"How the Press Behaves and Misbehaves"

a presentation by Michael Robinson

Symposium on "The Role of the Media in American Life"
Nichols College, Dudley, Massachusetts
Dr. Lee A, McGaan, Moderator

Michael Robinson is Associate Professor of Political Science at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, he received his M.A. and his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. His doctoral thesis won the American Political Science Association award for best research in American Politics. He has taught at the University of Michigan, Georgetown, the University of Oregon, the University of Virginia and George Washington University. He is the author of more than 50 articles on television, the news media, congress, and the presidency. His commentaries have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the Washington Star. His research had included articles in Political Science Review, Political Science Quarterly and Public Opinion. In the l980 campaign he appeared as a commentator on ABC news. His book, Over the Wire and on TV, is an analysis of media political coverage.

*** * * ***

Every generation has its premier media critic. In the l920s it was Walter Lippman. Lippman claimed that the press was nothing more than a search light, focusing momentary attention on potential problems but then moving on too quickly to make much of a difference. Thirty years later it was Marshall McLuhan looking at the media, declaring that the media themselves were the message, even though McLuhan never really explained what that meant. The late 1900s represent a whole new era of media and media criticism. Move over Lippman. Move over McLuhan. Here comes Peppermint Patty.

For those of you who don't read "Peanuts", Peppermint Patty is the homely and hopeless elementary school girl who never gets any grade higher than a D-. But, despite her low grades, Patty was able this last January to express her theory of the press in just six frames of the Sunday funnies. In the usual one-sided dialogue she conducts with her teacher Patty said:

"Yes ma'am, I got all fifty test questions wrong.

No ma'am, I don't think it was my fault.

Last night I was watching a program on TV that I didn't want to miss. Then I had to read the sports in the newspaper. There was also this talk show on the radio that I listen to every night. Two of my magazines came in yesterday's mail.

Ma'am, I blame the media."

Patty speaks for most all politicians and for a growing number of pundits who either blame the press for whatever goes wrong or see the press as an imperial force in American politics. Following on the heels of an imperial Presidency, an imperial Congress and an imperial judiciary comes this theory of an imperial media.

The theory apparently has two parts - that the media behave imperially and that the media have imperial levels of impact. Leaving aside the question of effects - to what degree the media influences public opinion or public policy - I would like this evening to examine the first proposition, that the press per se behaves imperially.

But let's begin with a warning. I come to explain the news media, not to bury them. This is not an apology for the American press: what I'm about to say will not make any reporters in the room feel like heros. But neither will my remarks satisfy the Peppermint Patty's of this earth. My mission is to dispel what I consider to be some of the most popular myths about the way the press, particularly the national press, behaves when covering Washington or beyond. And most of those myths, whether coming from the left or the right, have to do with the larger myth of an imperial press.

The fact is most of the really terrible things of which the press is accused don't happen very often. And, most of the really great qualities some people attribute to press behavior don't usually happen either. So, let's get the record straight. Let's go through five of the most important misconceptions concerning journalism and journalists, starting off with one of the "good news" myths and moving on toward some of the "bad news" variety.

Myth One: The Press is An Investigative Institution.

Watch Lou Grant reruns on television. Watch All the President's Men on late night HBO. What do you see? You see an image of the American journalist only slightly more accurate than the image of defense attorneys fostered by old "Perry Mason" programs.

On Lou Grant, in All the President's Men, journalists are forever uncovering major news stories that somebody is trying desperately hard to keep secret. Journalists investigate the news much more than they report it.

In reality, if even our best, most investigative newspapers (the Post, the Times, the Globe) printed only the stories they have uncovered - let alone pried loose from somebody else - the news would, at most, fill up two pages of copy.

Back in l970, which is to say back when the theory of our imperial media was just beginning, Leon Sigal analyzed a year's worth of front page stories from the Washington Post and the New York Times. Leaks, one form of investigative journalism, accounted for only 2% of the total coverage. At most, ten percent of Sigal's 2800 front page news stories were investigative reporting, pieces in which the journalist went out and unearthed hidden evidence a la Perry Mason.

Margaret Sheehan and I did a yearlong study of CBS Evening News and the UPI day wire in l980. We found the same thing that Sigal did: only about one story in ten dealing with the Carter administration could be labeled investigative journalism, and that with a loose definition of the term. Even in the elite press the overwhelming majority of news reporting starts with somebody other than the reporter. Most news is a straightforward description of what somebody else has said or discovered, whether it be a politician, a pollster, or even a professor.

Thirty-five years ago press critic A.J. Liebling said that the news business reminded him of a hypothetical fish cannery that spent billions on processing equipment but relied upon a few old mean in leaky row boats to bring in the fish. It isn't quite that way anymore, but the news media still spend billions more collecting canned news than fishing for hidden news. For good or ill, Lou Grant it's not.

Myth Two: The Press Almost Always Behaves Like an Adversary.

Media critics argue among themselves as to whether the press should be more investigative - conservatives generally say no, liberals generally say yes. The same basic pattern holds for our second truth about press. Liberals want more of it, conservatives less, but in either case the fact remains. Despite theories to the contrary, the press only rarely acts as adversary when dealing with established political authority. Most often the relationship between the press and the government is much less than adversarial.

Back in the late l970s I interviewed several members of the House and Senate, their press secretaries too. I asked each of them how the press had, in their opinion, changed since the early sixties.

Almost every congressman and Senator complained about what they labeled the "Watergate syndrome" - the tendency on behalf of the media to doubt everything political leaders told them and to behave like hostile adversaries in their relationships with the government. One political leader said that Watergate had put blood in the water and that the press was acting like a bunch of sharks.

But while these Congressmen were telling me that it wasn't safe to go back into the water, I did some checking on my own. I persuaded one senior member of the House, who must remain anonymous, to turn over his press clippings (stories actually written about him) and his press released for the entire calendar year of l978 - the same year I had done my interviews about the press on Capitol Hill. In other words, Congressman "X" gave me two lists: the first list included all the published stories about Congressman "X" that had appeared in that same paper.

Things are not as adversarial as you might think. In fact, things were even less adversarial than Congressman "X" had originally believed. Even though "X" comes from one of America's twenty largest cities, with one of America's largest daily newspapers, more than half of the news stories about him appearing in that paper were essentially reworded press released. Not much investigative reporting going on here. But more important was the over-all tone of these stories. In the 52 stories featuring Congressman "X", in l978, over three quarters were either good news pieces about him or were pieces written essentially by his own press secretary. Fewer than ten percent of the stories shaded toward the negative; none was hostile or even openly critical.

Granted, the nationals are tougher than the local media. Granted, too, Presidents usually do not get so easy a rise as "X". But the truth is that most press relations day-to-day in Washington are convivial, or at least civil, and certainly not hostile.

Consider what happened two months ago when, in a nationally televised press conference with the President, Sarah McClendon, of McClendon News Service, really did act like an adversary. You may remember that McClendon openly challenged Reagan for denying he knew anything about a report concerning sex discrimination in his administration. McClendon refused to accept the President's evasions and refused to laugh when Reagan made a witty remark about "R" rated press conferences.

The only ones who laughed were the other reporters, laughing, apparently, because they were

themselves embarrassed by one of their own peers really acting like an adversary.

Public response was overwhelmingly negative toward McClendon. Press response was, at best, mixed. Most reporters do not ask, nor do they appreciate very much, a really adversarial questioner.

Admittedly we tend to remember the way Roger Mudd practically dismembered Edward Kennedy in that now legendary CBS interview that started Kennedy on his road to defeat in l980. But we remember the Mudd-Kennedy interview in part because it was exceptional. As often as not, the press treats unindicted politicians the way it treats Congressman "X", not the way Roger Mudd treated Kennedy. Sure, things are tougher now than in the l950s, or the l960s. But as late as this July Dan Rather would conclude that the adversarial relationship is "badly exaggerated". Rather was right.

Myth Three: <u>The Press Behaves Like a Bunch of Liberals</u>.

To this point the reality of press has seemed less than heroic. But dispelling the third myth should improve the media's image. Because no matter what you may hear, or read, the national media rarely behave like partisan liberals, and almost never behave like Democrats.

Arguing that the press is <u>totally</u> without partisan bias is tantamount to arguing that George Steinbrenner is a nice guy or that George Bush is flashy. But in our study of 6000 campaign stories coming over the wires or on TV in l980. The media showed precious little ideological favoritism toward anybody or any issue.

Consider this. Throughout Campaign '80 we found that the "liberal" candidate almost always got the worst press. Kennedy got worse press than Reagan throughout the campaign. In what was clearly the only real instance of liberal favoritism, John Anderson got very good press at the outset of the campaign - on TV, not in print. But by July and August Anderson got the worst press scores for any candidate during any phase of the campaign.

There is no question but that press people are liberal and Democratic. Our study of CBS news personnel indicates that since l964 no Democrat has received less than 80% of the two-party vote at CBS. But that did not stop Evening News from treating Carter much more critically than it treated Reagan. At times all the networks (liberal as they may be personally) seemed to cover Carter as an under-sexed J.R. Ewing - mean and manipulative.

As for the issue in Campaign '80, we also found much less bias than you might expect. Not once during the general campaign did a news story make a judgmental statement about the rightness or wrongness of a candidate's stand on the issues.

We interviewed several reporters at CBS and UPI after the election had passed. We found that most of them felt that supply side economy theory (Reagan's theory of economics) was nonsense. But none of these reporters ever came close to writing that. What they did do was quote George Bush, over and over again, saying that supply-side was "voodoo" economics. The media kept its own mouth shut. Bias? Perhaps, but at the very least, indirect bias.

Under circumstances different from a campaign, the media do slide more easily into partisan reporting. During the coverage of Three Mile Island it did appear as if the press had learned its nuclear physics and energy policy from watching the <u>China Syndrome</u>. But even at TMI the problem was not so much unfairness toward the pronuclear people as it was a case of over-coverage and sensationalism. But when it comes to old-fashioned partisan political bias - trying to help the people you personally believe in, trying to hurt the people you oppose - that happens very rarely. And when it happens, the press usually rights itself before long. Ask

Teddy Kennedy. Ask Bill Clinton. And then ask yourself this. If the national media and television behave liberally, why is it that the conservative candidate has won the presidency three out of the last four chances?

Myth Four: <u>The Media are Independent Political Actors Who Decide the Political Agenda,</u>

This next myth gets us dangerously close to opening up the issue of impact. But if we ignore the obvious question concerning the public's agenda and focus again on press behavior we can draw some surprising conclusions about the media's freedom in deciding which topics to cover and to ignore.

At the superficial level, editors and producers do decide what makes the papers and what makes the evening news. But that fact implies a much greater license on behalf of America's news media than that which they usually enjoy. For the most part the news media still <u>follow</u> the political agenda that the government decides upon. And by government I mean quite specifically the <u>administration</u>.

Unless there is a real or imagined scandal to cover (Monica Lewinski or Watergate) or a real event (war in the Middle East, for example), the press generally takes its news cues from the administration. I don't say that the administration gets to decide how the tune will be played, but instead that the administration does get to decide which tune is playing.

Even the Reagan administration proves the point. The Reagan administration came to Washington practically obsessed with theories of political economy - notions of supply-side, monetarism, gold-standards, a flat tax, safe harbor leasing. The result: the press has covered political economy more closely in the last two years than at any time I can recall - perhaps ever.

Reagan cannot dictate the coverage. These days he wants to talk about inflation, not unemployment: the media do much the opposite. But Reagan has set the news agenda - economics continues to be the major news story.

In our study of Campaign '80 we found an even more telling example of the administration's power to set the news agenda. The issue was the hostage crisis.

In the beginning of the year, when it was politically advantageous, Carter and his administration kept talking openly - even passionately - about the hostages. Carter not only told the press he wouldn't campaign until the hostages returned, he claimed he was losing sleep over them. The media took the cue. On CBS and UPI we counted 60 hostage stories per month in January, February, March and April.

But in April, after the commando raid had failed, after it became clear that the hostages were a political liability, Carter and his administration refused to discuss the situation publicly, closed down their reports to the press. The result was an almost complete collapse in hostages news coverage.

In May, June and July CBS and UPI delivered on average only l2 stories per month, about one fifth the level of news attention for the previous three months.

We asked UPI White House Correspondent Helen Thomas what had happened to the media. Her answer was that when Carter and his State Department refused to talk there was no story to report, so the press just stopped reporting about the crisis.

Eventually, events and the media brought the hostages back just in time for the election, and just in time to do Carter no good whatsoever. But for about four months - from November l979 through February l980 - Jimmy Carter did a pretty good job of holding the media themselves hostage, as he played large part in defining the news.

The same sort of thing happened in El Salvador. The press hardly bothered until Alexander Haig went before the Senate and the Congress to announce that El Salvador was the test of western resolve, the test of Christendom. After that kind of press cue from the administration, El Salvador became the foreign news story until the war in the Falklands broke out in late spring.

Obviously, this sort of logic does not apply to the Watergate years. In l973 and l974 Richard Nixon failed to divert the press for more than a day or two away from their corruption-in-high-places reporting. But when the news is not about corruption, or vice, or war, the administration still influences greatly what the news agenda will be. If you doubt it, watch the news the day following a presidential press conference, even if the president had nothing new to say.

Myth Five: The Press Behaves Seriously.

For our last myth we go back to some bad news about news. Although most of us don't know much beyond what the national media tell us, the fact is the press isn't a very serious sources of information for anyone interested in being expert.

Clearly this applies to local news, even in some of the largest "locals" in the country. On a day in which President Reagan formally and publicly announced the "zero option" - his plan for removing all nuclear weapons from Europe - I happened to be in Los Angeles - one of America's biggest small towns. That night the CBS station in L.A. led its late-night broadcast not with Reagan's zero-option but with word that Magic Johnson wanted to be traded by the Lakers. The local station also ended the program with a Magic Johnson update.

But, if seriousness means comprehensiveness, then even the elite press is less than serious, hard as that may be for us news junkies to admit.

We can start with the fact that the institution getting most column inches in the Weekday Washington Post is neither the Presidency nor the Congress but is instead the local food industry. Grocery ads consume more space than anything else in the front section of the Post.

But, ignoring the ads, what about the news hole per se? Isn't that serious? Let me take a topic I presume to know well - politics and the media. In l980 the Post and the Times assigned a news reporter to cover the media, "free" and "paid." The Post coverage was more frequent, and more comprehensive. But was it serious? Not very. Despite the fact that Robert Kaiser did an objective, fair-minded job - and reached a set of conclusions about the media that I tend to share - it has to be said that Kaiser's reporting was less than serious.

His research on the effect of paid commercials involved little more than Kaiser sitting in a room with fewer than a dozen people willing to watch and willing to express an opinion about the ads. Kaiser's analysis of John Anderson's press coverage was based on a handful of quotations from a haphazard selection of news reporters. Thin gruel at best.

More important, no piece that Kaiser wrote went beyond 2000 words - which is to say that no piece about any aspect of the media in l980 was half as long as this speech, a speech I would not want classified as comprehensive. Editorials are of course, even less serious. In this morning's Times, no editorial went beyond (350) words.

This doesn't mean that one should not read or watch the news; political leaders and political scientists often sound serious by having memorized that which appears in the elite press. The point is that even if one reads all the day's news about the PLO, banking policy, weapons technology, etc., one cannot expert in anything. In the end, the elite press and the popular press almost always behave responsibly by checking facts, including "both" sides, quoting legitimate authorities. But the press much less frequently behaves seriously if we define seriously as a piece longer than l000 words or based in evidence other than quotation. Having studied the question of television and violence for the last ten years I am convinced that nobody can handle the topic seriously in six paragraphs. Most editorials give it three.

CONCLUSIONS:

By this point you should be asking yourself at least three things. First, why do we maintain so many myths about press behavior? Second, why does the press behave as it does? Finally, can we tolerate all this - at least the bad parts of press reality?

The first question invites irony. Except for the myth of partisanship, most of the illusions come from, where else, the media. Ed Asner as Lou Grant is for most of us, the journalist we know best in America. Rossi is probably second best known. Even though he appears regularly now on ACT News more people recognize Carl Bernstein as Dustin Hoffman than as Carl Bernstein. Media give us most of our illusions about all the professions, and entertainments media deal in illusions much more than news media. For a sobering experiment watch how TV programs depict college students during the next few months.

As to why the press behaves as it does, we could have another speech, if not another symposium. To be very brief, most of the good news about news stems from the fact that journalists and editors are taught, over and over again, not to be partisan, not to decide on their own the agenda, not to behave irresponsibly. Hence the press tends to behave "responsibly."

As for the bad news, almost all of that traces back to something we already know. The media are commercial enterprises. They appeal to their market or they fail to make a profit. They make a profit or they die.

It costs l00,000 minimum to keep a bureau and a correspondence for a year abroad. That explains why there are more than 70,000 journalists in the United States and fewer than 700 American journalists overseas. That fact alone explains some of the lack of seriousness in foreign coverage to be sure.

Cost also explains some of the reluctance to do investigative journalism. At even the lowest levels it costs thousands of dollars to investigate a story, a story that might not even pan out. Why not rely on press releases, or pseudo events to fill up the day's copy? It's cheaper and easier to use canned news.

But costs and laziness explain less, I think than markets. We have three times as many correspondents covering the confines of White House than covering the entire world outside the United States. That's not costing so much as recognition by the editors that nobody cares much what happens in China with its one billion people, let alone Indonesia with its l50 million.

In essence, almost every press reality that leaves a bad taste starts with somebody's recognition that readers and viewers could care less about seriousness or hard-nosed reporting. My honest assessment is that the press actually does a better job than the market requires.

Which leads to the last questions - tolerating press realities. By now it should be apparent that I might prefer to ask who should be tolerating whom. But perhaps the more acceptable query

is this - how can a political process rely on an unregulated, unserious and unschooled sector for playing a major role in governance? The problem here is that all those adjectives pertain not just to our news media but generally to the political leaders we choose and almost always to the public we are. In the end commercial media have the same justification - and the same inadequacies - that we face in democratic elections and even in competitive capitalism.

America has 2000 professional astronomers and 20,000 professional astrologers. It ought to come as no surprise that our commercial and competitive journalism has its less than serious, less than investigative faces. What should perhaps come as a surprise is that given all these truths, knowledgeable people regard the media as imperial in impact or imperious in behavior. If there is one single theme that I'm subscribing to tonight it is that the news media are, above all, commercial, much less frequently "political", and rarely if ever imperial.

It's a cliche to involve Churchill in one's conclusion but if Reagan can do it so can I. We've made a real cliche of Sir Winston's premise that democracy - with its frivolous campaigns, sensationalized rhetoric, less than exceptional leadership - is the worst sort of government, but according to Churchill for all the alternatives. The same has to be said about American journalism, sometimes awful but better than the other varieties, real or hypothetical. A cliche, yes. But better a valid cliche about the limitations of American journalism than a collection of myths about its evils or its purity.