

## CLOSING THE GAPS: FOCUS ON THE MEDIA

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Good morning. It's an honor to speak to you at Caux today. Today I briefly touch on three things.

1. I'll share some of the findings of a massive study this spring by the Project for Excellence in Journalism called "the State of the News Media 2004."
2. Add some of my own views of how and where the news media are failing and how these failures are tied to bad business practice
3. Suggest a few ways the growing stranglehold of Wall Street on the News media might be addressed to broaden coverage, bring in the audience, encourage discussion and close the gaps.

I apologize for my emphasis on the U.S. media; it is what I know. But I hope you can apply these lesson to the media in your own country and, after all, many of the world's developing nations take their lessons, good and bad, from the U.S. media.

In an introduction to the Project for Excellence Report, Bill Kovach, a distinguished U.S. journalist and former New York Times editor, wrote – and I quote "News people .... Fear more than ever the economic behavior of their companies is eroding the quality of journalism. These worries have widened the divide between those who cover the news and the business executives they work for."

The report also suggests that the obsession with quarterly earnings report has widened the divide between news organizations and the people they serve. The public is voting with its feet – by deserting the media.

For traditional news outlets in the United States readership is down n TV viewership is down or, in the case of cable news, static n Radio listenership is static.

Only when one looks away from the mainstream media – at the ethnic press, at the alternative press, at the internet press – which is hard to define – are more people reading and listening.

Noted the report:

'Without investing in building new audiences, the long-term outlook for many traditional news audiences is problematic.'

But the U.S. media are not investing, particularly not in staff and content.

Newspapers in 2003 had a 19 percent pre-tax profit on average – and cut their staffing. Local television had an obscene pretax profit of 40 percent – and cut staffing

If this is a capitalist press in action .... Serious questions can be raised about, when it comes to gathering and producing the news, unrestrained capitalism and the furthering of democracy are at odds.

These strains can be seen in coverage in a variety of ways:

We all know about the rise of big-story journalism, the drumbeat of celebrity coverage and the sensationalizing of certain events. What we don't all know is that there is an economic cause for this. .... Beating one story to death is a lot cheaper than finding varied stories that take investment in reporting. Foreign reporting is particularly costly. And so, three years after 9/11, Americans remain largely ignorant about the rest of the world.

But journalism in my view is letting down its audience in other ways:

1. First the US news media are increasingly isolated from their audience. The U.S. remains a country of immigrants from all over the world. Today, most are non-white. And American populations of color are growing faster than the white population. Yet, although many cities in the U.S. already are 50 percent or more non-white, news organizations have generally done a poor job of diversifying staff. Only about 1 in 10 journalists in print newsroom are non-white and few of these run the show.

The impact is huge ... and economic. When people see little reflection of themselves and their concerns, they look for news elsewhere (note the increase in the ethnic press). Differences of view and value are often not even raised, let alone discussed and debated, in the marketplace of ideas that should be represented by a good news organization.

Last week I was working with a roomful of young reporters at a suburban newspaper near Boston. I asked them to brainstorm, in groups, about what is undercovered by their newspaper. This was long: immigrants and working class people, minorities and the elderly, teens and the disabled. I asked why and, after a long silence, one reporter said, sheepishly, "We write about people like us."

It's human nature, one really important reason why diverse staffing is needed (although, obviously, all reporters must push beyond their comfort zones).

2. Secondly, in their efforts to get more exposure, news organizations today are eager for their reporters to be interviewed by other journalists. Reporters talking to reporters may be good business but it is bad journalism. Instead of working on gathering facts, too many reporters are spending their time giving opinions.

3. Third, the news media are much easier to control today by those who make a living in manipulation. This is the subject of an article in this month's Columbia Journalism Review. Journalists working fast with heavy demands in an around the clock environment have little time to check facts .... So if they are lied to – and the article says that's particularly commonplace in this year's presidential race – they're much more likely to print the lie and the other sides rebuttal instead of to seek out facts that set the record straight. This is not an example of the objective reporting that has become a model to many. It is bad journalism. And it is dishonest journalism.

4. Finally the media, in part because news organizations always seem to be cutting staff instead of adding staff, have been slow to invest and experiment in ways of using new technology to change their relationships with members of the public. Audiences today are no longer satisfied being told “this is important – shut up and accept it.” They want to interact. The internet has the power of two-way communication and serious discussion. In the hands of competent, professional news organizations this is powerful. But if these organizations ignore the opportunity someone else will gladly step in. We – the public – will talk to those who talk back to us.

So what does this say about what the news media must do to bridge the gap – between haves and have nots and between making a profit and serving the public.

The answers of what's needed seem clear enough:

1. Broader coverage aimed at the concerns of a broader audience. Journalists should “fill the silence,” says Amy Goodman of Democracy Now.
2. More space aimed at discussing solutions, not merely identifying problems.
3. More opportunities for audience participation

But getting there won't be easy. The first step clearly must be to convince media owners it is in their best economic interests to do this – that lower short-term profits can help them sustain profitability longer. In short, that good journalism is good business.

I believe rank and file journalists and their audiences should work together to do this convincing. They should, at every opportunity, point out that circulations, in all media, is static or declining and that gaining audience means giving them a reason to come.

They should join together to send representatives to board meetings (many journalists have their retirement in company stocks). Journalists could embarrass their company's boards by offering to accept lower profits for more investment in news. Wouldn't it be powerful to have a journalist stand and say, “I'd like to accept less personal profit so that I can better serve the public's interest.”

Finally, if nothing else works, journalists and communities should use the Internet to break away and start their own publications. Today, anyone can be a publisher and it's cheap.

The U.S. Constitution holds a special place for journalists. It's called the First Amendment. But it's not meant as an absolute protection for obscene profits. Ultimately, if things don't change, the majority of the public may no longer support a special role for journalism. And the First Amendment, a foundation of democracy, could be in trouble.

Thank you.