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Democracy vs. the news

by Philip Terzian

Breaking the News is a book that could only have been written in the late twentieth century by someone born about the middle of the century. It is impossible to imagine an Enlightenment pamphleteer, or Victorian inhabitant of Grub Street, or foreign correspondent in Weimar Berlin, wasting a hapless grove of trees to speculate whether his chosen vocation was somehow to blame for affairs of state. But then there has been nothing quite like the Baby Boom generation for sheer self-regard and self-veneration, or for journalists who might suppose that, among the remarkable achievements of their peers, "the media" could "undermine American democracy." Journalists of the past, even the recent past, would have laughed at such conceit: democracy, they would argue, might well undermine the media—journalism is a business, subject to the marketplace—but not the other way around.

It is a paradox of the modern journalistic world that, as the number of newspapers in America steadily diminishes, the number of studies devoted to the press, the number of symposia planned to discuss it, the number of books on the subject and public philosophers to write them, somehow rises. But there is a simple explanation, really. Journalism, like any number of occupations, has undergone status inflation in our times. What was once a slightly disreputable trade —complete with apprenticeships, journeymen, and guilds—is now a profession, one which attracts the likes of our author, James Fallows.

Mr. Fallows, a graduate of Harvard College who once wrote speeches for President Jimmy Carter, has done quite well in a business which, just a generation ago, would not have attracted many Harvard men. This elevated station, however, exacts a price: journalists, especially journalists of Mr. Fallows's generation, tend to enlarge the significance of their work by assuming an importance it does not possess. And, being Baby Boomers, there is never enough time and space for self-analysis.

Here, then, is Mr. Fallows's contribution to the mayhem. American journalism and democracy are in crisis, he believes, because the media have grown more powerful than in the past and, inevitably, corrupt and irresponsible. Americans have never been especially fond of the press, he acknowledges, but "through the last decade … their disdain … has reached new levels. Americans believe that the news media have become too arrogant, cynical, scandal-minded, and destructive."

This has had two unfortunate consequences. The public has registered its dismay by gradually boycotting the press, reducing the number of outlets and resources. Accordingly, democracy has suffered, in Mr. Fallows's estimation, because "ignoring the news leaves people with no way to prepare for trends they don't happen to observe themselves, no sense of what is happening in other countries or even other parts of their own town, no tools with which to make decisions about public leaders or policies." Mr. Fallows's explanation for all this—journalists are too cynical—is familiar to

any viewer of TV chat shows or reader of Op-Ed pages where, since the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, any number of journalists have reached a similar conclusion, and are troubled in that knowledge. We will return to this in a moment. In the meantime, however, it is worth examining Mr. Fallows's initial thesis.

The powers of the press, whatever they may be, are subjective, even haphazard, in nature. Newspapers may amplify or mitigate stories, as they choose, and exalt or belittle individuals. But there is no clear relationship between the actions of the media and their discernible effects. One obvious illustration is in presidential politics: in the 1930s and 1940s, when most American newspapers were editorially opposed to the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt was four times elected to the presidency. By the 1980s, when most American newspapers were editorially transformed, Ronald Reagan was elected to two terms. Indeed, from a progressive viewpoint, no amount of propaganda in the news pages or on the air about a variety of issues—homelessness, affirmative action, anti-Communism, crime— has yielded the desired results in public opinion. Still, like advertising, journalism seems to possess implicit power: it cannot be quantified, yet is somehow presumed. The fact that candidates for public office, and politicians in power, contend with the media, even a hostile press, is testament to this power. They would happily do otherwise if they felt they could.

Still, it is difficult to ascribe much power, especially the power to undermine democracy, to an institution which, as Mr. Fallows suggests, is steadily shrinking in public esteem. Here, then, a little textual critique might yield more evidence than investigative reporting. Mr. Fallows's lament for the gradual irrelevance of the media to national life is expressed in extraordinary terms. Without the benefit of the press, he says, the citizenry is very nearly helpless: people cannot know anything, and knowing nothing, cannot make informed judgments— not even about events in "other parts of their own town," much less "other countries."

Only a journalist born into the television age, and raised to believe that the medium is the message, could believe such a thing, or assert it without discerning its clear implication. The media, after all, is a recent invention. Mass circulation newspapers did not exist before the twentieth century, and "broadcast journalism"—an oxymoron, if ever there was one—is a postwar phenomenon. It is difficult to imagine, from Mr. Fallows's point of view, how the colonists of the Massachusetts Bay, or the westward migrants of the Cumberland Gap, or the industrial classes of the Gilded Age, might have prepared "for trends they don't happen to observe" in the absence of "tools with which to make decisions." Of course, the press is a factor in a prosperous democracy, but it is scarcely a decisive one.

That is the essential difference between journalism as it used to be practiced, and journalism as it appears to subsist today. It is only in very recent times that the writers and editors of newspapers presumed that they perform something approaching a public service, or must feel the need to discharge a civic duty. Historically, journalism was a kind of low literary art: most towns and cities had multiple outlets, all pursuing a cacophony of styles and ideology. Readers were invited to make a choice—the penny press for the working man, the *Boston Evening Transcript* for T. S. Eliot's Cousin Harriet—and newspapers catered to their customers' taste.

Unhappily, this tradition has largely been lost. Cities and towns, even vast metropolitan regions, are often served by one daily newspaper; and newspapers, including their proprietors, tend to picture themselves now as a community resource, a local, quasi-governmental institution. This has led, in contemporary America, down some very predictable paths. Not only do newspapers, and "media outlets" generally, seek to cater to an unseen, polyglot audience, but they do so by imitating the most egregious excesses of political indoctrination. Journalists do not seek truth, as a rule, since truth, in our postmodern world, is a matter of opinion. They scarcely even bother to record the passing circus. They pursue justice, instead, or correct imbalance, or foment "change," or cater to

fashionable prejudice or mythology. They serve, on the whole, to satisfy themselves. Journalists tend to address one another in print, rather than the customers purchasing their product, since subscribers must be guided to "prepare for trends they don't happen to observe themselves."

For Mr. Fallows, cynicism is the perverse element in modern journalism, along with arrogance and (in some instances) undue affluence. But cynicism is scarcely the besetting sin of the trade; in truth, journalists are not cynical, but impossibly romantic. They become infatuated with personalities, they evolve (with much encouragement) into political crusaders, they insinuate their values into their reporting, and do it so habitually that their partisan convictions are often mistaken for the canons of the press. Indeed, they can be cynical, but about their readers, not their subjects.

Mr. Fallows is no exception. It is strikingly evident, in *Breaking the News*, that it is not American democracy for which he despairs, but the Democratic party. And like any good reporter, he furnishes his readers with instructive examples. The occasional success of Republicans in politics is so painfully mysterious it can only be explained by media misadventure. The loss of Democratic hegemony can largely be ascribed to a derelict press. All of Mr. Fallows's gallant losers are Democrats, all his villainous conquerors are Republicans (or worse, conservatives) and his thoughtful acquaintances are safely on the Left, all duly applauded in the back of the book. Mr. Fallows expends considerable energy, and much valuable space, to defend the policy initiatives of Bill Clinton, and Fallows's old boss Jimmy Carter, against a catalogue of supposed distortions in the media and professional malpractice. How, he asks, can decency be restored to public discourse, and the good works of Carter and Clinton be acknowledged? No wonder, one is tempted to think, that the people who used to read newspapers on the subway now listen to Rush Limbaugh.

Mr. Fallows is certainly correct to deplore many of the habits of political reporting, and much of its superficiality and sloth. In presidential campaigns, as we may observe this year, journalists are more interested in process than substance, and tend to follow contests rather than the principles presumably at stake. Moreover, television has corrupted the routine—a corruption, I should say, embraced by all participants— by reducing details to digestible chunks, or emphasizing trivia: pouncing on mistakes, probing for weakness, judging politicians on theatrical grounds.

But it is a mistake to suppose that Americans are so malleable. The prettiest candidates do not always win, the richest often lose, and the cleverest slogans don't always prevail. The Clinton health care plan was not scuttled by irresponsible journalism (as Mr. Fallows believes) but by discussion of the issue, in Congress and out, and by public debate, a democratic clash of ideals and opinions. President Clinton and James Fallows lost a fair fight.

For that matter, it is ignorant to presume that the Barnumesque qualities of American public life may be blamed on supposed transgressions of the media. James Fallows, and too many of his colleagues, persistently allude to some distant golden age of participatory democracy, a kind of civic Eden from which our national politics, having savored the taste of sound-bitten apples, are forever expelled. When was it? There was no television or*USA Today* when "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" were running for the White House, or "a chicken in every pot" was promised to Americans: "Let us have peace," "He kept us out of war," "Happy days are here again," "I shall go to Korea"— it is not so easy to conclude that things are worse.

And unfortunately, the cure is more dangerous than the disease. A healthy portion of this volume is devoted to a particular enthusiasm of Mr. Fallows's called "Public Journalism," a curious movement within the business, well funded by foundations and supported by practitioners, which maintains that publications ought to be good corporate citizens, and promote specific political goals. The notion of Public Journalism appears to have originated with Charles Peters, proprietor of*The Washington Monthly* and an early patron of James Fallows, who offers his mentor much reverential treatment in this work. Peters is a former Peace Corps bureaucrat who has sought for decades to translate the

culture of his onetime employer into political journalism: an upside-down version of paternalism, where bright young things (like James Fallows) spread out into the provinces and educate those with "no sense of what is happening in other countries or even other parts of their own town."

If Mr. Fallows thinks that the public is unhappy with the media now, and believes that journalists are partisan and arrogant, he should wait until the full horror of Public Journalism takes root in American newspapers and on the television networks. Charles Peters has lately been revealed to be a private political adviser to the Democratic governor of West Virginia. Perhaps, with luck, all Americans will benefit from the luxury of Democratic government, West Virginia-style, blessed by the wisdom of Charles Peters, and guided by the judgment of journalists like James Fallows, rescuing the American people from themselves.

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