

Slipshod Scribblers



I have a terrible confession to make. Sen. John Kerry was right, except for one tiny detail. Nothing good comes to people who goof off in

class, don't do their homework, and cheat in their exams. Only they don't end up in Iraq. They end up as journalists, sending others to Iraq.

The bad habits they pick up at school serve them well in a profession that thrives on laziness. (One of the main reasons I became a journalist.) Rather than do original research or develop new sources or leads, journalists prefer to rely on government handouts. Rather than pick up a telephone to hear both sides of the story, they would rather call their one or two tried and true sources, not coincidentally the same one or two tried and true sources that other hacks rely on. I was recently rung up by a London *Daily Mail* hack asking me if *Vanity Fair* magazine had paid for a party I gave in London to celebrate my birthday. "What reason could *VF* possibly have to pick up the tab for a party I gave for my friends?" I said. "There is absolutely no truth to it." Well, you guessed it. The next day the hack led off his column in London's leading tabloid that *VF* had paid for my party. Outrageously unfair? Not really, just par for the course.

Mind you, the British press is the yellowest this side of the Greek one, but even here, in the Land of the Free, hacks feel free to ruin the reputation of anyone they don't agree with or happen to dislike. When *TAC* was starting up four years ago, I had many journalists ring me up pretending to wish to interview me about the magazine. Some did, most of them didn't—mention the magazine, that is. One of them, a woman, I found

going through my mail and my wastepaper basket. She works for *Tatler* magazine in London. No wonder the old joke about a journalist who is discovered working on a paper by a friend and who tells the friend, "For God's sake, don't tell my mother I'm a reporter, she thinks I play the piano in a warehouse," works. As does the old Baldwin jibe—he had Beaverbrook in mind—that journalism enjoyed the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages: power without responsibility.

Journalists actually are purveyors of conventional wisdom. This makes them very useful mouthpieces for corporations. As the poet Humbert Wolfe wrote: "You cannot hope to bribe or twist / Thank God! The British journalist / But, seeing what the man will do / Unbribed, there's no occasion to."

Making up stories out of whole cloth comes naturally to people who honed their skills inventing variations on "the dog ate my homework." If he hadn't become a politician, Bill Clinton, a very skilled and persuasive liar, would have or should have been a journalist. He would have been a great one. Almost as good as Judith Miller in the *New York Times* talking twaddle about Saddam's supposed weapons of mass destruction and relying on the word of mega-crook and con man Ahmad Chalabi. Probably better than Jeffrey Goldberg in *The New Yorker* hyping up a fanciful link between Saddam and al-Qaeda. His other mentors could have been Ruth Shalit, with her multiple plagiarisms at *The New Republic*, Stephen Glass writing fiction

and passing it off as fact, and of course Jayson Blair of the good old *New York Times*.

Okay, I am being a bit tough on the Fourth Estate, perhaps because I know it quite well. It was Carlyle who called hacks the Fourth Estate, referring to the enormous power wielded by those who direct the flow of information.

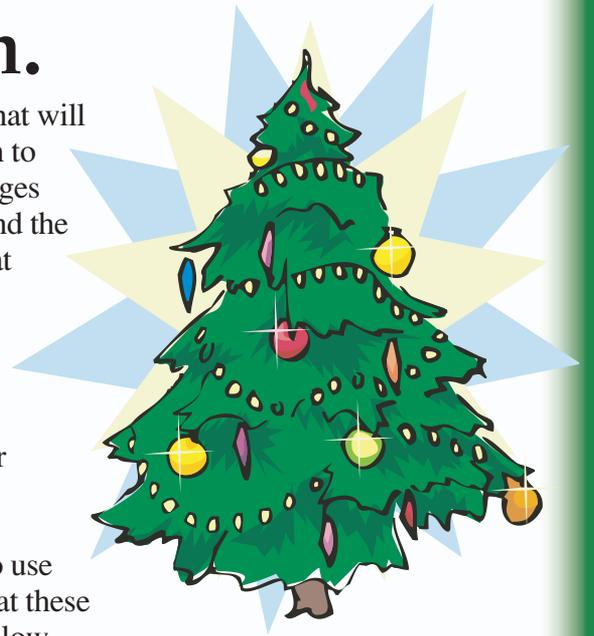
But let's face it, the power is staggering. Control of the press is concentrated in a few hands and their responsibilities are small in proportion to their power. Hacks can set up their own kangaroo courts in which they figure as prosecutor, counsel, jury, and judge. Awareness of this power sets the tone and puts a swagger in the media's step. It respects no authority and is cavalier where the right of individual privacy is concerned. In fact, it tends to see itself above the law, and governments quail before the media as kings once did before barons.

And it gets worse. Journalism is supposed to report the facts, however unobjectively, but now it has morphed into entertainment. Caught up in the ratings war, the search for profits, and ego gratification, hacks are now seen as less trustworthy than lawyers, used-car salesmen, and undertakers.

Two generations ago, Noel Coward sang, "Don't put your daughter on the stage, Mrs. Worthington," warning of the perils that stage-struck young women had to endure as showgirls. If he were alive today, the "master" would surely be warning Mrs. Worthington not to let her daughter become a journalist. Then again, he might not. Judith Miller, Maureen Dowd, Leslie Stahl, Barbara Walters, and others of their ilk have not done so badly. It beats having to sleep with Harvey Weinstein. ■

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