must be monitored. Too much is at stake. There are too many students diligently studying in universities for the present professionals to ruin the fields with bad or inappropriate choices.

The impact of professionals is greater than their small circle of colleagues. Journalists affect their audiences; doctors affect their patients; lawyers affect their clients; and so on. These positions of authority demand ethical behavior, sensitivity and the utmost integrity.

And when a member or several members of a profession step out of line, it is the duty of their colleagues to intervene and challenge their actions.

We shouldn't shape the future of our professions with the "carefreeness" of a child playing with Play-Doh, but with the scrutiny and precision of a sculptor working on a masterpiece.

Jenny Magee is a sophomore English and journalism major



## EDITORIAL

### Avoid mail fraud

#### A&M student list used in scams

Texas A&M keeps a list of personal information on students that can end up easily in the wrong hands. Although grades cannot be released to the public, state law requires that lists of other personal information must be made available for purchase. Students' phone numbers and mailing addresses are handed out without students' consent — usually to legitimate businesses, but not always.

There is nothing the University can do to protect students against phone or mail fraud under the current law. Therefore, it is up to students to be careful when replying to any sweepstakes, scholarship offers or advertisements that request the student to send in money.

Students may also have their names removed from those mailing lists in a very simple process at Heaton Hall. Any information about a Texas A&M student can be sealed off from the public if the student fills out one simple form.

If the University is forced to make it so easy for scam artists to get our personal information, then we should take advantage of how easy it is to have that infor-

mation removed from those lists.

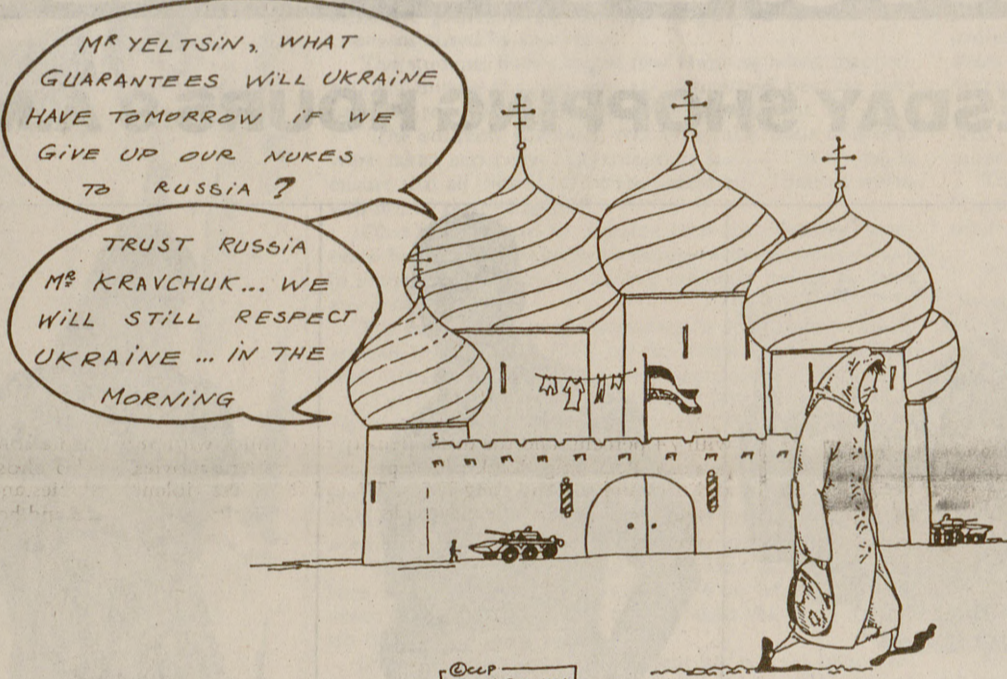
It is a bad feeling to come away from checking your mailbox without any mail. Even junk mail is sometimes more comforting than finding an empty box. But it's a far worse feeling to fall victim to mail fraud. When students receive mail from scam artists, odds are good that the scam artist got the student's address from a list purchased from A&M.

Students can check out any business by calling the Better Business Bureau and seeing if any complaints have been filed against the company.

They should also be sure to report any complaints about possible mail fraud to consumer advocate groups and the proper authorities to help keep other students from becoming a victim to the same scam.

Without the help of the law, which requires the University to give out student information, all students must act to have their names removed from these public mailing lists in order to slam the door on possible mail fraud. Even if this means missing out on the coveted junk mail that keeps our mailboxes from being empty.

"Big money has changed the news and information industry just as it has changed professional sports," O'Reilly said. "Few journalists like it but



## Halls of education sow seeds of students' political apathy

FRANK STANFORD

Columnist

How many of you out there know anything about the Texas candidates running for governor or senator? Did you know when the primaries were, or even what the primaries do? Did you vote? Do you care?

There's really nothing so embarrassing about shirking the answers to these questions — these days anyway — because political apathy is sort of an "in" thing. What is scary, however, is how much of our country is controlled by the very individuals we ignore. Although democracy is synonymous with political freedom the world over and America is a visible symbol of liberty, Americans, the keepers of liberty, are woefully indifferent re-

garding their own elections and policies. Why? Do we really not care, or do we just think it doesn't matter?

It seems as though we just don't care — but even if someone thinks they couldn't care less about politics, I would wager that a 50 percent tax rate on everybody's paycheck would change some minds. Ignorance. Maybe people don't know what makes America tick politically. If they did, surely they would vote. This would be a good excuse.

Nope. Not for us, anyway. By this point in our academic careers, we all hopefully are well aware of our government's basic workings, the importance of voting, and other political responsibilities. In addition, as college students we represent part of the educated elite, and are supposedly more principled regarding such responsibilities than the average citizen.

So, in order to discover why someone would be so apathetic about politics — someone who had no excuse — I asked somebody who fit that description (and then some). Me.

Even growing up with a politically concerned family, I developed a cynical, uninter-

ested attitude towards policy and politicians as I approached the voting age. On the occasion that I did vote, a straight Republican ticket was always an easy choice and required little thought. Ronald Reagan was the only familiar name, and quite frankly, I couldn't get excited about choosing some railroad commissioner. I thought I just didn't care who held such offices.

I came up with a very unscientific theory of political apathy based on conjecture, empirical evidence and my own jaded perspective. My theory states that there are two main reasons why many Americans (college students primarily) don't seem to care about elections and such.

School. We learn apathy for politics as early as junior high, and certainly through college. I'm not referring to the academic type of learning in eighth grade government class. We learned apathy without being aware of it. In high school if you or a close friend weren't running for a student government position, did you really give a damn who won? Was the election going to change the school any? Three hour lunch shifts maybe? Recess for 12th graders? Of course not. The position just

### Every spring campus is loaded with campaign signs: "Whoop! I'm Bob/Betty (photo attached) and I'd like to be your Secretary of Sidewalk Maintenance!"

needed to be filled. I really don't think colleges are much different. Every spring the A&M campus is loaded with campaign signs of every design possible, from giant "Gig 'Ems" to Reveille cut-outs, all brightly painted. Although I rather enjoy these signs for their artistic merits, they all say the same things: "Whoop! I'm Bob/Betty (photo attached) and I'd like to be your Class Secretary of Sidewalk Maintenance!"

Can you or anyone you know actually name the occupants of all these "important" student government positions? How many Aggies know who the class president is, or

are sweating over whether that person is up there making those gut wrenching decisions which will affect us all? I would guess that it's an appalling few. We have simply learned that things will go on as usual regardless of who's in office. It just doesn't matter.

The second major factor for political apathy moves beyond college and concludes that a sickeningly enormous percentage of elected officials are unscrupulous at best. It seems like every day the media reports some new government scandal. Mistresses, bad checks, kickbacks, lying, harassment — the list is endless. You've got to wonder why candidates will spend millions of their own dollars — not to mention ours — to get elected. It just can't be because they're so in love with the constituents and want to help them. My guess is that getting elected has much more to do with power, personal achievement, prestige and business connections than true concern for the public. There's just nothing we can do to change this aspect of human nature.

I figure we're more or less going the way of the Roman Empire anyway.

Frank Stanford is a graduate philosophy student

COLLEGE STATION, TX  
 March 23  
 1994  
**MAIL CALL**

### 'Liberal' label not for all Aggie Democrats

I have chosen to allocate my time to write this letter in order to address a point which I feel deserves clarification. This particular topic is the description of the Democratic party as "liberal," a word which seems synonymous with Satan in these parts.

I am a member of the Aggie Democrats, the chapter of the College Democrats (yes, we do exist) here on the Texas A&M campus. Contrary to popular belief, most of the members of the Aggie Democrats do not fit the description of a liberal. We have members who favor strong use of the death penalty, minimizing federal government spending, a strong military, the ending of

the welfare system as we know it and so forth.

Also, believe it or not, we have members who oppose President Clinton's health care plan. Sounds pretty "conservative" doesn't it Ags? We members of the Aggie Democrats tend not to think of ourselves as "liberal" or "conservative" Democrats, but rather as rational Americans.

The common thread that unites the Aggie Democrats is that we have an open mind when dealing with issues concerning the United States. The purpose of the Aggie Democrats is to provide an organization for those students who wish to participate in the political process in an objective manner, by analyzing the costs and benefits of actions by local, state and the federal government. We feel that a straight-party vote is a wasted vote, that people should be more objective when voting.

While the Aggie Democrats are attempting to deal with current issues that are important in a rational manner, the chapter of the College Republicans on this campus seems content to call people names, and attempt rather pathetic attacks on political figures.

The purpose of the student organizations on this campus is to provide students with an "other education." Education is objective in its manner and content, without regard to whatever views are said to be "popular." I believe that the Aggie Democrats are doing their part in providing an objective "other education" to the students here at Texas A&M University. I suppose the College Republicans will continue to provide the student body with the subjective view of the workings of the local, state and federal governments.

Well Ags, if to be "liberal" means to view issues in a rational manner, then the Aggie Democrats can be described by such term. I invite those members of the student body who think of themselves as "independent" to come to an Aggie Democrats meeting and see what we are about. Trust me, we aren't as "evil" as we have been portrayed to be.

### Tenure column much needed, well-reasoned

I want to commend and thank Prof. Dennis A. Berthold for his extremely well-written and reasoned article on tenure in The Battalion. Such a scholarly presentation of what tenure is, how it came about, and what it is intended to accomplish is particularly needed in the current time and environment at Texas A&M University. I appreciate the efforts and intent!

Robert A. Kennedy  
 Vice President for Research and Associate Provost for Graduate Studies

### Students find little wisdom in words

Pearls of Wisdom? Barbara Bush's discussion on the "changing roles of the First Lady" was pathetically lacking substance. In fact, the former First Lady failed to discuss any role change whatsoever. Rather, she dwelled on the wonderful world of traditional family values, going as far as to offer

a personal analysis of the happiness of the Clinton marriage and the mothering abilities of Hillary Rodham Clinton. Mrs. Bush offered her view of the first lady's responsibilities as that of a supporter and spokesperson of the president's thoughts, regardless of her personal or perhaps even conflicting opinions. Come on Barbara — stop perpetuating the myth that an educated, career oriented woman is a poor mother and wife because she can think for herself.

When questioned about her choice of literacy as her personal philanthropy, Mrs. Bush responded by saying that when George began seeking higher office in 1978, she realized she needed to become involved in a cause. Unfortunately, Barbara did not understand just how callous her remark sounded to the attentive ear. American family values place an importance on helping others.

Was Mrs. Bush's motivation to free America from illiteracy truly noble or merely another campaign vehicle to get her husband elected? Barbara, your Pearls of Wisdom seemed as "faux" as the pearls around your neck!

Katherine McCalmon  
 Class of '95  
 Kingsley Ross  
 Class of '95

Matt M. Murphy  
 Class of '96