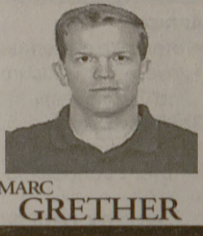


The state of the Fourth Estate



MARC GRETHER

Modern journalism values drama instead of newsworthy stories

On March 15th, an Amtrak train crashed, killing 11 people on the outskirts of Chicago. Graphic footage of the grisly scene were carried on newscasts of the event for days, while many newspapers carried similar photographs.

A tourist bus on a Mother's Day excursion to a casino crashed in Louisiana leaving 22 dead. News coverage of the event discussed every aspect of the crash, going into excruciating detail about the possible medical problems of the bus driver.

A group of tourists was boating on Lake Hamilton in Arkansas on May 2. Suddenly, the boat sank, killing 13 of the 21 passengers. The speed with which the boat went down precluded photographs from being taken of the event.

Didn't hear about the boating accident? Not many did.

No national newspapers carried the story, which garnered front-page coverage in only two regional newspapers, the *Dallas Morning News* and Memphis' *The Daily News*.

The national networks that aired the story did so well into their broadcasts, indicating that this was not a top story.

Yet the media was quick to point out why the boating story was not a media priority. It was, as MSNBC vice president and general manager Erik Sorenson recently put it, the lack of footage that was "compelling" enough.

What type of photograph exactly would be needed to make a story about the untimely death of 13 people compelling? Rest assured, if 13 children were killed in yet

another school shooting, train wreck or bus crash, the story would be major news, compelling photograph or not. Although there can be no doubt that every effort would be made to have a picture of every minute detail.

It seems this need for a compelling picture stems from news formats which value drama over newsworthiness.

This approach to news reporting takes what is deemed the most entertaining view of potential stories and often overlooks those stories which do not lend themselves to this format, such as the boating accident. Whenever possible, the events are covered live. At other times, in news magazines, there are dramatizations involving actors involved in a fictionalized version of the story.

This style of portraying news robs stories of other potential subtexts. Lance Bennett in his book, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, discusses this issue by detailing various ways of reporting a murder. On one end of the reporting spectrum is the sensationalized news approach.

On the other end, "a murder can be reported analytically in order to show how various aspects of the crime reflect social problems known to be linked with violent crime (such as poverty, family violence, unemployment, alcoholism, social instability, or prison system failures)." The first approach fails to include this larger social commentary.

Another problem

with a sensationalized approach to news is the lack of context in which to actually learn something from news stories. An action-oriented news style treats each issue as separate and does nothing to suggest the causes of the underlying problem.

Without context or background information in often fragmented and disjointed news stories, the news is like any other form of entertainment, rather than the important protector of freedom that it needs to be.

The lives of those killed in the boating accident should have received more attention. Their lives are worth just as much as the 13 murdered in Colorado by Dylan Kle-

bold and Eric Harris.

Jesse Jackson may have been busy freeing the three American hostages held in Yugoslavia on the Saturday the boat sank, but more papers should have used some of their prime column-space on the boating accident.

The television networks also should have let the public know more about the misfortune that befell our countrymen because nothing is more important to us as Americans than what is happening right here at home.

Compelling picture or not.

Marc Grether is a graduate student in mathematics.



CALEB MCDANIEL

Attempts at media reform pose new challenges

The relationship between the media and the masses is the classic love affair of American democracy.

In the early days, the love was strong. The people thought so much of their press that the protection of its freedom headlined the Bill of Rights.

But in recent years, the relationship has been on the rocks. Disenchanted by the media's unfortunate tendency towards sensationalized stories and intrusive news-gathering tactics, the public has lost trust in its one-time true love.

Attempts to patch things up between press and public are everywhere in abundance. One of the most recent movements towards reconciliation has been a theory known as civic journalism.

Civic journalists believe communities can be mainly self-sufficient if they are closely-knit and well-cultivated. Thus, civic journalism usually consists of cooperative, problem-solving projects between media outlets and other community entities.

They are especially interested in being catalysts for community dialogue. Therefore, civic journalists often join hands with business leaders to sponsor town hall meetings, as well as in-depth community coverage in newspapers and newscasts.

But like most noble ideas, community-minded journalism has a tendency to be blissfully unaware of its own limitations.

Unless caution is exercised, this latest media bandwagon may tip over because of over-enthusiastic passengers.

Zealous journalists have tried to implement the ideals of civic journalism around the country, and the movement has come most recently to Bryan-College Station.

Tuesday night, Bryan-College Station got a taste of this brand of civic journalism in its own backyard. A town hall meeting was held in Bryan to discuss youth violence. Significantly, however, the meeting was not moderated by an elected community leader, but by Mike Wright, host of "Brazos Valley This Morning," a journalist. The forum was aired live on primetime television and on a popular music radio station.

These are the telltale signs of civil journalism — journalists taking it upon themselves to use the power of their profession for some community outreach.

There is no doubt that civic journalists do have the best of intentions. Forums like the one held Tuesday night are not financially profitable, and by their willingness to eat up 105 minutes of airtime to broadcast



the event, KBTX-TV and B102-FM have proven their sincerity. Good intentions, however, are not enough to make civic journalism work, and its defects have yet to be fully explored.

No broken love affair can be fixed unless both parties are willing. The reunion of press and public is no different. Civic journalists seem to think the estrangement of democracy and journalism is mainly the fault of the media. If only journalists would do more for the community, all would be well again.

But the public's disillusionment will not be dispelled so easily.

The public has become accustomed to a media more entertaining than socially responsible.

Audiences addicted to the reporting of car accidents and three-alarm fires may

greet serious attempts at community uplift with a yawn and a general "ho-hum."

Therefore, for all its democratic pretensions, careless civic journalism can consolidate majority opinions instead of diversifying discourse.

Town hall meetings usually attract active citizens whose voices are used to being heard instead of the more jaded citizens who have become used to being ignored. As a result, it is highly possible that journalist-led efforts will only serve to homogenize public discourse.

Judging from the local media fallout of Tuesday's meeting, for instance, the consensus at the meeting was a cry for faith and hope to be restored in the community's children.

Tell us something we do not already know. The need for faith and hope is certainly a real one, but it also too vague to be a hard-hitting community solution.

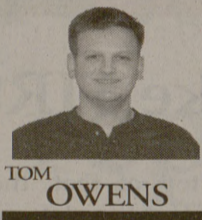
Perhaps journalists should simply stick to hard-hitting news after all.

Caleb McDaniel is a junior history major.

From China, with love

United States must enact policies to combat dangerous fruits of Chinese espionage

CONSERVATIVES HAVE BEEN telling us for years that the communist government in China cannot be trusted.



TOM OWENS

Last week, a Senate committee, led by Christopher Cox of California, released a report that justifies right-wing paranoia.

However, this latest development is not surprising when one considers the historical character of the communist Chinese state.

Quite simply, the Chinese communists are the worst criminals the world has ever known.

In addition to their severe restrictions on religious and political freedom, they are guilty of the holocaust of nearly 50 million dissidents, and the death of over 100 million unborn children through their "one child" forced abortion policies.

Think about this: even if Hitler had killed every Jew in Europe (about 16 million at the time), he would only be

slightly more than one-tenth the quantitative murderer the Red Chinese have proven themselves to be.

Americans must keep this in mind when evaluating the regime in China. The worst mass murderers of all time cannot be expected to have moral qualms about stealing nuclear secrets.

The Cox Report found that, from Carter through Clinton, the Communists have committed the worst acts of espionage in U.S. history.

"With the stolen U.S. technology, the PRC has leaped, in a handful of years, from 1950s-era strategic nuclear capabilities to the more modern thermonuclear weapons designs. These modern thermonuclear weapons took the United States decades of effort, hundreds of millions of dollars and numerous nuclear tests to achieve," the report said.

Although the report's main point is that the security of American nuclear research facilities is extremely poor, the revelation of China's advancement in nuclear technology has consequences far beyond a tightening of security.

China will soon possess a nuclear arsenal capable of striking the entire mainland United States.

America must act quickly to avoid another Cold War and maintain dominance over the world.

The following is a stepwise plan for assuring our success:

1. Americans must elect strong conservative leadership that values America's present state over an idealized vision of the future.

When the Chinese fund the President's re-elec-

tion, it cannot be reasonably expected that he will deal with them harshly.

Someone must fill the enormous shoes of Ronald Reagan and defeat this second "Evil Empire."

2. Our security must be rock solid. According to the Cox Report, "China requires as a normal practice that many of the thousands of students, tourists and other Chinese visitors to the United States to seek out bits of information that might be used for military purposes."

To prevent further security abuses, citizens of the People's Republic of China residing illegally in the United States must be deported to prevent further theft from our laboratories and academic institutions.

We must end all tourism and visits between China and ourselves. To prevent other aliens from selling secrets to the Chinese, non-citizens must be banned from defense-sensitive research.

The enforcement of these regulations should be under martial law, and its offenders charged with treason, under threat of capital punishment if proven guilty.

The Cox Report also found several United States corporations acted illegally in their conduct with the Chinese.

According to the report, one particularly gross offender was Hughes Electronics, which assisted the Chinese in the development of satellite-launching rockets. Much of the technology involved in placing a satellite in orbit can also be applied to delivering a nuclear warhead.

"Hughes deliberately acted without seeking to obtain the legally required licenses," the report said.

In the future, companies like Hughes found to be selling unauthorized information to the Chinese

should be given one warning, and after a second offense their assets should be seized and sold at auction to fund U.S. nuclear research.

3. National defense must be the first priority, and the first act should be the deployment of a nuclear missile defense system. America needs missile defense now, regardless of any treaties signed with the U.S.S.R.

U.S. conventional forces must also be upgraded. We should re-deploy our great battleships, and build more carriers to meet and exceed Reagan's dream of a 600-ship navy.

Also, U.S. soldiers should be paid a living wage; their sacrifices are worth more than poverty level subsistence.

4. We must enact a comprehensive trade embargo on China.

Last year, China ran a \$57 billion trade surplus with the United States, which reflects a net transfer of wealth from our country to theirs.

For the technology China cannot steal, our trade policies fund the research.

5. U.S. nuclear research should be accelerated. Now that China has stolen our current technology, we must continue research under strict security to maintain an edge in the arms race.

With this combination of strategic investments, America can break China the same way she broke the USSR: by continuously out-spending and out-researching the enemy until they can no longer afford to keep up.

Through sacrifice and decisive action, America will remain as the world's strongest power and defeat the last major bastion of communism.

Tom Owens is a senior chemical engineering major.