David Shaw in the continuum of press self-criticism

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David Shaw in the continuum of press self-criticism

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University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1993

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DAVID SHAW IN THE CONTINUUM
OF PRESS SELF-CRITICISM

by

Mark S. Bacon

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ABSTRACT

DAVID SHAW IN THE CONTINUUM
OF PRESS SELF-CRITICISM

David Shaw is the Los Angeles Times press critic, the only newspaper writer in the United States who devotes his full time to researching and writing criticisms and explanatory articles about broad issues affecting the press and the public. In addition to calling attention to bias, sensationalism, arrogance, and unresponsiveness in the press, Shaw has sparked internal criticism from his colleagues at the Times.

At a time of declining public confidence in the media, Shaw asserts that the press has a duty to explain itself and engage in public self-criticism: The only public institution the press does not regularly scrutinize is the press.

This study identifies the most prominent and insightful press self-critics in U.S. history and traces the development of their critical themes. Shaw's eighteen and a half years of press criticism is then examined and found to continue many of the critical themes from history.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Within hours after Benjamin Harris's *Publick Occurrences* appeared on September 25, 1690, critics were at work. The first edition of the earliest newspaper in North America became the only edition when authorities forbade further publication. According to colonial government, America's initial attempt to print the news came out contrary to law and "contained reflections of a very high nature." Translation: Harris wrote disparagingly of the British military so he was put out of business.\(^1\) Criticism of the American press has continued for three centuries.

Much of the press criticism has come from government, considered by some an adversary of a free press; however, business leaders, educators, novelists, and others have also repeatedly assaulted American journalism and its practices.\(^2\) Why does the frequently harsh criticism continue? Freedom of the press is one of the country's most cherished liberties, a freedom protected by the first amendment of the United States Constitution. This protection, however, may be part of the reason for constant dissatisfaction with the press. Members of the fourth estate often discount or
ignore external criticism, regardless how well founded, because constitutional protection affords them insulation, often fostering arrogance.

When press criticism comes from within, the reaction is sometimes different. The comments are harder to dismiss. Over the years, growing dissatisfaction with press arrogance, and other factors, have prompted some journalists to become critics. Their observations have often provided the best explanation of the uneven relationship among the press, government, and the public. Self-criticism has not been quite as frequent or as loud as the external variety, but usually it is the most accurate, reasoned, and deserved.

Members of the press have criticized each other for a variety of reasons. Politics was the focus of the barbs exchanged by newspapers at the end of the eighteenth century. Newspapers such as John Fenno's *Gazette of the United States* and Philip Freneau's *National Gazette* traded blows over political ideologies, rather than editorial policies. Fenno himself once literally traded blows with the editor of a rival newspaper on the streets of Philadelphia. Their affray was not the last time editors would jab each other with their fists or canes rather than their editorials.³

During the nineteenth century, name-calling was common as newspapers in New York and in other major cities fought over political allegiances and for circulation among a population growing eager for the news.⁴ With the turn of the twentieth century, journalism criticism seemed to
mature. It still railed at times but it also quietly pondered the purpose and duties of a free press. Some of the most respected names in journalism were also respected press critics. Walter Lippmann, H.L. Mencken, and William Allen White wrote thoughtful criticisms of the press.

Today the press shares its power with the electronic media, and as a result, sometimes escapes specific criticism that is leveled against "the media" in general. Criticism of broadcast news, plentiful in the print media, tends to make newspapers seem more responsible by comparison. Media criticism is a current form of expression in the popular press and on television. Most journalist-critics, however, concentrate on coverage of individual events, or on individual television programs or movies rather than on the broader philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of what responsible journalism should include. With some notable exceptions, press self-criticism in the past few decades has consisted largely of occasional pieces in magazines or newspapers or brief hit-or-miss television commentaries. Only the academic press has fostered anything approaching a continuing examination of the press.

In 1974 William Thomas, editor of the Los Angeles Times, asked one of his reporters to take on a new, full-time beat: press criticism. He gave him autonomy, permission to criticize freely the editorial policies and practices of the newspaper, and independence from the Times copy desk. For the past eighteen and one half years David
Shaw has used that independence and autonomy to criticize The Times and other newspapers and news-gathering organizations. Some of his articles have focused on the way The Times and other papers have reported on specific events or subjects, and much of his work has been devoted to exploring wider issues such as journalistic ethics, minority hiring, coverage of the courts, and the public's perception of the press.

Shaw is the author of two books on press criticism and in 1991 he received the Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He remains the only full-time press critic at a U.S. newspaper.

**Thesis Purpose and Scope**

This thesis will examine and analyze the press criticism of David Shaw and identify the place it has in the continuum of press self-criticism. Among the questions to be explored are: Is Shaw's work a natural progression in the history of press self-criticism or does he represent a divergence from previous themes? Does his criticism follow one of the four traditional media philosophies? Are the major historical themes of press self-criticism represented in Shaw's work? How has his background and experience shaped his criticism? What does he see as the strengths and weaknesses in the press today? What type of internal criticism has Shaw received, how does he respond to the criticism, and how has it affected his work?

Research for this project includes interviews with Shaw
and an analysis of his articles from 1974 to present, reviewing themes, subjects, and implications for media theory. William Thomas and Shelby Coffey, III, the two editors for whom Shaw has worked during his years as press critic, plus other Times editors and reporters were also interviewed for this paper.

The term press in this paper will refer only to the print media. Broadcast media will not be specifically excluded from discussions but will be mentioned primarily as they relate to the functions of the press. For example, the scope of broadcast news can be used to compare news coverage provided by newspapers. Although Shaw is a press critic, his articles and books frequently include information and analysis of the broadcast news media. Shaw's Pulitzer Prize-winning series of articles reviewed media coverage of the McMartin Preschool molestation trial in Los Angeles. In one part of his report he compared television coverage of the trial with print media coverage. In addition, the term "press" generally refers to the news/editorial functions of newspapers. Business and advertising aspects of newspapers are discussed when specifically referring to the relationship between editorial and commercial functions of the press.

The term "self-criticism" limits the scope to criticism of the press by current or former editors or reporters for magazines or newspapers. Simply writing a book or article on press criticism does not make someone a journalistic
self-critic.

The "continuum of press self-criticism" refers to the history and substance of criticism in the United States from the name-calling of the early 1700s to the analytical criticism of today.

**Shaw's Distinctive Assignment**

David Shaw's assignment is unique. While many newspaper reporters in the country write about the media, none has Shaw's critical mandate. Many journalists are assigned to media beats, but they are less critics than simply writers reporting on media-related news events. Howard Kurtz of the *Washington Post*, for example, writes occasional media criticism, but he also covers breaking news stories about broadcasting and publishing. Columnists regularly review television programs, movies, and other media, but they usually focus on specific content of a medium, rather than the medium itself.

Shaw's distinctive assignment is to explain the functions and duties of the press. In the course of that explanation Shaw sometimes provides comments, from himself and others, on how well the press is performing. Saying that he is a reporter first and a critic second, Shaw draws attention to the depth of research he puts into each of his articles. In the course of his work he has conducted thousands of interviews including talks with the most successful and prominent journalists and media leaders in
the United States such as Walter Cronkite, Rupert Murdoch, and Al Neuharth. In preparing his stories he regularly talks with the senior editors of the country's leading newspapers.

As a result of his work he has become a popular speaker at universities and a frequent guest on television and radio programs. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, he has earned more than 40 press awards from such diverse groups as the American Political Science Association, Los Angeles Press Club, and the American Bar Association. He has written on the press and other subjects for a variety of trade and consumer publications. Few academic, text, and trade books on the media and media criticism fail to quote Shaw at least once, yet no one has published an academic analysis of him and his work.

In the introduction to his book, Press Watch, Shaw says,

Who holds [the press] accountable when we misconstrue the public trust? . . . The brief, oversimplified but honest answer is that no one does . . . We should watch ourselves. Carefully. Constantly. Critically. Publicly.7

The last four words describe Shaw's own press criticism and the last word is a primary key to Shaw's importance. Media criticism appears in journalism trade publications, academic journals, and industry and in-house newsletters, but Shaw's articles, exposing the failings and prejudices of the press, appear regularly on the front page of the second-largest-circulation metropolitan newspaper in the country.
Although occasionally censured by his colleagues at The Los Angeles Times, he is not censured by his editors.

I tend to emphasize our flaws . . . because the newspaper industry spends a good deal of time--and money--championing itself. Since many editors and publishers risk whiplash from patting themselves on the back so vigorously and so frequently, I think I should write about the other side of our business--the mistakes we make and the inadequacies we display.

Need for Press Self-Criticism

Recent studies have shown that editors and reporters think their major responsibility to the public is to print breaking news promptly and accurately. With this accomplished, journalists may assume they are deserving of public confidence, but as Professor Lewis Wolfson noted in The Quill, "Journalists may see themselves working in the public interest, but the public doesn't. Journalists rate higher than politicians in surveys of public sentiment, but not by much."

Public opinion surveys have, for several decades, reflected declining faith in the press. In addition, the public has given television news a higher believability rating than newspapers. According to some critics, the press seems to be oblivious to the falling public trust. Norman Isaacs, former editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, contends that failure to recognize the credibility gap is itself part of the problem. The public, he says, has lost faith with the press in part because of "an arrogance that seems to place journalism's rights above everything
else in the society." Jean Otto of the Milwaukee Journal, an editor and former president of the Society of Professional Journalists, also sees arrogance among journalists. "Sometimes people in the press act as if they are doing their jobs for each other and maybe God, and nobody else ought to get in their way." 

Self-criticism can help diminish public distrust and condemnation in two ways. First, public acknowledgement by the press of its problems can demonstrate at least a measure of humility. Second, self-criticism can be the catalyst for change. And if changes are to be made, criticism from within has the greatest chance of success. According to Professor James Lemert, the typical journalist's response to external criticism is that the critic "doesn't know the business and therefore can be ignored." 

Author Tom Goldstein restates this common press response to the subject of criticism saying, "contemporary journalists have not shown any great appetite for self analysis and they pretty much hunker down when others pick on them." If the press does not show a willingness to examine and criticize itself, however, others will do it for them.

"We need to tackle our own failings," writes Loren Ghiglione, editor of the Southbridge (Massachusetts) News and former president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. "Why can't we report about ourselves or critique ourselves with the candor, if not the completeness, of David
Shaw of the Los Angeles Times? Sixty percent of newspapers surveyed by the ASNE's ethics committee, incidentally, rated their coverage of themselves as only fair or poor.16

Although some journalists may not see a need to boost public confidence and may attribute failing popularity of the press to a growing public distrust of all institutions, ultimately press indifference, arrogance, and lack of self-control could have dreadful consequences. Does the first amendment give the press universal authority? Two hundred years ago Alexander Hamilton, observed differently in the Federalist Papers. He wrote, "[W]hatever fine declarations may be inserted in any constitution respecting it, [freedom of the press] must altogether depend on public opinion, and on the general spirit of the people and of the government."17 Since journalists today are the people most concerned about the practical implications of first amendment protection, they should be the ones working to preserve that protection by encouraging healthy internal debate and criticism.
Notes


(2) See, Tom Goldstein, ed., *Killing the Messenger: 100 Years of Press Criticism* (New York: Columbia, 1989), for examples of press criticism from people in politics, the academy, and other disciplines.


(4) Mott, 413.


(6) In November 1992 Shaw spoke at the University of Nevada - Las Vegas, the University of Arizona, and the University of Hawaii.

(7) Shaw, 7.

(8) Ibid., 14.


(14) James B. Lemert, *Criticising the Media* (Newberry Park, Calif.: Sage, 1989), 12. Lemert mentions Shaw's work as part of the "short list" of self-examination by journalists.

(15) Goldstein, 11.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF PRESS SELF-CRITICS
IN THE UNITED STATES AND
THEIR CRITICAL THEMES

Press criticism arrived in the American colonies from Europe along with type, ink, and presses. Although early criticism came from the crown, colonial journalists were soon criticizing each other. Over the years, as journalists commented on their profession, journalists' rhetoric, motivation, and stature changed. Critical themes changed too, yet many remained remarkably constant. This chapter traces themes of self-criticism from the dawn of newspapers in North America to the present day and identifies the most influential and insightful journalist-critics showing how historical events, personal conviction of the critics, and technical developments in the press influenced the substance of their critical themes.

An historical review of press self-criticism should, of necessity, also recognize the formation of the four theories of the press, not only because of the changing paradigmatic view they supply, but because they help explain, and provide a context for, contemporary press self-criticism. Press
self-criticism in America began in an era of authoritarianism, expanded during the rise of the libertarian view of the press, and later became profoundly influenced by the conditions and prevailing thought that precipitated the social responsibility theory. Although findings from the Commission on Freedom of the Press in the 1940s are sometimes identified as the genesis of the social responsibility theory,¹ this chapter will show how social responsibility elements have infused press self-criticism since the turn of the twentieth century. These theoretical changes underlying press criticism will be identified and Marxist theory will also be reflected in the work of some twentieth century critics.

Three critical themes of European press criticism were transplanted to the American colonies, themes that dominated press self-criticism for years to come. Newspapers were condemned for (1) inaccuracies (both intentional and unintentional), (2) sensationalism, and (3) deceptive advertising, especially ads for medicines.² A fourth theme, political bias, was soon born out of the ideological debates that led to the Declaration of Independence and later, the Constitution of the United States.

One of the earliest examples of press self-criticism came from Boston, home of the first newspaper circulation war in North America. In the early 1700s the Boston News-Letter was printed by the postmaster and was "published by authority" which meant the governor or other official
approved the newspaper's content. When the paper's editor, John Campbell, retired from the postmastership, he declined to turn over the newspaper to his successor, William Brooker, so Brooker started his own paper, the Boston Gazette. Campbell attacked his rival, saying he pitied the readers of the new newspaper: "Its sheets smell stronger of beer than of midnight oil. It is not reading fit for people." This criticism—primarily personal competition between editors—was followed by more spirited conflict with the Campbell and Brooker newspapers on one side and an upstart New England Courant, published by Benjamin Franklin's brother James, on the other. Not published by authority or even interested in news, the Courant criticized local religious leaders and focused on human interest stories to entertain readers. Writers in the Gazette and News-Letter criticized the Courant as being scandalous and immoral. Although at the time, Boston newspaper circulation was measured in the hundreds, these early editorial skirmishes brought the same results as the larger-scale rivalries in the century to come: more readers and greater interest in newspapers.

Rivalry and competition between newspapers have prompted criticism throughout the history of journalism, but politics was the primary source of press criticism in the 1700s as the press moved from authoritarian to libertarian principles. This transfer was a gradual one that, according to author Fred Siebert, took place over a century, but the
shifting was clearly evident as newspapers began to criticize each other freely about loyalty to the crown or colonial independence. Following the Revolutionary War, political allegiances became not only a source of newspaper criticism, but the very reason newspapers were founded. In Philadelphia, New York, and other cities, newspapers were started and funded by political groups eager to have their opinions propagated. The Party Press, as these newspapers were later labeled, fueled continuing self-criticism, based on ideology. In 1798, John Burk, editor of the New York *Time Piece*, was lambasted by editors of Federalist newspapers because he criticized President John Adams. Burk, said an editor at the New York *Commercial Appeal*, should be placed on horseback, "for in that case he would speedily ride to the devil." 

A year later, John Ward Fenno, Federalist editor of the *Gazette of the United States*, said the American press polluted the fountains of society. "The newspapers of America are admirably calculated to keep the country in a continued state of insurrection and revolution," Fenno stated. No engagement between party papers was more vigorous than the conflict between Fenno and Philip Freneau of the *National Gazette*. The fight mentioned in the previous chapter was only one engagement in a continuing editorial dispute, one based on political ideology, rather than specific journalistic practices.

While the turmoil of the Party Press continued well
into the nineteenth century, developments in communication technology altered newspaper production and ultimately changed the nature of press criticism. In the 1830s and 1840s steam engines moved into newspaper pressrooms giving metropolitan editors the ability to produce tens of thousands and later hundreds of thousands of copies each day. Expansion of railroads, particularly in the east, and the stringing of telegraph lines around the country gave newspapers the ability to be more immediate. Stories from other cities could be as current as local ones. Technology helped expand the reach of newspapers and as author Lee Brown points out, the Party Press's battle for men's minds was gradually replaced by a battle for dollars.

In 1833 Benjamin Day started the *New York Sun*, an inexpensive newspaper written in a casual style featuring human interest and crime stories and aimed at mass circulation. The *Sun* was the first successful newspaper of the Penny Press, so named because each paper cost only one cent, making it affordable to nearly everyone. By contrast, some mercantile papers of the day charged $8 to $10 in advance for a year's subscription. The Penny Press was also a different form of journalism, one that attracted attention and criticism.

**James Gordon Bennett**

Two years after the *Sun* appeared, crusading journalism pioneer James Gordon Bennett started the *New York Herald*. 
Although Bennett's genius brought innovations to journalism including use of foreign correspondents and coverage of business and financial news, his Herald was probably the subject of more focused criticism than any paper had ever been before. Largely the criticism came from other papers. Bennett sought greater reality in reporting and thus he flouted convention by avoiding euphemistic language. He used the word *legs* rather than *limbs* and *shirt* rather than *linen.* He also instituted a more direct form of question-and-answer interviews and he focused on stories of illicit sex and scandalous incidents. The Herald's journalistic techniques made it the leader of the Penny Press and prompted a "moral war" against it by other newspapers in New York. Editorial in such newspapers as the Evening Signal, Courier and Enquirer, and Evening Star of New York called for citizens to boycott the Herald. Ministers criticized Bennett from the pulpit. The Signal called Bennett an "obscene vagabond," the "prince of darkness," and "a venomous reptile." Later, newspapers in other cities, as well as magazines and even some English newspapers, joined the chorus against Bennett.

In return, Bennett criticized others. He condemned editors who he knew were heavy stock speculators for running stories in an attempt to influence the price of certain stocks. When he criticized James Watson Webb of the Whig paper, Courier and Enquirer, the rival editor waited for him on a street corner and knocked Bennett down with a stick.
Bennett retaliated by running a circulation-building account of the skirmish the next day in the *Herald*.19

In its first week of publication, the *New York Tribune*, another *Herald* rival, criticized newspapers that printed sensational accounts of murder trials. Later, *Tribune* publisher Horace Greeley attacked other newspapers for printing "atrocious advertisements" and for supporting the theatre which he said was associated with "libertines and courtesans."20 During the period, largely unregulated advertising often promoted questionable medicines, investments, and other products.21

The "moral war" against Bennett represented two recurring themes, the obvious criticism related to sensationalistic practices, and a more functional one related to the commercial gains to be realized by acquiring advertisers and readers of competing newspapers. Unbridled freedom of the press, associated with libertarian (and democratic) principles, encouraged the competitive spirit that permeated press self-criticism of the 1800s. Some of the self-serving criticism was no less accurate simply because it attacked a competitor, but it is important to identify commercially-founded criticism so that it can be distinguished from critical work arising from strictly moral, ethical, or professional considerations. Thus the "war" against Bennett, which lasted less than a year, was based as much on commercial gains as it was on moral indignation.
Bennett's Herald focused critical attention of the public and journalists on sensationalism. While sensationalism was not one of Bennett's journalistic innovations, he used it skillfully to build a following, establishing a pattern that publishers would try to copy for decades. Following Bennett's lead, newspapers in Manchester, New Hampshire; New Orleans; Baltimore; Boston; and other major cities carried articles of crime, gore, and scandal in attempts to boost circulation.²²

Throughout history, publishers have been criticized for sensationalism but the excuses offered have almost always been the same. In 1784 a Boston publisher said he printed morbid news because the public demanded it.²³ Other editors of the day claimed they would not publish sensational news except for their duty to tell the truth, no matter how horrible.²⁴

**First Self-Criticism Book**

During the pre-Civil War years, magazines and newspapers carried press criticism,²⁵ but in 1859, however, a new forum for U.S. press self-criticism was born. That year, Lambert A. Wilmer published *Our Press Gang: A Complete Exposition of the Crimes and Corruptions of American Newspapers*, the first book on press criticism in the United States. Filled with an abundance of references to his sorry experiences as a journalist and his dislike for newspaper people in general, Wilmer's narrative could be described as
a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore, to use the words of Edgar Allen Poe, with whom Wilmer once discussed establishing a literary magazine.\textsuperscript{26} At length, Wilmer explained--or complained--that his associations with various papers in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Baltimore were almost always cut short due to disagreements regarding either his salary or financial interest in the newspapers. After about twenty years, during which time he also wrote for \textit{The Saturday Evening Post} and \textit{Godey's Lady's Book}, he left the business for good,\textsuperscript{27} saying, "My connections with the press have not been very fortunate."\textsuperscript{28}

Notwithstanding his complaints and his tendency to use assumptions and generalizations rather than direct evidence, Wilmer's book is valuable. He provided contemporary insight into prominent journalists and issues of his day. For example, he condemned Bennett's sensationalism, claiming the \textit{Herald} was the first newspaper charged with blackmail, but he gave Bennett credit for his innovations and leadership. Most important, however, Wilmer reinforced the most common themes of criticism and helped establish modern themes, particularly those related to business influence. He presented a list of "fourteen serious charges against the newspaper press." These accusations, presented decades before press self-criticism was motivated more by professionalism than by commercialism, can be considered a benchmark for the critical themes to come. Here is a summary of some of the items in Wilmer's bill of
particulars:

1. Special business interests obtained favorable coverage in news columns in exchange for the purchase of large advertisements or through straight bribes. As an example, Wilmer cited a report by the Philadelphia Board of Trade attesting to the poor condition of several life insurance companies. Press coverage of the report, Wilmer speculated, was cut short through "connivance and cooperation of the press" purchased with bribes.\(^{29}\)

2. Newspapers promoted immorality and vice by providing sensationalized accounts of crime, "the details of which are often too gross and filthy to be diffused through the atmosphere of a common brothel."\(^{30}\)

3. Newspapers invaded personal privacy and destroyed the peace of families by publishing groundless and malicious slanders. Here Wilmer focused on newspaper stories about marital infidelity and promiscuity.\(^{31}\)

4. Many newspapers were supported by unscrupulous politicians whose official malfeasances were covered up by the papers.\(^{32}\) This charge, of course, reached to the foundations of many papers in the U.S. as many were established primarily to support a political cause or candidate.

5. Newspaper coverage of the criminal justice system made it impossible for persons accused of a crime to obtain a fair trial. Newspapers set themselves up as judge and
jury and passed sentences before trials began, Wilmer insisted, thus prejudicing people who ultimately became members of juries. Rumors as well as facts were incorporated into crime stories and the public's (and potential jurors') first exposure to the circumstances of cases was through unreliable newspaper articles. In addition, newspapers, by the weight of their power, could influence the results of trials.33

6. Newspapers debased the literature of the nation by focusing on stories of prize fighting, adultery, and other sensational topics and through mutually supportive arrangement with book publishers who produced worthless romances and "pamphlet novels".34

**Hearst and Pulitzer**

Wilmer's book was largely ignored by the press, and criticism remained relatively unchanged until 1872. That year could be considered the end of one journalistic era and the beginning of another. Bennett and Greeley both died in that year, the New York Sun was in its fourth year of rejuvenation under Charles A. Dana, and one of the first major histories of journalism was published, Frederick Hudson's *Journalism in the United States 1690 to 1872*. Samuel Bowles of the Springfield Republican predicted that the death of Greeley and Bennett would mark the end of personal journalism, that newspapers would no longer be strongly influenced by and identified with their
publishers. Bowles's comment was about 30 or 40 years too early, however, because Dana made his personal mark on journalism and was swiftly followed into New York publishing by Joseph Pulitzer and later by William Randolph Hearst. Circulation-building, attention-getting techniques of the latter two giants of personal journalism spawned the term "yellow journalism"—then a description of style named after a cartoon character, now a pejorative term for journalism's baser elements, a term used most frequently by press critics outside journalism.

Pulitzer, who purchased the New York World in 1883, was a complex man who lifted journalism to new heights and more than occasionally reached to the old lows of sensationalism worn thin by his predecessors. Pulitzer looked for good literary style, however, and cautioned reporters to be accurate. His editorial page was conservative but his front page was not. When he began his reign at the World, Pulitzer editorialized that the paper would be "dedicated to the cause of people rather than to that of the purse potentates." Yet soon the New York World was, by contemporary accounts, the most reckless and sensational paper in the city. In 1895 Hearst, a sensational success at the San Francisco Examiner, bought the New York Journal and began a battle with Pulitzer that dwarfed the moral war against Bennett—in scope if not in intensity—and set a record for newspaper circulation. Hearst and Pulitzer each captured more than one million readers per day.
yellow publishers crusaded, publicized fakes and hoaxes, and contributed to the emotional upheaval that led to the Spanish-American War.

The excesses of newspapers in the 1890s, exemplified by Pulitzer and Hearst, created a flow of self-criticism. E.L. Godkin, editor of the weekly Nation, at times thought the press "villainous, venal, and silly." In 1896, he editorialized, "What is wanted in the way of reform is mainly maturity, the preparation of a paper for grown people engaged in serious occupations." Godkin criticized papers for obvious mistakes, saying inaccuracy was one of the causes of the low status and credibility of journalists.

Increasingly, magazines and weekly papers such as the Nation carried the majority of serious press criticism. As magazines were not in direct competition with newspapers, particularly the yellow papers of Hearst and Pulitzer, their commentaries encompassed more than just the typical rival criticism. Publications such as Scribner's Magazine, Gunton's Magazine, and The Arena carried articles about fakery and the lack of ethical conduct among journalists. In a February 1898 article, The Arena cited specific examples of newspaper fakes ranging from reports of phony foreign disasters to the false story of a doctor who thwarted a suicide, written simply to promote the doctor. J. B. Montgomery-M'Govern's Arena article was entitled, "An Important Phase of Gutter Journalism: Faking."
Twentieth Century Transition

The period surrounding the turn of the century saw changes in self-criticism, not significant alterations in the continuing themes of criticism, but changes in the form and motivation for press criticism. Rather than wildly lambasting Yellow Journalism, which would have been understandable given the scandalmongering practices of the times, many self-critics, such as Will Irwin and Walter Lippmann, wrote thoughtful, theoretically oriented analyses of the press. The criticisms of Irwin, a newspaper reporter and magazine editor with experience working for newspapers on the east and west coasts of the United States, seemed to highlight the transition during the turn-of-the-century when criticisms based on politics, rivalry, or personalities were increasingly replaced by criticisms based on concerns for ethics and professional standards of journalism. Irwin said "a newspaper should be a gentleman" and he emphasized the need to educate the public on how journalists do their work.\textsuperscript{45}

Even Joseph Pulitzer, who had led the new wave of sensationalism, tired of it, and, before his death in 1911, became a press self-critic. He wrote of the need for specialized journalism education to "strengthen [the press's] resolution and give it wisdom."\textsuperscript{46} In his will he established a trust fund for what was to become the Pulitzer Prizes and before he died he donated money to Columbia University to establish a school of journalism.
It was the writing of Irwin, however, that seemed to underscore the changes in press criticism. In 1911 the former reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *New York Sun* wrote a 15-part series on the press for *Collier's* magazine that provided a detailed explanation of how newspapers operate, offered definitions of news, and showed how news had become an important factor in most persons' lives. In his series, "The American Newspaper: A Study of Journalism in its Relation to the Public," Irwin said the audience of newspapers included all human beings with two eyes and an elementary education. "News is the vital consideration to the American newspaper" he wrote. "It is both an intellectual craving and a commercial need to the modern world."

Irwin thus helped shape press criticism and, in all, four significant changes took place in press self-criticism in the twentieth century:

1. Many leading journalists became critics. Walter Lippmann, William Allen White, H.L. Mencken and other celebrated, respected journalists, made considerable contributions to press criticism, thus adding stature and credibility to self-criticism and to the critical themes they continued.

2. Critical techniques became more sophisticated, more exact. Not only did self-critics document their work with specific examples, but also self-critics developed new
methods of analyzing the content and effects of the press.

3. Journalist-critics contributed to the development of the social responsibility theory of the press. Irwin, for example, said that freedom of the press was a franchise granted by the people. Many of the self-critics in this century discussed the expanded obligations of the press as opposed to the freewheeling practices of yellow publishers more associated with the libertarian theory. As self-critics lambasted advertiser and outside business influence over newspapers they also urged a greater social commitment, greater professionalism, and the establishment of ethical guidelines.

4. Prominent journalists-critics added their personalities and unique writing styles to their criticisms. From the simple, down-to-earth observations of William Allen White, to the sarcastic humor of A.J. Liebling, twentieth century journalists made their criticism memorable.

In spite of these changes, critics still found fault with essentially the same press practices as had critics in the nineteenth century. The primary themes of criticism remained: (1) control of newspapers by commercial and advertising interests, (2) inaccuracies and bias, and (3) sensationalism.

Commercial, Advertising Control

The theme of commercial influence and control was carried on in the 1900s by several self-critics. Some
attacked misleading advertising and advertiser influence over editorial content while other journalists were concerned about the concentration of power among giant publishing corporations and the limited voice that labor had in journalism. Upton Sinclair painted a picture of deceitful journalism and merciless commercial control and his book, *The Brass Check*, was one of the most famous indictments of the press ever written. In it he attacked large newspapers and small. Beyond the heights of metropolitan dignity, he said, weekly and small daily papers descended into "the filthiest swamps of provincial ignorance and venality." Sinclair said the press operated to further, not the public interest, but its own selfish commercial and political interests.

An author and social reformer, Sinclair had varied journalistic credentials: He spent a week writing obituaries for the *New York Post*, wrote occasional articles for *Everybody's Magazine*, and published a magazine that bore his name. *Upton Sinclair's magazine*, published in Pasadena, California, lasted 11 months. Sinclair stopped publishing his magazine in 1919 to give himself time to complete the manuscript of *The Brass Check*.

At times in his life, Sinclair sought publicity; other times he shunned it. When he became newsworthy, he criticized the press for labeling him and making up stories about him. *The Brass Check*, named for a metal bordello token, contained many chapters identifying situations in
which the press lied to him, published false stories about him, or smeared him with labels such as anarchist.\textsuperscript{53}

Sinclair lashed out at sensationalism and participated in a much publicized feud with the newspaper that applied the anarchist label to him, \textit{The Los Angeles Times}. Sinclair attacked Harrison Gray Otis, publisher of \textit{The Los Angeles Times} in the early 1900s, calling him a dishonest, power-hungry publisher whose personality "infected [The Times] so powerfully that the infection has persisted after the man is dead."\textsuperscript{54}

A utopian socialist, Sinclair used different techniques and anecdotes to repeat his theme that the press was controlled by the "capitalist class" which included publishers and commercial interests. In this way he was anticipating the Marxist theory of the press which focuses on the relationship between the ownership and control of the media and the power structure of society.\textsuperscript{55} Sinclair favored a union for reporters and worker control of newspapers. Most reporters, he said, were decent men who hated the work they did.\textsuperscript{56} Among his other recommendations were laws requiring retractions and prohibiting newspaper lying, and the establishment of universal press ethics. Sinclair saw city-owned and -operated newspapers, free of advertiser and publisher influence, as one solution to the problems he identified.

Joseph Pulitzer, a businessman as well as journalist, approached the theme of commercial control in a different
way. In a 1904 essay Pulitzer described how journalists must operate separately from business managers.

Commercialism has a legitimate place in a newspaper, namely, in the business office. The more successful a newspaper is commercially, the better for its moral side. The more prosperous it is, the more independent it can afford to be, the higher the salaries it can pay to editors and reporters, the less subject it will be to temptation, the better it can stand losses for principle and conviction. But commercialism, which is proper and necessary in the business office, becomes a degradation and a danger when it invades the editorial rooms. Once let the public come to regard the press as exclusively a commercial business and there is an end of its moral power.57

In the June 3, 1911 installment of his Collier's series, Will Irwin criticized newspapers for bowing to the wishes of advertisers. The New York Journal had an unwritten but nonetheless generally understood policy, Irwin said, of publishing favorable reviews of plays in exchange for advertising. Irwin cited positive play reviews and corresponding theatre ads that appeared in the paper over a three-year period. The Journal would offer a positive review by editor Arthur Brisbane in exchange for a $1,000 full-page ad. "Of course what the [theatre] managers really wanted for their thousand dollars was not the advertisement but the editorial."58 Following three full magazine columns showing evidence of the Journal's advertising policy, Irwin quoted Brisbane: "I have never found that advertisers tried to control the policy of any newspaper with which I was connected."59 Irwin also reported that newspapers, such as the New York World, failed to publish stories of below-
poverty-level wages paid to female employees of department stores because the stores were major advertisers.⁶⁰

Business and advertiser influence over newspapers was perhaps the overriding theme in the writings of George Seldes a contemporary of all twentieth century self-critics (and still alive today at 103). Like Irwin, Seldes was a correspondent in World War I; prior to that he was a reporter on newspapers in Pennsylvania.⁶¹

After the war, while serving as chief European correspondent for the Chicago Tribune, Seldes was kicked out of Russia for reporting a Bolshevik purge and was later expelled from Italy for reporting on fascist activities. In 1928, he wrote You Can't Print That: The Truth Behind the News, the first of his 19 books. The book, which told about suppressed stories of European figures, marked the beginning of a second career for Seldes, a career as a tireless crusader and press critic who constantly condemned the press for subverting the news to please advertisers and other outside interests. He published several books of press criticism. Freedom of the Press in 1935 and Lords of the Press in 1938 were bestsellers.⁶²

Perhaps the most prolific writer of press self-criticism, Seldes was largely ignored by the press—a situation mirroring the press's treatment of Sinclair. When the press ignored his charges, Seldes started his own outlet for press criticism, In Fact, a newsletter he said was an antidote for falsehood in the daily press. Started in 1940,
and discontinued twenty years later, In Fact had a peak circulation of 176,000, making it one of the most popular publications on journalism ever printed.

Seldes was born in a short-lived utopian community in New Jersey and he carried some utopian ideals into his criticisms. His criticism was also influenced by his experiences in Europe. Seldes main charges were:

--The press suppressed stories and lied to protect big business in general and advertisers in particular.

--Newspapers, and newspaper chains, big businesses themselves, used their influence to monopolize resources, influence officials, and mold public opinion.

--Newspapers were generally anti-labor or "labor baiters" and did not publish positive information about unions.

--A reader-owned national newspaper that told the truth could be the solution to the abuses of the press. Seldes hoped that In Fact could evolve into just such a paper.

Newspapers had "three sacred cows," according to Seldes. Newspapers did not run unfavorable stories about (1) tobacco, (2) automobiles, or (3) drug companies, because they were the nation's three largest advertisers. He pointed to the press's refusal to publish the results of studies linking smoking to the shortening of life. In some ways Seldes was an early consumer advocate who felt the press abdicated a responsibility to inform the public. "The welfare of the people when it comes into conflict with the
welfare of the [newspaper] business office, comes off a bad last."65 One of the press's abdicated social responsibilities was the failure to publish reports on Federal Trade Commission action against manufacturers. In one issue of In Fact Seldes pointed out how the press had failed to publish action by the FTC against manufacturers of an advertised headache remedy. Under the heading "Suppressed As Usual," Seldes wrote that the FTC had ordered the manufacturer to alter the formula because some ingredients were considered dangerous. This unpublished FTC news, Seldes said, was a "challenge to honesty of the press."66

Like Sinclair, Seldes thought that editors and reporters should have a greater say in running newspapers. He advocated decentralizing control of a newspaper's policies among many people of differing political and economic beliefs. Putting members of the news staffs on editorial boards would lead to a truly free press.67 By contrast, newspapers or chains run by one person became dictatorships. "When Hearst sends an order to run Marion Davies' picture every day for a month, it hurts no one, but when he sends an order to smear a certain liberal congressman, that is journalistic dictatorship."68

One of the journalists Seldes praised was William Allen White, who he said was "the most outstanding figure in American journalism." He quoted the editor of the Emporia (Kansas) Gazette who had written an uncomplimentary obituary
of a newspaper mogul and said that White too was a foe of excess commercial control of the press.\textsuperscript{69}

During his nearly 50 years as publisher and editor of the small-town newspaper he purchased in 1895, White wrote editorials touching on all three major press self-criticism themes of the century, including commercial control. White's writing and his influence stretched far beyond Kansas and his obituary of newspaper chain owner Frank Munsey was one of his most widely reprinted editorials. In the early 1900s, Munsey bought and consolidated newspapers, firing hundreds of employees. Munsey believed that ultimately only three or four companies in the United States would be responsible for all publishing, with smaller concerns forced out of business.\textsuperscript{70} Wrote White: "Frank Munsey contributed to the journalism of his day the talent of a meat packer, the morals of a money changer and the manners of an undertaker. He and his kind have about succeeded in transforming a once-noble profession into an eight percent security. May he rest in trust."\textsuperscript{71}

Even Henry Louis Mencken of the \textit{Baltimore Sun}, whose writing frequently differed from his colleagues' criticisms of the press, excoriated journalists for publishing misleading advertising and for general venality:

\begin{quote}
Three fourths of the journals of the land would print anything in their advertising columns that was paid for and could get through the mails, and fully two-thirds of them would throw in some lagniappe in their editorial and news columns. They were ignorant, partisan, corrupt, and puerile, and most of the men who owned them were
\end{quote}
Unlike other critics Mencken did see benefits in newspaper chains such as those of Munsey or the Scripps family. Commercial success of the chains, wrote Mencken, led to better pay and conditions for reporters and to greater editorial independence of advertiser influence.

In general, Mencken was in agreement with Sinclair about some of the commercial failings of the press, but he made fun of the socialist's remedies such as hiring unbiased university professors to cover news stories part time and write for a national, publicly-owned newspaper. "The Brass Check runs true to socialist form . . . and it winds up with a remedy that is simple, clear, bold and idiotic."

Bias and Inaccuracies

Many journalist-critics of the early and mid 1900s called attention to newspaper bias, but the causes of the bias, according to the critics, ranged from the insidious conspiracies alleged by Seldes and Sinclair to less intentional forms of inaccuracy. Will Irwin, and particularly Walter Lippmann, examined how inaccuracies, other than those attributed to intentional lying, can find their way into newspapers.

Irwin first explained to his readers how a reporter evaluates and judges which events are newsworthy. He then showed the importance of perception and pointed out how two people can witness the same event and come away with
divergent descriptions. Reporters rarely witness events themselves, he said, so they must rely on others. "And where news results seem untruthful, the fault lies often with the reporter's judgment, not his intentions. He may accept in the first excitement following disaster, the statement of some hysterical official that 20 people are dead . . . and may find later that the victims number only two or three."75

Lippmann, who criticized the press throughout his lengthy career as an author, newspaper editor, syndicated columnist, and advisor to presidents, wrote extensively about inaccuracy in the press. He too helped foster social responsibility by pointing out newspapers' mistakes (or biases) and calling for more professionalism.

In his early career he wrote for magazines and later joined the editorial page staff of the New York World where he worked from 1922 to 1929. In 1913, he wrote the first of his 26 books, A Preface to Politics, and included press criticism. He told how the "wretchedness and brutality" of the conditions of textile workers in mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, did not gain press coverage until a workers' strike impelled the "hardened reporters" to write articles about the workers' plight.76 Before leaving the staff of Everybody's Magazine in 1912, Lippmann wrote an article that criticized the press for trying to influence legislation with its news columns. The American Newspaper Publisher's Association tried to obtain passage of a tariff bill that
included a provision of duty-free imports of newsprint from Canada. The president of the ANPA wrote to the editors of 300 newspapers urging them to tell their Washington, D.C. correspondents to treat the bill favorably.\footnote{77}

One of Lippmann's greatest contributions to newspaper criticism was a pioneering content analysis of the \textit{New York Times}' coverage of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia from 1917 to 1920. In a lengthy article that was published as a supplement to the \textit{New Republic} in 1920, Lippmann and Charles Merz, who later became editorial page editor of the \textit{New York Times}, reviewed more than 1,000 issues of the \textit{Times} and concluded that the newspaper's coverage was so overly optimistic about the military and political prospects of the provisional (non-Communist) government forces as to mislead the public about the course of and ultimate outcome of the revolution. In addition, Lippmann and Merz said, "The Russian policy of the editors of the \textit{Times} profoundly and crassly influenced their news columns."\footnote{78}

Applying empirical techniques to an analysis of the press, Lippmann and Merz operationalized their study by establishing certain incontrovertible events as the benchmarks against which they would review the \textit{Times}' stories. They stated that a definitive history of the revolution would probably not exist in their generation, but that certain facts such as survival of the Soviet government, defeat of various provisional "White" Russian generals, and the Soviet peace with Germany in March of 1918
would be used to test the accuracy of the news reports.
"The reliability of the news in this study is tested by a few definitive and decisive happenings about which there is no dispute."79

One of the article's main conclusions was that the news stories were primarily influenced by the hopes and fears of the editors and reporters handling the news. The journalists hoped for a White (provisional) Russian victory and feared the "Red Peril." These subjective feelings caused the reporters and editors to put greater faith in the accuracy of the optimistic reports from provisional Russian government and Washington, D. C., sources. Lippmann and Merz did not charge a conspiracy existed or say that specific items were withheld; they simply said that news favorable to the Soviet cause was played down. The information was there, but it took a careful, continuous reading of the news articles to glean the truth about what the ultimate outcome would be.

The article introduced concepts and critical themes that are used and discussed today. First, the authors used a quantitative technique in analyzing the newspaper content, adding up the number of optimistic and pessimistic articles and counting and categorizing the news sources cited. Second, Lippmann and Merz discussed news as a component of public opinion, anticipating the agenda-setting theory of the news media.

Whether [New York Times journalists] were
"giving the public what it wants" or creating a public that took what it got, is beside the point. They were performing the supreme duty in a democracy of supplying the information on which public opinion feeds, and they were derelict in that duty. Their motives may have been excellent. . . . They were baffled by the complexity of affairs, and the obstacles created by war. But whatever the excuses . . . a great people in a supreme crisis could not secure the minimum of information on a supremely important event.80

A third critical concept discussed by the authors was the use of anonymous sources. Lippmann and Merz criticized the misleading use of sources such as "government and diplomatic sources" and "reports reaching here." These sources put domestic editors and readers at the mercy of opinion because they had no way of evaluating the accuracy of the authority cited. The authors said reporters need not identify all sources by name, but they should "place" them.

The authors suggested self-criticism and self-enforcement as the best way to correct errors such as these. "Where is the power to be found that can define the standards of journalism and enforce them? Primarily within the profession itself. We do not believe the press can be regulated by law." Lippmann and Merz said it was up to newspapers to establish and enforce a code of honor such as established by bar associations. Newspapers are being forced to establish standards by the public's "growing distrust" and papers must "be prepared for an increasing supervision from readers of the press."81

Later in his career, Lippmann noted that there was "no
regular and serious criticism of the press." He noted that criticism was a "one-way street--the uncriticized press criticizing all other institutions and activities. It is not good for the press and it is not safe. Serious, searching, and regular criticism of the press is the ultimate safeguard of its freedom."82

Sensationalism

Although Yellow Journalism had begun to fade during the early part of the twentieth century, sensationalism, in various forms, remained, and of course is alive today. Perhaps no one made more straightforward or practical commentaries on sensationalism than William Allen White. Press practices of White's contemporaries to the contrary, the Kansas editor evolved his own editorial policies that he explained over the years on the pages of the Gazette. He saw journalism as one of the highest professions and was disgusted when reporters focused on sensationalism. "No honest editor cares to have scandal and improper stories in his paper, and no one should print such stories in such a way that they may not be read aloud in the family circle," White wrote in a 1903 editorial on "A Newspaper's Duty."83 Years later, in a 1926 editorial reply to a letter from a reader, White explained the Gazette's longstanding policy on divorce cases. The paper printed "the names of the parties, the causes briefly stated, and the disposition of the children, if any. The community has a right to this
news. But the harrowing details that mark the wreck of a home are not news . . . to pry among the wreckage is ghoulish."\(^{84}\) Drunkenness was different from divorce, however, White explained in the same editorial. A public drunk is a nuisance and a public charge, and a newspaper does a public duty by printing arrests for drunkenness."\(^{85}\)

Although he disliked sensationalism, White wrestled with the problems of censorship. In 1911 he said he thought details of violent crimes should be suppressed by the state and that cities ought to appoint managers to regulate the press.\(^{86}\) Years later he said, "But alas how can we censor the news? If the people are not wise enough to censor a newspaper by withdrawing patronage from offenders against decency, nothing remains to save the public from the swill and poison that certain publishers peddle."\(^{87}\)

His abhorrence of sensationalism led him to omit details of some court and police news stories, but he was a fierce defender of the first amendment and a champion of free speech. He risked a jail sentence by specifically violating a court decree that he felt was an unconstitutional abridgment of free speech, ultimately prevailing and earning one of his two Pulitzer Prizes for an editorial on the subject.

With a gentlemanly view of newspapers, Irwin expressed comments on sensationalism similar to those of White. He criticized what he called the "hysterical slush" published by papers such as Pulitzer's *New York World* and Hearst's *New
York Journal. On the positive side, however, Irwin said that Yellow Journalism produced better news efficiency--getting the most information to the public in the least amount of time--and he defended blaring headlines, if accurate, because they communicated information quickly.88

He disliked reporters who used unethical methods to obtain information. Irwin said impersonating public officials, prying open desks, and searching through wastebaskets were not excusable, and he criticized reporters who paid criminals or their families to provide exclusive stories. Other sensational practices that Irwin faulted were the focus on crime news and an overemphasis on the scoop, ignoring point of view and style.89

In part to combat sensationalism, Irwin proposed a four-point code of ethics for reporters:90

1. Draw a strict line between your social and personal life. Never, without special permission, print what you learn from a friend’s house.

2. Except in the case of criminals, publish nothing without the full permission of your informant.

3. State who you are, which newspaper you represent, and whether your informant is talking for publication.

4. Keep decent relations with the public.

Code number two, said Irwin, was not as much a matter of morals as it was of convenience so that reporters could maintain working relationships with politicians, clergymen, policemen, and others with whom newspapers had regular
contact. Irwin explained his fourth code: "Remember that when the suicide lies dead in the chamber [bedroom], there are wretched hearts in the hall, that when the son is newly in jail, intrusion is torment to the mother."^91

Lippmann also criticized sensationalism and in 1915, in comments reminiscent of Irwin, he wrote about his code for reporters.

Every reporter is a receptacle of scandal. But the honest reporter has a moral code which says that the use of gossip for personal ends or to serve a personal grudge is as low an activity as that of a doctor who would talk about his patients at a dinner table.^92

Sensationalism has been a target of nearly every press self-critic of the 1900s, no matter what his background or journalistic occupation. Robert Benchley, humorist, drama critic, and actor addressed the educated readers of the New Yorker and criticized the press for a variety of sensational practices. Using humor as his chief weapon Benchley criticized newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s by identifying the absurd nature of the press's foibles.

In one of his first press articles, Benchley lampooned mob journalism as he explored the sensational aspects of coverage of Charles Lindbergh's return to New York after his first trans-Atlantic flight. "In glancing over the files of the New York papers for the past month, we find that there was a Charles A. Lindbergh in town for a spell," said Benchley's understated column opening. Benchley described Lindbergh's visit as "an orgy for the newspapers" and gave
examples of both invading privacy and trivializing the aviator's activities.  

Benchley began writing occasional press criticism articles for *The New Yorker* and eventually became the author of a continuing column, "The Wayward Press." In it he regularly criticized newspapers for sensational stunts and for misleading the public. In one column he prodded the press for everything from headline-making around-the-world races, to the invention of German atrocities to spur American involvement in World War I, to inaccurate predictions of an Alf Landon (presidential election) landslide.  

In reproaching the press for focusing on nonsensical issues or for making nonsense out of serious issues, Benchley was, in a humorous way, asking for more social responsibility.

Sensationalism was also denounced by Mencken, but the famous newspaper columnist and magazine editor often expressed a more libertarian view than most of his fellow journalists-critics. For example, he found things to praise in the journalistic practices of Hearst and Pulitzer. Of Hearst he said,

"... he remains at sixty five, as he was when he singed the whiskers of Pulitzer, a goatish and unsubtle college boy, eager only to have a hell of a time.

There was no sense in Hearst's riotous brewing of war medicine in 1898 ... He whooped it up simply because he was full of malicious animal magnetism, and eager for a bawdy show ... Hearst deserves more and better of his country than he will ever get. It is the fashion to speak of him contemptuously ... He shook
journalism to its foundations, and exposed the incompetence of more than one highly smug newspaper proprietor. Mencken also showed two sides of Pulitzer:

Pulitzer fetched the mob with colored comics, black headlines, all the depressing machinery of sensationalism, but he also fetched the civilized minority with his editorial page.

Mencken's criticism of the press does not fit as neatly into the three common themes of the times because he often did not agree with his colleagues. Walter Lippmann, with whom he occasionally traded barbs, saw him as elitist and called him the literary pope. Media self-critic A. J. Liebling once called Mencken the "Baltimore bonze."

Mencken, who joined the Baltimore Sun in 1906 when he was 26 years old and remained there until his death in 1956, was an outspoken critic known almost as much for how he wrote as what he wrote about. His sometimes diverse writing style included irony, ribaldry, sarcasm, metaphors, hyperbole, understatement, and a large vocabulary.

Liebling and Contemporary Criticism

In 1947, a report critical of the press was issued by The Commission on Freedom of the Press, a committee chaired by Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago. The committee, composed mainly of professors from leading universities, was funded in part by Henry Luce, publisher of Time magazine. Although the Hutchins Commission, as it was called, did not contain journalists, the group's conclusions were read widely by journalists and
interested members of the public. It received mixed reviews at best by the general press, but was significant because (1) press critics have repeatedly cited its conclusions and recommendations; (2) it carried the not unsubstantial weight of the reputation of its chair; (3) the report was a definitive milestone in the establishment of the mass media social responsibility theory; and (4) the findings were similar to those of earlier press self-critics. The report criticized sensationalism and bias and said freedom of the press was in danger because the concentration of press control in the hands of a few resulted in limited public access and limited public service. The committee report quoted William Allen White who said many newspapers of the day were controlled not by journalists, but by businessmen from other professions or industries who were interested solely in making money.

New Yorker writer Abbott Joseph Liebling expressed sentiments similar to those of the commission, but he stated his thoughts in a different way. "Freedom of the press is guaranteed to anyone who owns one," he was frequently quoted as saying. His concern that press control was concentrated among a few powerful individuals was the centerpiece of his press philosophy. In his years as press critic for the New Yorker he touched on a variety of topics and themes, however, mixing articles critical of press techniques with those discussing broader issues.

In some regards he was to the New York Times what David
Shaw is to the Los Angeles Times, because Liebling often wrote about New York papers, the Times in particular, giving only occasional attention to the press in what he called the "wasteland west of the Hudson [River]." As his themes were similar to previous self-critics and even his style slightly reminiscent of Mencken, Liebling formed a bridge from earlier twentieth century critics to the criticism of Shaw. Liebling wrote until his death in 1963.

After he returned from Europe where he covered World War II Liebling convinced New Yorker editors to let him revive Benchley's "Wayward Press" column. The column had not run for eight years and Liebling said he revived it because he was tired of the things he read in American newspapers. He found them, among other things, shallow and superficial. His reactions to what he read in the press "resembled severe attacks of mental hives or prickly heat," he wrote with characteristic humor. "Occasionally they verged on what psychiatrists call the disturbed and assaultative."¹⁰⁰

In a 1947 article, Liebling explained the tenets of his philosophy: The vested interests of big business were the dominating influence in newspapers and everything else was secondary. Large, profitable newspapers always supported the status quo and lower taxes for business, opposed government intervention in business, and did not support unionism, although they were forced to deal with unions in various newspaper departments. Since newspapers and
newspaper chains are big business they naturally supported business interests in their pages.101 The U.S. press was not monolithic, however, he said, because there will always be dissidents--including start-up newspapers not yet bound to big business interests--and because there is money to be made by standing up for the underdog. He hoped that some day "unions, citizens' groups, or political parties as yet unborn would back newspapers." He also expressed hope in the possibilities for an endowed press, possibly one tied to a university. But, he said, "The hardest trick, of course, would be getting the chief donor of the endowment (perhaps a repentant tabloid publisher) to (a) croak, or (b) sign a legally binding agreement never to stick his face in the editorial rooms."102

Like other self-critics, Liebling used his experience not only to criticize but to make suggestions. In one "Wayward Press" column he criticized the New York Times for running in paid advertising space, unsubstantiated editorials written by and for business interests. After the "Wayward Press" piece appeared, Liebling received a letter from Arthur Sulzberger, publisher of the New York Times, asking him for suggestions. Liebling wrote the publisher and proposed ways the newspaper could substantiate "editorial" advertisements before they ran. Liebling later concluded that Sulzberger did not take his suggestions.103

When Liebling died, the voices of other journalists-turned-press critics continued. Perhaps most prominent of
those was I.F. Stone, an ex-reporter and editorial writer who published a weekly Washington, D. C., newsletter from 1952 to 1971. I.F. Stone's Weekly contained information Stone unearthed through carefully reading newspapers and vast numbers of public documents, including the Congressional Record. He criticized the press frequently, saying, for example, that the Washington Post was "an exciting paper to read because you never know on what page you will find a page-one story." He was most remembered for his coverage of Johnson Administration misstatements regarding the Vietnam War.104

A few years after Liebling's death a new type of press self-critic emerged, the ombudsman. Norman Issacs, editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal, and an outspoken press self-critic himself, hired the first newspaper ombudsman in 1967, although he gave credit for the ombudsman idea to Abe Raskin, assistant editorial page editor of the New York Times.105 John Herchenroeder had been city editor of the Courier-Journal for 25 years when he became the newspaper's first ombudsman, charged mainly with dealing with reader inquiries and investigating reader complaints. The newspaper already had a policy of running corrections, and after Herchenroeder became ombudsman, the corrections column was given a fixed position in the newspaper every day.106 Herchenroeder was kept so busy that two additional ombudsmen had to be hired and gradually a few other newspapers in the country copied the ombudsman concept, notably the Washington
Richard Harwood, the Post's first ombudsman, left the job in 1971, after a year, and was succeeded by Ben Bagdikian who had been national editor of the Post. In 1967, Bagdikian had written an article in the fall issue of the Columbia Journalism Review critical of the Post. In the article, he suggested five qualities of greatness for a newspaper: 1. authority (thorough, balanced reporting); 2. comprehensiveness; 3. art (evidence of style, insight, intelligence); 4. professionalism (basic, clear, unpoisoned facts); and 5. a sense of priority in the news. Bagdikian lasted less than two years at the Post, and left after a disagreement with management over where his allegiances should lie, with readers or with the publisher. Since Bagdikian, the Post has had eight other ombudsmen including Harwood who returned in the late 1980s.

Far from becoming common, the position of ombudsman has been created at only 34 newspapers throughout the country. Ombudsmen generally respond to calls from readers, investigate complaints, oversee corrections, and write critical memos to management. Some ombudsmen also write regular signed columns. Limited popularity of this position is attributed to resistance by editors and to hostility of reporters and lower level editors. Other newspapers that have hired ombudsmen include the Orange County Register in Santa Ana, California, the (Denver) Rocky
Mountain News, Honolulu Advertiser, Sacramento Bee, Boston Globe, and Minneapolis Star-Tribune.\(^{113}\)

A few years after the first ombudsmen were hired at U.S. newspapers, William Thomas, editor of the Los Angeles Times, decided that his newspaper would start a policy of explaining and criticizing itself and the press in general. The concept of the press explaining itself to the public had been suggested earlier by Irwin, whose Collier's series gave the public a rare look at how newspaper journalism operated, but was never carried out in earnest until Thomas discussed his ideas with reporter David Shaw.
Notes


(5) Ibid., 27; Mott, 17.

(6) Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1974), 48. According to the libertarian theory, the truth will arise from an unrestricted clash of ideas.


(10) Lee Brown, 25.

(11) Mott, 220; Donald Shaw, 87.

(12) Mott, 216.

(13) Ibid., 232.

(15) Donald Shaw, 87; Payne, 257.


(17) Ibid., 456.

(18) Lambert A. Wilmer provides the names, dates, and details of duels fought by more than two dozen newspaper editors during the period 1785 to 1854 in, *Our Press Gang; Or A Complete Exposition of the Corruptions and Crimes of the American Newspapers* (Philadelphia: J.T. Lloyd, 1859), 294-325.

(19) Payne, 261-262.

(20) *New York Tribune*, 28 April 1841, quoted in Mott, 271.

(21) Advertising as a means of supporting the press was consistent with the libertarian theory according to Siebert, 53.

(22) Donald Shaw, 89; Lee Brown, 25.

(23) John D. Stevens, "Sensationalism in Perspective," *Journalism History*, 12(Winter-Autumn 1985), 79. Stevens notes that sensationalism actually dates back to ancient Rome and was popular in Europe even before the printing press.

(24) Francke, 80.

(25) Mott, 386.

(26) Mott, 311, credits Wilmer's book as a first, but few other writers mention him or discuss his criticisms. Siebert (78) simply says the first book of press criticism was published in 1859.

(27) Mott, 320, notes that *Godey's Lady's Book* was one of the better paying magazines its time.

(28) Wilmer, 48.

(29) Showman P.T. Barnum was another benefactor of the press's selective interest, according to Wilmer (154). Such attractions as a monkey with a codfish tail sewed on its back presented as a new form of sea life, and singer Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale", were promoted through "puff" stories Barnum had placed in newspapers. Wilmer defined
"puff" as a strong recommendation or first-rate notice. (The term is still used today as a pejorative by journalists and a description of a favorable news article by public relations practitioners.)

(30) Wilmer, 173.

(31) Ibid., 252-264.

(32) Ibid., 184-201.

(33) Ibid., 217-233.

(34) Ibid., 327-335.

(35) Samuel Bowles, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 20 December 1872, quoted in Lee Brown, 27.

(36) Payne (340) and Mott (374) credit Dana with advancing professional techniques of journalists and with imbuing his personality into his paper.

(37) Mott, 440.


(48) According to Jeffres, p. 35, between 1870 and 1900 illiteracy was reduced from 20 percent to 11 percent and the number of children in public schools rose from 57 percent to 72 percent.


(53) Sinclair, 200.

(54) Ibid., 252.

(55) Jeffers, 20; Siebert, 106-111.

(56) Sinclair, 417.


(59) Ibid.


(61) McKerns, 639.

(62) Ibid., 640.

(64) George Seldes, *In Fact*, 2 February 1948, 1.

(65) *In Fact*, 2 November 1942, 3.

(66) *In Fact*, 6 January 1947, 1.


(68) Ibid., 383.

(69) Ibid., 272-280.

(70) Mott, 637.


(73) Ibid., 250.


(79) Ibid., 2.

(80) Ibid., 3.

(81) Ibid., 42.


(85) Ibid.


(87) William Allen White, Forty Years on Main Street, 282.


(90) Ibid., 19, 30.

(91) Ibid., 30.


(93) Robert Benchley, "Press in Review: Lindbergh Month," The New Yorker, 2 July 1927, 28, 30. In this column Benchley wrote under the pseudonym Horace Greeley, Jr., although his "Wayward Press" pieces bore the byline Guy Fawkes.


(98) Ibid., 60.


(100) A.J. Liebling, The Wayward Pressman, 117.

(101) Ibid., 265-267.
(102) Ibid., 273-274.
(103) Ibid., 163.
(106) Issacs, 135.
(107) Lee Brown, 54.
(109) Issacs, 136.
(113) Issacs, 140-143.
CHAPTER 3

BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID SHAW

On a wall in David Shaw's home, near his Pulitzer Prize certificate, is a political-style cartoon showing a young Shaw as the Biblical David standing victorious over a fallen Goliath. In the drawing, Goliath is Max Rafferty, an unsuccessful candidate for the U.S. Senate from California who Shaw characterized as a World War II draft evader in a series of investigative articles he wrote in 1968 for the Long Beach Independent. Rafferty lost the senate election to a then relatively unknown Alan Cranston and Shaw won the top Los Angeles Press Club award that year for the stories and went on to secure a job with the Los Angeles Times. The cartoon, and the Pulitzer certificate, are not displayed like trophies in a room where guests would be likely to see them, but are tucked away upstairs. The cartoon tribute to Shaw, created as a gift, rather than for publication, is symbolic of several struggles and victories that have punctuated Shaw's life.

David Shaw was born in Dayton, Ohio, on January 4, 1943. His parents moved to Southern California in 1946, living first in Long Beach and then Compton, at the time a
middle-class white suburb of Los Angeles. Shaw's parents fought constantly and had what he describes as a "miserably unhappy marriage." When Shaw was 11 his father had a heart attack that left him unable to work. Shaw, his sister and parents lived on his father's pension of $226 per month. When Shaw was 13 his parents divorced. He lived with his father; his sister lived with his mother.\footnote{1}

Although Shaw's father did not have much money to spend on his son--Shaw said he never bought clothes anywhere but the Goodwill until he was preparing to go to college--he did get David "into the library habit at a very young age." Long before he attended high school, Shaw became well known at his local library. As he was discovering the world of books, he also learned about a dark side of society. During the early 1960s, the first black families moved into his south-central Los Angeles community. The first black family on Shaw's block was greeted by crosses burned on the yard and garden hoses shoved into the family's mail slot to flood the house. Shaw was shocked and did not fully understand what was happening. By the time he was enrolled at Compton High School where racial tensions had led to violence, Shaw had learned about racism first hand and had become a foe of discrimination. Years later he would write about race and the newspaper business.

As a young journalism student in high school, Shaw was offered the opportunity to write sports for a community newspaper. When Shaw asked the sports editor about the
salary, he was told he should be grateful just for the opportunity, but Shaw insisted. He told the editor he came from a poor family and needed the money. With the help of Viola Bagwell, his high school journalism teacher, he got paid for his writing. During his last two years in high school Shaw worked for a weekly motorcycle newspaper and became editor of the publication at 16 even though he knew little about motorcycles and had never ridden one. Due to his financial condition, and a growing interest in going to college so he could become a newspaper writer, Shaw worked at a variety of part-time jobs--many in newspapers--but he was also an apprentice butcher and a janitor.

One of his part-time jobs led to a college scholarship. Shaw wrote local high school sports stories for the Los Angeles Examiner as part of the newspaper's Scholastic Sports Association, founded to give students experience in journalism. His good grades in high school helped him win a full scholarship from the association to Pepperdine College in Los Angeles. Although he wanted to be a newspaper sports writer, Shaw majored in English, having been told by a newspaper reporter he met that he would only be taught two things in journalism school: "to indent for paragraphs and to start stories half-way down the page." He took English to improve his writing, content to learn journalism on the job.
College Education

While he credits the chairman of the English Department at Pepperdine for teaching him more about writing than anyone else he ever knew, the Church of Christ-operated college was not suited to Shaw, or vice versa. In Shaw's words he was, "liberal, Freudian (meaning sexually oriented), and Jewish" and was therefore out of place, especially in his regular religion classes and weekly chapel attendance. He was reprimanded when he wrote in the school paper that two players on the otherwise inept football team were so good they stood out "like Lady Godiva at early Mass." Soon he had given up his scholarship and transferred to UCLA to complete his education. In the 1960s, resident tuition at the University of California was minimal, but Shaw nonetheless worked all the time he attended UCLA.

He carried a heavy load of classes, including literature courses he picked specifically for their lengthy required reading lists. Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe were his favorite authors and he remembers also reading Harper's Magazine. In his second year at UCLA he was sports editor of the campus paper, The Daily Bruin. During the summers he worked full-time as a relief reporter for local newspapers. In the summer before his last year at UCLA, he got a temporary job as a reporter at the Huntington Park Daily Signal, a small suburban newspaper. When he started work there he decided that he would do everything he could to impress the editors so they would hire him as a full-time
reporter in the fall. Working on his own time to develop and write extra feature articles he filled the newspaper with his words during the summer and did indeed get an offer of full-time employment.

Shaw said he anticipated the offer so he arranged his schedule at UCLA so he could still carry a full load of classes and work at the newspaper. The editor assigned him to cover evening meetings and to work Saturdays to accommodate his college classes. Once he had this job, however, Shaw immediately lost interest in college; his only reason for going to college was to obtain a job as a reporter, and he was a reporter. The newspaper became his primary interest—he covered the 1965 Watts riots for the Daily Signal—but he stayed in school, maintained good grades, and received his bachelor's degree in 1965.

After three years at the Daily Signal, Shaw moved to the Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram, a larger newspaper in a larger community. In 1968, an election year, Shaw was assigned to do a background story on Max Rafferty, the Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate. Using reportorial techniques he now calls, "reprehensible and illegal" and criticizes others for using, Shaw wrote a series of stories that gained him statewide acclaim.

To gain background on Rafferty, Shaw visited Trona, a small town in California's Mojave Desert where Rafferty had been a teacher and coach. Shaw said he is not sure now whether he started the assignment using a hidden recording
device or whether he was told to wear the recorder by his editors after it appeared he might be able to uncover evidence of wrongdoing against Rafferty. In any event, Shaw found himself wearing a wire recorder in a holster in his arm pit with a microphone wire running down inside his coat sleeve to his wrist. Shaw was told in interviews that Rafferty had avoided military service during World War II by feigning an injured leg. Shaw said he discovered the candidate's ex-wife, whom he was the first reporter to interview, and received confirmation of the stories. He then went to the Selective Service Office in the state capital, Sacramento, and posed as an employee in order to borrow and copy Rafferty's draft records. This was not the first time Shaw had posed as someone he was not, in order to get a story. Earlier, while at the Long Beach newspaper, he dressed as a sailor to investigate allegations that a waterfront store was using women to lure sailors into buying overpriced encyclopedias. At the time, Shaw was proud of himself. He later wrote about the waterfront incident criticizing himself and other reporters who become impostors or otherwise break the law for stories.  

Shaw's Rafferty series not only earned the top Los Angeles Press Club award, it was picked up by newspapers throughout the state--except the Los Angeles Times--and was mentioned in national news magazines. Soon Shaw received a job offer from the Los Angeles Times. According to Shaw, the editor who contacted him had not seen the Rafferty
series, but called him because people had recommended Shaw to him and because he had read some of Shaw's earlier stories. Encouraged and buoyed by the recognition he received from the Rafferty series, Shaw did not, however, instantly accept the offer to work on the newspaper he said he always knew he would work for, but he gave the editor a list of conditions which included setting his own schedule, reporting directly to the managing editor, rather than a lower-level editor, and writing only lengthy feature stories, the topics for which he would select himself. "I didn't want to do any daily (breaking news) stories. They bored the heck out of me." Although the late Ted Weegar, managing editor of the Times' Orange County Edition, was amazed at Shaw's demands, he hired him to work in the satellite office in suburban Orange County, south of Los Angeles.

While some reporters viewed an assignment at the Times Orange County office as being stuck in a journalistic backwater, Shaw recognized an opportunity. If he had started downtown he would have been surrounded by hundreds of more experienced writers, but in the local office with a much smaller staff he stood a better chance to get noticed. He was determined to earn a transfer and good assignment downtown within 18 months and he set out to impress his editors as he had earlier on the Huntington Park newspaper. Almost eighteen months later, in May of 1970, Shaw had a chance to move up to the central, Los Angeles office of the
The metropolitan editor, William P. Thomas, became interested in Shaw when he read a profile Shaw had written on Walter Knott, founder of the Knott's Berry Farm amusement park. When Thomas interviewed Shaw for a reporting job for the main Times office, Shaw had some suggestions. "I started to tell him I wanted the same conditions I had in Orange County and he said, 'No, no. This is what your schedule will be and you will report to the city editor.'"

In the ensuing four years Shaw was a feature writer focusing mainly on "projects," journalistic term for long research articles or series of articles. Twice he was offered opportunities to specialize either as a Times political writer or education writer, but he declined, preferring a variety of assignments.

To Cover the Press

One day in August of 1974 Shaw was told "T.H.E. editor" wanted to see him. William Thomas, who had been promoted to the top editorial position of the Times, was sometimes referred to as T.H.E. editor to distinguish him from the many other lower level people who also had the word editor in their titles. Thomas had occasionally discussed stories with Shaw and on this day Shaw assumed that Thomas had another story idea for him. As Shaw remembers it, Thomas wanted to discuss the stature of the press and the fact that newspapers did not report on themselves.

According to Thomas, now retired, he discussed with
Shaw how the press was simply not reporting on itself. "Nobody on the outside had the faintest idea of what the press was doing, why it did it, what yardsticks it used, or what sort of ethical guidelines were in place." Thomas thought it indefensible for the press to be digging into government and the inner workings of business and not be reporting on itself, too. Initially he had no noble intentions, just a desire to see the press covered and explained to the public. It was a gap no other newspaper was filling and the full-time job he envisioned had no historical precedence.

At first Thomas thought about hiring a "social historian of repute" to report on the press from a social viewpoint, to explain the effects of the press on the public. Then he worried that someone without a background in journalism would understand the business no better than the public did and he did not want to risk hiring a well-known writer only to have to fire him later. Eventually he came to the conclusion that a skilled reporter would be best to handle what Thomas saw initially as simply a new beat (regular assignment) covering the press. Thomas foresaw that if the press reporter did his job well he would be disliked by many of the other writers and editors on the newspaper and he wanted someone who would not "cave in" to pressure from colleagues. Thomas remembered that in the past Shaw had accepted some assignments that other reporters might have found distasteful. Honesty was also a prime
consideration, so he discussed the job as press reporter with him.

Shaw remembered that he was not interested in the job at first but he liked and respected Thomas so much that he did not want to disappoint him. He told Thomas that he would think about the job over night and they agreed that Shaw would come up with a half dozen potential story ideas. That night, rather than come up with a half dozen ideas, he came up with 31. He also developed another list of job conditions similar to his previous list at the Orange County edition. "By now I had learned enough not to pose them as conditions, but as questions."

Thomas and Shaw differed slightly in their recollections of how Shaw's assignment was achieved, but regardless of whether the men decided on the job's characteristics together or separately, they both agreed on these points:

--Shaw would report directly to Thomas. Thomas would personally edit Shaw's copy.

--Shaw would write lengthy analysis stories about the press and would include coverage of the *Los Angeles Times* itself.

--Stories would be considered for the front page, right hand feature column. (This position is known as "Column One" and is reserved for often lengthy feature stories on almost any topic. In fact, nearly all of Shaw's stories have run there.)
Editors in other sections, who would not normally see a story before publication, would not be given a chance to read the articles. For example, if Shaw wrote about film critics, the Times arts editor would not be given the story ahead of time.

Shaw would not be the exclusive media or press writer on the newspaper. He would focus on in-depth analysis stories. Television, movie, and book reviews and news stories about the media would continue to be done by other writers. He did not have much interest in writing breaking stories about the media. Shaw explained common breaking stories, as opposed to the analysis article he writes:

A common breaking story assignment might be, 'the Supreme Court just made a decision on libel. Call six editors and get their reaction.' I find those, as a reader and as a reporter, predictable and boring.

Shaw was not, in any way, to be considered an ombudsman. Thomas saw Shaw's role as a reporter, not columnist, critic, or ombudsman. The latter Thomas considered a "cop-out" and an ineffective way to explain the press to the public. Ombudsmen's columns reflect the opinion of one person. Thomas wanted press news articles written by a Times reporter reflecting the views of many sources and carrying the full weight of the newspaper.

Shaw accepted the job on a trial basis for one year and his first media article, "Ford and the Press: A Critical Commentary," ran on October 15, 1974. The article reviewed
press coverage of the first 50 days of the Gerald Ford administration and was the result of about 30 interviews and an analysis of newspaper, magazine, and wire service stories. In his lead, Shaw said the press, "blinded by its hostility toward Mr. Nixon, did a generally inadequate and sometimes irresponsible job of covering the Ford administration." Shaw's byline, then, as now, said only "Times Staff Writer."

After Shaw wrote his first article, he and Thomas discussed what his role ought to be. Thomas thought Shaw had sounded too much like a critic and he impressed upon him that he wanted him to be a reporter, not a critic. At the same time, Thomas acknowledged that in line with the trend toward analysis and interpretation in newspaper writing, he did want Shaw to include his judgments, "but his judgments had to be backed up with reasons for them, the arguments for and against, so that the reader was free to make up his own mind if he wanted to."

Thomas described the direction he gave Shaw:

If you can make a case for the judgment you're offering or the picture you're drawing, then I'm going to let it go even if I don't agree with it, but I've got to see the case. It's got to be plain to me why you've come to these conclusions. Then, even if I don't agree, I've got to let it go, or otherwise I'll be writing your stories.

In the first two years of his work, Shaw wrote articles on sports pages, the effect of editorial endorsements, advice columns, film critics, police-press relations,
hoaxes, and other topics. In doing so, he discussed the Times more than Thomas had envisioned. Thomas deleted some material about the newspaper when he thought the Times was receiving too much attention, but many of Shaw’s references to the Times were valid and were left in the newspaper. Shaw described Thomas as a laissez-faire editor who hired skillful, sometimes unorthodox writers, gave them beats, then left them alone. “If you did a good job he did not interfere with you. I’m sure my job developed in ways he did not envision. I’m sure I wound up writing more often about us [The Times] and longer pieces and often more judgmental pieces than he envisioned or wanted.” Over the years Thomas and Shaw became comfortable with each other and though Thomas maintained his veto power over specific material and topics, Shaw’s charter evolved and gradually became broader. He began to explore a variety of press topics, carrying on the historical flow of press self-criticism.

Shaw’s work has included more than his newspaper articles. Before he obtained the media assignment, he wrote two books, one an autobiography of basketball star Wilt Chamberlain, with whom he shared the byline, and the other, a humorous story of a stock swindler. In 1977 and in 1984 collections of his articles on the press were published as Journalism Today and Press Watch respectively. Shaw wrote another book, that has never been published. For most of his life, Shaw’s father kept a diary and in the early 1980s Shaw
decided to turn the diary into a book. He used his father's diary entries and supplemented it with information and comments on things that were happening in the world at the time. The book was sold for publication but Shaw's mother, who was criticized in the book, refused to release the publisher from liability and therefore the book died. Shaw has a passion for food and has also written articles on restaurants, food, and wine for a variety of publications including GQ magazine where he wrote a regular column.

How He Writes

His method of researching and writing his press criticism articles has evolved over the years and now includes these steps:

--Shaw discusses ideas with his editor. (Thomas was more likely to give immediate approval than his successor, Shelby Coffey, III.)

--If the series will significantly involve the Los Angeles Times, Shaw immediately goes to that person at the Times who will be most directly affected by it. "I want them to hear it first from me," he said. Shaw explains the topic of his article and, if applicable, says that he will come back to that person later for an interview.

--Research usually includes numerous interviews, often with reporters and editors from a variety of newspapers. With permission, Shaw tape records all his interviews whether on the phone or in person.
His research has often taken Shaw to the East Coast where he is well known to editors of the New York Times, Washington Post, Philadelphia Inquirer, and other large newspapers. The number of people Shaw interviews for each series has increased over the years. Often he will talk with 100 people or more for one series--he interviewed 175 people for his article on minorities and the press. Research usually includes reading the press as well, a regular habit of Shaw who reads five newspapers per day: The New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and the Los Angeles Times. Depending on the nature of his topic, Shaw may focus on specific types of stories, e.g. sports, book reviews, obituaries; specific newspapers; or specific subjects, e.g. abuse of language, political columnists, ethics. For example, Shaw reviewed the front pages of The Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, and New York Times every day for 155 days for an article he wrote on how different editors determine what is and is not front-page news. Researchers at the Times library frequently help Shaw locate books, studies, and articles from The Times and other publications.

When he started writing his media critiques, his research time averaged two months. Now he spends about twice that long. Criticism he has received from Times writers and editors has caused him to take more time to be even more methodical in his research and, in addition, he is today addressing larger, more complex topics. He is also
spending an increased amount of time talking to college
classes and journalism groups and being interviewed by other
reporters from magazines and newspapers, tasks that take
time away from his research.

--Shaw transcribes his taped interviews, collects his
other documentation, and then may spend several days or
longer reviewing all his research. He works both at home
and at the office but all of his writing is done at home in
a bedroom cubbyhole where he has a computer, connected by
modem to the Times, a printer, and facsimile machine.

As he is writing, Shaw's articles frequently develop in
ways he did not anticipate when he began his research. "For
me the pleasure of reporting is discovering what I don't
know. The pleasure of writing is discovering what I really
think. Novelists say characters develop a life of their own
and I feel that way about the stories I write." Revisions
are accomplished as he goes along. Before he used a word
processor, Shaw would write one draft, no matter how long,
at one sitting, then revise it. Shaw considers himself good
at analyzing and distilling the vast amount of information
he collects. He said he thinks he is not overly intelligent
but is able to take the creative thoughts and opinions of
others and combine them in a useful way to explain his
topics.

--Once his final draft is ready to be submitted, Shaw
goes back to his tape recorded interviews and listens to
every direct quotation he uses "to make sure it is word-for-
word correct and in context."

--Shaw has little contact with his editor until his story is ready for submission.

Shaw's articles vary in length. Even the shortest ones that have but one part are long by newspaper standards. His longer series approach book length. A recent story on press coverage of the Los Angeles Police Department stretched over five days and covered more than 700 column inches.10 His series on the press and minorities covered approximately eight full newspaper pages.11 One of the reasons for the length is that Shaw tries to answer every possible question he has about a subject. He said he writes his articles for readers who, like him, do not want to be left with questions after reading an article on a subject of interest.

Winning the Pulitzer

In addition to receiving numerous requests for speaking engagements, Shaw receives a heavy volume of mail and phone calls in response to his articles. After he wrote a profile of Walter Cronkite for TV Guide he received about 1,000 letters, the most he has received about one story. Many of his Times articles generate mail as well, sometimes hundreds of letters, almost all complimentary. Articles on coverage of the abortion issue and the misuse of language in newspapers generated the most letters. Shaw attributes the positive nature of his mail to a favorable response to
seeing the press criticize and explain itself in public.
"One of the problems with the press is we've got this image
of being arrogant and disengaged and too good for
everybody." To counteract that impression Shaw is
purposefully accessible to readers and anyone else who wants
to get in touch with him. He personally responds in writing
to all the letters he receives and has only resorted to form
notes when he has received hundreds of letters about one
particular article. When he is working at home he leaves
his home phone number on his voice mail recording at The
Times.

In 1989, after Shaw had been writing press criticism
for 15 years, William Thomas retired. At the time, there
was speculation among the staff that Shaw's media criticism
might be ended, because his booster was leaving the
newspaper and because of the "special relationship" Shaw was
perceived to have had with Thomas. When Shelby Coffey,
III, The Times executive editor, replaced Thomas, Shaw's job
did not change. Coffey, who had worked at the Washington
Post for 17 years, knew of Shaw before he moved to the Times
and had even been interviewed by him once. He maintained
essentially the same working relationship with Shaw. The
new editor's inclination is to stay in closer contact with a
"project reporter" during the course of his research and
writing, than Thomas did, but Coffey exercises most of his
control in the editing stage. According to Shaw, he tends
to "discuss, debate and even argue" over stories with Coffey
more than he did with Thomas. "I have to defend a lot more than I did with Bill, but that's fine." Coffey, according to Shaw, "has never pulled rank."

In 1990, Shaw and his wife were expecting the birth of their first child, so when he had finished one article and was searching for another topic, he looked for one that would require no travel outside Southern California. Lois Timnick, the Times reporter who was covering the McMartin Pre-School trial in Los Angeles, had suggested that he write about the case so he discussed it with Coffey. When Coffey approved the topic, Shaw started to investigate the local media coverage of the trial in which operators of the McMartin Pre-School in Manhattan Beach, California, were accused of multiple counts of child molestation. The trial cost $15 million and was the longest criminal trial in history. The case first became a news story in 1983, but prosecutors did not bring it to trial until four years later. A jury found the defendants not guilty in early 1990. For his story, Shaw interviewed more than 70 people and reviewed nearly 2,000 newspaper and broadcast stories about the case, plus 10,000 pages of documents, including court transcripts.

"Pack journalism. Laziness. Superficiality. Cozy relationships with prosecutors . . . responsible journalism be damned" was one of the ways Shaw described the "media feeding frenzy" that surrounded the trial. In addition to criticizing media coverage that "assumed the defendants were
guilty," Shaw focused on *The Times*, citing sources in and out of the media who charged the *Times*’ coverage was biased. While Shaw received favorable comments from some *Times* staff members, others, particularly those named in the story, and their friends, were furious. *Times* deputy managing editor Noel Greenwood, whom Shaw identified in his story, was quoted in the trade journal *Editor and Publisher* defending the *Times* coverage and characterizing criticisms as "Monday morning quarterbacking." At the same time Greenwood and other employees were criticizing Shaw, both publicly and privately, Coffey was defending the *Times*’ use of the story. The *Times* editor told *Editor and Publisher* there was "never any doubt in my mind that [the McMartin criticism articles] should be published." He said it was "all right if the series stirs up a little controversy." Coffey's "little controversy" was an understatement as the negative feeling among the metropolitan news staff generated by Shaw's McMartin stories, and fueled in part by subsequent Shaw articles, continues today.

In 1991 David Shaw's McMartin stories won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism.
Notes

(1) Unless otherwise specified, material in this chapter, including quotations, is taken from an extended personal interview with David Shaw on 23 February 1993.


(4) Ibid.


(6) Thomas interview. In separate interviews both Shaw and Thomas described essentially the same conversations regarding the scope and nature of Shaw's assignment. Both said they knew there was a fine line between (1) Shaw's straight critical opinion and (2) his conclusions or judgments based on the weight of evidence collected during research. Shaw explained that Thomas told him to, "draw on the conclusions of the people you interview, then summarize it and infuse it with your own judgments."

(7) Ibid.


(14) Ibid.

(15) Shaw has been married three times. His second wife, Ellen, died of cancer in 1983 and he married Lucy in 1988.


(19) Ibid.

(20) John J. Goldman, "Times Reporter Shaw Wins Pulitzer Prize for Criticism," Los Angeles Times, 10 April 1991. sec. A, p. 1. Among the ironies associated with Shaw's honor was the fact he had written articles about the Pulitzers and quoted sources who criticized the selection process. Originally Shaw had been entered in the Beat Reporting category, but the judges switched him to criticism, a category usually dominated by architecture, music, television, and book critics.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS I: CRITICIZING THE CRITIC

The previous chapter's description of Shaw's media beat and the way he works explained the physical side of his environment and his methodology but it omitted the emotional and psychological aspects of being an in-house critic surrounded by approximately 1,000 sensitive, creative people. It omitted what appears to be the overriding reason why no other major newspaper in the United States has a media writer with the critical charter of David Shaw. Former Los Angeles Times editor William Thomas summarized the challenge of employing an in-house press critic as, "blood on the floor." This chapter traces the origins of the often vociferous criticism Shaw generates and provides an historical perspective on internal criticism.

In several respects, William Thomas, David Shaw's boss, was not a conventional newspaper editor. In the late 1960s and early 1970s while other newspapers emphasized the who, what, when, and where of the news and tried to be brief, Thomas believed that to engage contemporary readers fully and to compete with television the Times should break with past rigid journalistic formulas. He hired a team of
talented young, often unorthodox writers who wrote long, stylish articles that provided analysis and interpretation, rather than just facts. Shaw's assignment as internal press writer was, and still is, unusual; however, it was but one of the many changes Thomas brought to the Times. Thomas knew that when Shaw criticized some of his fellow reporters, he would not be popular, but he thought it important that the press talk about itself in print and he thought Shaw would be up to the challenge that probable internal hostility would pose. He told Shaw, "I hope you have a lot of friends outside the newspaper business. By the time you're through with this job you may not have any left inside it."

Thomas' expectations about reactions to Shaw's criticisms were correct. Within the first two and a half years of Shaw's assignment,

--A Times movie critic wrote a four-page memo to Thomas taking exception to Shaw's comments and he noticeably avoided Shaw in the office.

--An associate editor of the Times complained in outrage at Shaw's article on film critics and his article about the newspaper's book best-seller list.

--The Times advertising department obtained a pre-publication copy of one of Shaw's articles and complained that it would provide valuable ammunition for competing newspapers.

--The Times marketing research department produced a
19-page study to rebut a story Shaw wrote about all-news radio stations.

--A *Times* reporter confided to Shaw that other employees were "hysterical" over his criticism of them by name.\(^6\)

In spite of mounting criticism of his work from some reporters and editors, Shaw was never advised to be more careful, nor were many of the specific criticisms that reached Thomas ever transmitted to Shaw. Thomas remained convinced of three things: (1) the continuing value of Shaw's criticism, (2) his selection of Shaw as press writer--"anybody else would have wanted out of that job because . . . everybody's ready to whack you"-- and, (3) the necessity of personally editing Shaw's copy to keep it from being thrown out by other editors.\(^7\)

The criticisms increased as some reporters and editors refused to cooperate with Shaw. Others purposefully avoided him. "I don't know if anybody realized what a touchy situation he was in," recalled Thomas. "And he made it touchier because of his own characteristics."\(^8\) Shaw generally agreed with that assessment. "I do have an aggressive, abrasive, cocky personality. If I want something I make no bones about wanting it," he said in an interview.\(^9\) That he proposed a list of employment conditions to the first *Los Angeles Times* editor he talked with indicates, at the least, a forceful self-assurance, or as he said in his first press book, "an abrasive self-
Over the years, Shaw's popularity at the newspaper ebbed and flowed, depending on the subjects about which he was writing. One editor complained to the publisher about him, then refused to speak to him for a year. Another editor threw one of his articles in the trash and asked him if the paper ever did anything right. He has occasionally offended individual writers who have then complained to their fellow reporters about him, but opposition toward the newspaper's in-house critic was never as strong—or as public—as it has become in the last three years since Shaw's McMartin articles. Shaw's 1990 story on coverage of the McMartin trial strongly criticized two reporters, Lois Timnick and Cathleen Decker, by name. Of Timnick he said, "On McMartin, critics say, Timnick stumbled; she was convinced from the beginning that the defendants were guilty, they say, and her coverage—and the paper's approach—reflected that judgment." Decker, who wrote but two bylined stories about the case, was criticized for an article she wrote that seemed to assume the victims were telling the truth.

Not only were the reporters criticized in the article, but the editorial direction of the McMartin coverage was also questioned with examples that compared Times stories to those of other newspapers and television stations. Shaw said, "Criticism of The Times coverage of the McMartin case is particularly widespread among journalists who covered the
The story also quoted Noel Greenwood, then deputy managing editor of the *Times*, and a vocal Shaw critic, as "vigorously" denying the newspaper's coverage was biased. These named *Times* staff members, and some of their friends and co-workers, were angered by Shaw's work.\textsuperscript{14}

To avoid a misunderstanding of Shaw's critical technique, it should be noted that none of Shaw's articles, including the one just cited, consists of one-sided denunciations. Although some of Shaw's disparaging words have been cited thus far in this paper, as will be shown in the next chapter, all of Shaw's articles provide evidence and opinion representing a variety of viewpoints on virtually every issue and sub-issue he discusses. If he says *Times* coverage (or that of any other paper) is lacking in one area, he invariably cites authorities or statistics that support the opposite viewpoint. The angry responses to Shaw's columns, therefore, are sometimes a testimony to the natural tendency of people to focus on the negative--when it affects them. This is not to say, as *Los Angeles Times* columnist and former city editor Pete King pointed out, that simply providing quotations or authorities on different sides of an issue ensures a story will be objective. "You can cite those [types of evidence Shaw uses] to say [Shaw's articles] are balanced accounts. I'm here to tell you they're \textit{weighted} accounts," King said.\textsuperscript{15}
"Most Hated Man"

In December of 1990, the fourth and final part of a Shaw series on racial minorities and the press was a case study of the Los Angeles Times' hiring and promotion practices. The article contained percentages that showed that although the Times editors pledged they were interested in hiring and promoting minorities, they still lagged behind many major newspapers in the country. While deputy managing editor Greenwood was cited as one of the editorial staff most committed and actively involved in helping to hire minorities, the story concluded by saying that every editor Greenwood had promoted to a position of authority had been white, as had the vast majority of lower level editors and reporters with prestigious beats he had promoted.16

In April 1991, when Shaw won the Pulitzer Prize, it was for the McMartin series, the very articles that had fostered the most negative feelings in the news room. Three months later, a variety of Shaw's colleagues were quoted in a Los Angeles Magazine article that concluded that Shaw was, "the most hated man at the Los Angeles Times."17 The article was filled with pejoratives. The author said Shaw was a "pompous, cocky, independent jape" and had the "characteristic ability never to underestimate his own inestimable gifts."18 She quoted several Times employees.

"Most people don't like him," admits [former Los Angeles Times] science writer Lee Dye, who shares Shaw's 'pod' in the third-floor special writers' enclave. I get along with him fine but he's a little on the arrogant side, and that turns
people off. He's a talented guy and he knows it, and he doesn't try to hide it."

On Sunday, May 24, 1992, a Shaw series entitled "The Media and the LAPD: From Coziness to Conflict" began running. The first articles contained a history of police-press relations in Los Angeles. The May 26 installment discussed the Times' and other media's failure to cover adequately instances of racism and brutality in the Los Angeles Police Department. Shaw highlighted how the Times did not pursue a story about the police shooting of a black woman in 1979, a topic Shaw had also written about a few months after the incident happened. The May 27 installment compared the Times to the smaller Los Angeles Daily News in the newspapers' coverage of the Rodney King beating. In general, Shaw portrayed the Daily News as pursuing the stories more aggressively than the Times. The final installment, May 28, examined press coverage of Police Chief Daryl F. Gates and the Los Angeles Police Department's slow response to the urban rioting that broke out following the conclusion of the first Rodney King beating trial. Shaw examined coverage provided by the Times, Daily News, and the national media.

Predictably, when the trade press reported Shaw's assessments, it accompanied them with critical comments from Times employees. One editor accused Shaw of "trashing his own metro news staff." Noel Greenwood, who had become senior editor, and metropolitan editor Craig Turner said
Shaw was unfair to the metropolitan news staff. Turner said Shaw was more interested in being famous than in giving well-rounded accounts and Greenwood said Shaw "blows air kisses at the movers and shakers in the industry whose approval he craves and needs."23

When Editor and Publisher reviewed the major events of journalism in 1992 (in its January 2, 1993, issue) the "Year of Turbulence" story was led by the conflicts at the Los Angeles Times. "While the Times riot and Rodney King coverage was lauded by such media critics as New York magazines' Ed Diamond, the L.A. Times' own press writer, David Shaw, compared it unfavorably with that of the much smaller Los Angeles Daily News."24 It is uncertain whether the writer of that story did not pay close attention to Shaw's entire series or whether he assumed from previous Editor and Publisher articles that Shaw had criticized the Times riot coverage, but in fact Shaw did not discuss riot coverage, but only the press's coverage of Gates and his delayed response to the riots. In addition, Shaw actually quoted from the favorable Diamond article in his concluding Times story.

Shaw attributed the internal criticism he received as a result of his LAPD articles to concern by some staff members that his article would jeopardize the Times' chances for winning a Pulitzer Prize for Rodney King coverage.

There was this pervasive anxiety that [I] was going to say the Daily News did a better job than the L.A. Times on Rodney King, ergo the Daily
News was going to win a Pulitzer and the Times wasn't. That's what that was all about . . . I know it because I heard it directly from enough people.  

According to Shaw, he told his colleagues that no Southern California newspaper would win a Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the Rodney King case because what the Daily News and the Times pointed out in their stories was that the King beating was part of a long-time pattern of police behavior. One of the first things the Pulitzer judges would ask, said Shaw, was, "Where was the press before when this type of behavior was going on?" Ironically the Los Angeles Times did win a Pulitzer Prize, but, as Shaw had predicted, not for its coverage of the police, or the King trial, but for spot news coverage of the riots that followed the jury decision in the first trial.

Co-Worker Criticism

Severe criticism from co-workers is something most of Shaw's predecessors did not have to face, simply because most of the leading press self-critics of the past did not directly criticize the newspapers they worked for. For example, Will Irwin criticized newspapers while working for a magazine. Many of Walter Lippmann's outspoken comments appeared in his books, or later in his syndicated column. He did not work for the New York Times when he wrote his lengthy criticism of the coverage of the Russian Revolution, and his co-author, Charles Merz, did not go to work for the New York Times until years after the criticism appeared.
While William Allen White criticized the press, and his own newspaper in particular, he did so from the relative safety of the publisher's office. The vituperative George Seldes crusaded against the press in his own newsletter, and, as a result, he probably could not have obtained a newspaper job during the 1940s and 1950s if he had wanted it. Robert Benchley and A.J. Liebling wrote about the New York newspapers from the vantage point of the New Yorker and did not often criticize individual reporters by name. Ben Bagdikian did write outspoken criticism of the Washington Post while he worked for the Post, but he remained there only 18 months, while David Shaw has been at the Los Angeles Times more than 18 years.

Why has Shaw received such intense criticism? Industry interviews and an historical view of internal criticism yield several possibilities. One reason may be that since newspaper reporters are essentially writers--creative individuals--they are more sensitive to criticism of their work than people in other professions. According to a 1989 survey of newspaper reporters and editors, the chance to be a professional writer was the leading reason people selected a career in newspapers. Concurring, Thomas, former editor of the Los Angeles Times, stated, "Writers are tremendously sensitive to criticism and they should be. They are sensitive people. Writers are extremely tender when it comes to criticism."

"I doubt that anyone in the whole world is more
sensitive to criticism than people in the media . . .
especially newspapers," Bob Pisor, former press critic for
television station KDIV in Detroit told David Shaw when Shaw
was researching a story on media ethics.27 "We are afraid
to let anybody ever look at what we're doing critically,"
Robert Maynard, former publisher of the Oakland Tribune,
told Shaw.28 Based on comments such as these from writers
and media executives--and the personal criticisms he has
received in the news room--Shaw, too, has concluded that
much of the criticism he receives can be attributed to the
sensibilities of reporters.

In an interview, Henry Weinstein, a reporter for the
Los Angeles Times for 15 years and a friend of Shaw's,
offered three possible explanations for the criticism.
First, he suggested that friendship among reporters may
foster hard feelings against Shaw's criticism. If people
perceive that a friend is unjustly singled out for
criticism, then they will tend to become an advocate for him
or her. Second, others may hold hostile or jealous feelings
toward Shaw because of the reportorial freedom he has.
While most reporters work under a daily deadline, Shaw
writes a few series of articles per year. A third
possibility is that reporters think that Shaw criticizes
reporters and intermediate editors, but not the editor of
the Times.29

Earlier press self-critics also recognized the
sensitivity of journalists and the inherent difficulties of
self-criticism. H.L. Mencken, although he thought press self-criticism was necessary, ruminated on the difficulty of having adequate commentary on the press, in the press. "If a Heywood Broun is exasperated into telling the truth about the manhandling of a Snyder trial, or a Walter Lippmann exposes the imbecility of the Russian 'news' in a New York Times . . . it is a rarity and an indecorum." Mencken also stated that reporters have a natural inferiority complex and therefore abhor public criticism. "I have myself been damned as a public enemy for calling attention, ever and anon, to the intolerable incompetence . . . of the Washington correspondents." Walter Lippmann also believed self-criticism generated too many negative reactions among reporters to be practical:

> There is a fellowship among newspapermen as there is in other crafts and professions. They are not lone wolves. They have to see each other, meet together and work together, and life would become intolerable, as it would in a university faculty or an officers' mess, if they practiced vigorous mutual criticism in public. I may say that I have tried it and have had it tried on me, and my conclusion is that the hard feelings it causes are out of all proportion to the public benefits it causes. Mutual criticism, like marital criticism, if it is publicly made, is too hard for mortal men to take.

**Responding to Critics**

Obviously criticism of the critic has not deterred Shaw from doing his job, but he recognizes that criticism has been the most intense within the last few years, primarily, he asserts, because since 1990 he has written more direct,
intense criticism of the *Times* and of specific editorial staff members than he has since he began his job as media writer. According to Shaw, this has not been intentional, as his critics charge, but simply a result of a variety of circumstances. "Pre-McMartin you would not have found nearly as much hostility toward me. But in McMartin I was very tough on people by name. Those people and their friends . . . all got angry."33 Shaw's subsequent article on police-press relations reinforced the negative feelings among some staff members.

Shaw has responded in writing to some of his critics. In 1992 when Noel Greenwood's critical comments appeared not only in *Editor and Publisher*, but the *Washington Post*, Shaw wrote him a seven and a half page, single-spaced letter detailing how he has criticized the editors of many major eastern newspapers (Greenwood's "movers and shakers") and citing examples from his articles over the years to prove his points. In addition, Shaw said, "I probably did get a frisson of forbidden pleasure the first couple of times I wrote something negative about *The Times*. And I probably did enjoy the unusual attention that brought me. But I got over the novelty of all that very quickly, Noel, after about six months on the job. . . . But even on my very first media stories, I was never motivated by the desire to criticize us in order to glorify myself."34

The writer of the *Los Angeles Magazine* article on Shaw, and her editor, a long-time acquaintance of Shaw's, also
received lengthy letters from the critic. Shaw explained his reason for writing was not to complain about the magazine writer's conclusions about his personality, but to point out that she made numerous factual errors and omissions and did not quote him accurately. (Shaw taped the interview, the writer did not.) "I have no problem with her arriving at that judgment [about his personality]," Shaw said in an interview. "I am well aware that I am cocky. I am abrasive. And there are people who perceive me as a pompous, arrogant, obnoxious [jerk]. And she's absolutely entitled to make that judgment in the piece . . . What I object to is her leaving things out . . . twisting things." 35 Shaw pointed out the writer mentioned that a half dozen people were upset with him winning the Pulitzer Prize and did not mention that he received messages of congratulations on the Times' in-house electronic mail system from 116 people.

Shaw summarized how he does his work and keeps from being frustrated by criticism: "You have to be thick skinned and confident. And careful and thorough and fair. And not be overly concerned with what others think of you. I would like to be well-liked; who wouldn't, but I have no trouble going to sleep at night and I absolutely know that I have bent over backwards to be fair . . ." 36

Shaw used an anecdote to explain why he does not seek approval or praise from others regarding his articles:

I traced it to my very first day at the
Huntington Park Daily Signal. One of the beat reporters took me around introducing me to his sources. He had a story in the paper that day. And [to] everybody we met, he said, 'So what did you think of my story today? Pretty good, huh?' I was so appalled that I vowed at that moment I would never ask anyone, 'Did you see my story? What did you think of my story?' . . . [If] they want to tell me, they'll tell me.

A complete psychological analysis of Shaw is outside the scope of this paper but as Thomas and Shelby Coffey indicated, a degree of independence, assertiveness, and resilience are necessary ingredients for the Times' press critic. If Shaw was insecure about his work or displayed the "remarkable sensitivity to criticism" that he has said most reporters have,37 he would probably not have remained in his job. A healthy ego seems to be an important requisite for his position, even though the personality characteristics associated with a strong ego are sometimes interpreted as conceit. Thomas's comment that Shaw's personality occasionally makes his job even more difficult or tenuous points to the relationship between the self-assurance necessary to withstand criticism and the arrogance that a measure of immunity to complaints may communicate to others.

**Why Is Shaw Unique?**

While other newspapers have media writers and 34 have ombudsmen, no other newspaper has an in-house critic with the recognition, the reportorial freedom, and the editorial approval to criticize his own paper regularly.38 Some of
the reasons for this may, by now, be apparent. Thomas said no other newspaper editors have hired David Shaw-type critics for two reasons: potential conflicts with staff and unwillingness to be criticized.

It's too damn much trouble. It's endless blood on the floor. I mean it's one fight after another with your own people. Another reason is that most editors simply don't like to be criticized, or even implicitly criticized which they [would be] in things like David Shaw does. If David's criticizing your newspaper policy, he's really criticizing you. I've had other editors tell me that privately--while publicly they're saying, 'This is terrific. I wish we could do it.' One time, a pillar of the journalistic establishment in the south was telling me, while we were having drinks, 'Jesus Bill, you're letting this guy criticize you and your paper in your own columns.' . . . That's exactly the way they feel. Editors, until very recently, were the last of the jackboots, the last of the autocrats.

Shelby Coffey's answer to the question revolved around the difficulty in finding someone who had "the resilience and sometimes thick skin to put up with the unhappiness of his colleagues."

Arthur Nauman, ombudsman of the Sacramento Bee for the past 13 years, a former metropolitan editor and capital bureau chief for his newspaper, was asked why other newspapers do not have internal critics like Shaw. He listed three reasons:

1. Hiring an internal critic is costly. A good candidate would be an editor or subeditor who had been with a newspaper for several years, and such a person would be earning an above-average salary as a critic and at the same time not be producing for the paper on a daily basis.

2. Journalists do not appreciate criticism.

3. Editors do not appreciate criticism either.
"Many editors have a philosophical opposition to a person like me or a function like me. They say, 'every editor should be an ombudsman.'"\(^3\)

In a separate interview, Louis Gelfand, ombudsman for the Minneapolis Star Tribune, reiterated Nauman's third point. "A number [of editors] will say they're the ombudsman. So if you call the New York Times, you just ask for the editor and the editor will be with you in just one moment. Same is true for the Dallas Morning News or the Las Vegas [Review Journal]. Just call the editor and I'm sure he'll drop his session with the publisher . . . and he'll talk to you. I think that speaks for itself."\(^4\)
Notes

(1) The Los Angeles Times employs slightly more than 1,000 reporters and editors.


(3) David Shaw, "Good Writing, Long Stories and Freedom," Los Angeles Times, 1 January 1989, sec. A, pp. 1, 18. As examples, Shaw cites reporters David Felton who wrote in a blend of hippie dialog and personal observation, a 6,000-word account of life in the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco and Robert Scheer, former editor of Ramparts magazine, who Thomas hired despite fears that Scheer's liberal views might taint the news columns of the Times. Thomas was willing to publish stories he did not necessarily agree with if he thought they were reasonable and would be interesting to readers.

(4) Thomas interview.


(6) David Shaw, Journalism Today, 8-12.

(7) Thomas interview.

(8) Ibid.

(9) David Shaw, interview by author, 23 February 1993.

(10) David Shaw, Journalism Today, 8.


(13) Ibid., 16.


(18) Ibid., 62, 64.

(19) Ibid., 64.


(23) Ibid.


(28) Ibid.

(29) Henry Weinstein, interview by author, 25 February 1993. Weinstein did not say that all criticism of Shaw was unfounded; in fact, he said he too had criticized Shaw in the past over specific articles. He did, however, speculate what some of the unstated motives for the criticism might be.

(31) Ibid., 16-17.


(33) Shaw interview, 23 February 1993.


(36) Ibid.


(38) To establish Shaw's unique position, short of conducting a survey of newspapers across the country, editors of the leading newspaper industry trade journals were interviewed and asked if they were familiar with Shaw's work and if they knew of any other newspaper reporter or critic in the United States who wrote solely the types of articles Shaw writes. John P. Consoli, managing editor of *Editor and Publisher* and Brian Steffens, editor of *The Quill*, both interviewed by the author, 29-30 March 1993, said they knew of no other newspaper writer who did nothing but critique the press as Shaw does.


(40) Louis Gelfand, interview by author, 3 March 1993.
CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS II: SHAW'S CRITICAL THEMES, TECHNIQUES, AND STYLE

In spite of occasional turmoil at the Los Angeles Times as a result of David Shaw's articles, it is the substance of those articles that is of the greatest scholarly import. Shaw has been studying and critiquing the press since 1974. The body of his work makes up one of the most comprehensive critical examinations of the press ever written. He has examined broad issues: ethics, news judgment, libel and small details of journalism such as obituaries, ghostwriters, and food pages. To each topic he has brought voluminous research, the comments and opinions of authorities, and deliberate criticisms--elements not unlike those in a thesis. But where a thesis is aimed at a limited audience, Shaw's expansive depictions of the fourth estate are aimed at the public.

Historically, the three critical themes that appeared most frequently in the writings of journalist-critics were sensationalism, inaccuracy and bias, and commercial/advertiser influence over news coverage. The first step in analyzing the substance of Shaw's criticism will be to
determine if threads of these most common themes are visible in his work. Commonality with past critics would express not only a continuity of critical modes, but could demonstrate the effectiveness of previous criticism. In fact, only one of the major historical themes--advertiser influence--has not appeared frequently in Shaw's criticism.

Sensationalism remains a strong and pervasive element in American journalism, according to Shaw; the subject appears in a variety of his articles. He has found it where it might be expected in newspaper articles on crime, abortion, politics, and AIDS, but also in science and religion writing. In 1982 he wrote that some editors were predicting a return to the sensationalism of the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. "The lurid tales of rape and robbery and murder and mayhem that were splashed across the front pages daily back then may be returning now in some cities."¹ Shaw explained some of the reasons for a resurgence in sensational crime news: (1) the big story of the period, the weakening economy, did not lend itself to dramatic treatment, (2) in cities with competing newspapers, or faltering newspapers, sensationalism was seen as a way of building readers, and (3) violent crime did actually increase substantially during the 1970s. Shaw quoted the editor of the Boston Globe who said that violent crime has become "such an overpowering, tragic fact of life today that I'm not sure you can overplay it."²
Crime news is not inherently sensational, Shaw's article explained. It can be treated as a legitimate news story because it interests readers and shines light on a serious contemporary social problem. Shaw quoted Adolph S. Ochs, former publisher of the *New York Times*: "When a tabloid prints it [crime and scandal], that's smut. When the *Times* prints it, that's sociology." Shaw's 1979 article went on to focus on specific reportorial quandaries in crime stories, such as how and when to identify victims, and demonstrated that few absolute, universal answers are available.

Shaw sharply questioned the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsday* for publishing, during the 1984 presidential elections, sensationalized stories about the alleged mob and mafia connections of Democratic vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro and her husband John Zacarro and demonstrated how the *Los Angeles Times* and other papers exercised restraint in reporting the charges and denials that followed. At one point in his article Shaw asked if the press did not pursue the organized crime ties more vigorously than they would have if Ferraro had not been Italian.³ In several articles over the years Shaw has also referred to the press's pursuit of 1988 democratic presidential candidate Gary Hart. In a 1991 article Shaw said reporters raced each other "to see who could find the next smoking bed."⁴
Earlier, toward the end of his first year reporting on the press, Shaw wrote about coverage of the Patty Hearst arrest and two assassination attempts on President Gerald Ford. All three events happened within a 100 mile radius in California in a 17-day period. Shaw cited critics who challenged the necessity for saturation coverage of the events and questioned whether or not the news reports tended to "glorify and glamorize would-be assassins and terrorist kidnappers thereby inciting more assassinations and kidnappings . . . ."\(^5\)

Another aspect of sensationalism Shaw addressed early in his career as critic was whether the misdeeds of children or other relatives of celebrities should be published as news. For example, the daughter of Pennsylvania Senator Hugh Scott was arrested on a minor drug charge. "'What the press did to my daughter was obscene,' says Scott. 'One paper ran five stories on her and they all seemed to imply that I should still be exercising parental control . . . and be responsible for her.'"\(^6\) Scott's daughter, Shaw pointed out, was 41 years old at the time of the incident. "Many editors are beginning to wonder if such celebrity stories constitute an unwarranted invasion of the privacy of both the parent and the child," Shaw wrote. Although the violation of law or other misdeed may be trivial, some papers will still publish them, Shaw said, quoting one "Eastern editor" as saying his only responsibility was to avoid "sensationalism--big splashy headlines and
unsubstantiated charges."

In separate series examining the challenges of specialized writing in the fields of science and religion, two areas he said are generally inadequately covered because of underqualified reporters, Shaw said such stories can become sensationalized when the reporters do not fully understand and try to simplify a subject. Reporters often look for aspects of a religion or science story that will have sensational appeal, e.g. life on Mars, or President Jimmy Carter's "pipeline to God."

A careful examination of major newspapers, . . . shows . . . the best way for a religion story to get good play, generally, is for it to involve the colorful, the controversial, the charismatic, the crooked, or the concupiscent . . . .

Although he has not written a series strictly about sensationalism itself, he did write a series on one of its proponents: media magnate Rupert Murdoch. Shaw's 1983 articles gave Times readers a liberal sample of Murdoch's brand of journalism. In his profile of Murdoch and his publishing empire Shaw did not spend many words criticizing the Australian millionaire's style of newspaper, he simply provided examples and let readers do the rest:

HUSBAND CHANGES SEX TO KEEP LESBIAN WIFE WHO FELL FOR A NANNY
UNCLE TORTURES TOT WITH HOT FORK
LEPER RAPES VIRGIN, GIVES BIRTH TO MONSTER BABY
MANIAC WHO CUT OFF MOM'S HEAD TO GO FREE

Shaw also went beyond the sensational headlines of
Murdoch newspapers, however, and his stories provided insights into the personality and beliefs of the publishing mogul. Murdoch, said Shaw, thinks many editors publish stories because the editors think their readers should be interested in them, rather than because the readers really are interested in them. Shaw criticized Murdoch for misleading headlines and said much of the derision he receives from others in the media is deserved, but he also showed how many in the New York media delighted in making Murdoch look bad, even if it meant using apocryphal stories.\(^\text{10}\)

Murdoch is not alone among contemporary editors and publishers who say they are printing what the public wants, rather than what the editors think they should be reading. Echoing a comment that editors seem to have been making for centuries, Shaw said, in his 1976 article on sensationalism and public figures, that some editors insist that they are, "only providing what their readers want--interesting news about famous people--and there is, indeed, ample evidence of this appetite, as witness the rampaging popularity of People magazine and of the National Enquirer and other supermarket tabloids."\(^\text{11}\)

On March 31, 1993, a Los Angeles Times poll and follow-up interviews by Shaw seemed to confirm what he has been saying about sensationalism--and indeed seemed to affirm the prediction of a return to sensationalism. The national poll showed public trust in the news media to be slipping.
Sensationalism was the leading complaint people had about the media and 63 percent of the respondents said the media reveals too much about the private lives of public figures. Shaw's analysis of the poll traced instances of sensationalism and showed how the media could trivialize event coverage by focusing on a narrow and sometimes irrelevant, but sensational issue.\textsuperscript{12}

**Plentiful Inaccuracies**

Examples of inaccuracies and bias are even more plentiful in Shaw's writing than samples of sensationalism although some sensational stories may be biased. In fact, not unlike some previous critics, Shaw has found inaccuracies (and bias) across a broad spectrum of journalism. Some of his article series have concentrated on potential problem areas such as publishing rumors and conflict of interest worries when journalists become involved in community and social interest groups. Many other articles have pointed to concerns about accuracy and bias on topics ranging from wine writing to book reviews to covering Washington, D.C., to the misuse of the English language.

The rush to get a story into print before a competitor, seems to result in inaccuracies as often today as it did when most major cities had two, three, or more newspapers fighting for circulation. In a series on how the rush to be first can jeopardize accuracy, Shaw cited a variety of
reporters and editors who, in an age of radio and television, still highly value the scoop. Exclusives are fun . . . They add zest to the job," said the Washington bureau chief for Knight newspapers. But Shaw also cited--in this and other stories he has written over the years--a variety of examples where newspapers were wrong, simply because they rushed an unconfirmed story to print. He quoted a reporter who said that "a few mistakes just don't matter" on major stories such as the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, when the emphasis is on getting the story out fast. Seeming to concede that mistakes will always happen, Shaw concluded one of his scoop articles quoting an editor, "We can try to be more careful . . . but news is a high velocity business." Rumors--especially false ones--also pose a problem for journalists. "Newspapers are supposed to publish facts, not rumors," stated Shaw in the beginning article in a series on the subject. But what, asked Shaw, should a reporter do when he has a story he believes to be true, but cannot prove? Should the story be ignored? Published only if it can be confirmed? Published but labeled as a rumor? In the course of his discussion of the questions, Shaw provided examples, including some from the Los Angeles Times, where publication of a rumor, even labeled as one, appeared to be ill advised at best. Publishing rumors can do personal damage, as in the case of alleging someone has AIDS, or it can clear up public misunderstandings when the press
publishes a widespread rumor for the purpose of disproving it. But, said Shaw, "Publishing a rumor often legitimizes the rumor and contributes to its spread, even if the newspaper clearly says the rumor is untrue." In politics newspapers can be seduced into helping political causes by publishing rumors started specifically to damage the credibility of a partisan opponent. Although a Washington, D.C. correspondent may tell his editor back home that "everybody" in the capital is talking about a particular rumor, the editors may tell him that none of the newspaper's readers have heard the rumor and to publish it would be irresponsible.16

Stories on wine are certainly not as important to journalism--or the public--as political affairs or a variety of other topics, but when Shaw researched this field, he applied the same critical eye as he has to other areas of the profession, and he found an abundance of bias. Shaw's articles on wine writing were probably as one-sided and negative as he has written: "Ethical standards in the wine writing field are virtually nonexistent. Most newspapers tolerate behavior from their wine writers. . .that they expressly forbid in other areas of the paper."17 Shaw showed that conflicts of interest, or possibilities for the same, abounded because so many wine writers accepted free meals, free junkets to wine growing areas, and an almost never-ending supply of free wine. These same reporters then wrote about the wineries that had been so generous. Most
wine writers, Shaw wrote, could have their lunch and dinner paid for by wine interests almost every day and could probably take four to six free trips per year. In addition, Shaw said his investigation showed that most wine writers wrote favorably about the wines they tasted on free trips. The wine writer who received the most critical attention was Nathan Chroman of the Los Angeles Times, who, Shaw said, in addition to the other influences, had financial involvement with California wineries that he wrote about.18

Reporter or editor bias, or the appearance of bias, can also arise, Shaw explained, when a journalist is involved in a community or special interest group or a political cause. In a February 27, 1978, article Shaw examined how newspapers were imposing more restrictions on the outside activities of their reporters to avoid the appearance—or reality—of conflict of interest. Exploring a subject that had not been addressed historically, Shaw wrote that some reporters had been angered when asked to curtail their political activities. Shaw may have had mixed feelings himself about the topic because he said in an interview that as a young reporter covering civil rights demonstrations over integration of Los Angeles schools, "I wondered if I should have been the observer when my gut told me, 'I should be marching with these people.'"19

Describing the situation as a "slippery slope," Shaw showed how reporters who get involved in groups can be influenced and yet those who do not, can become distant from
the communities upon which they are trying to report. In trying to summarize an issue on which he found "little unanimity" Shaw wrote, "What it all comes down to is individual judgment: a journalist should not become so friendly with a source that it unfairly affects his journalistic performance."20

Shaw's most sweeping declaration of press bias to date was his assertion in a 1990 series that "... the media implicitly favors the abortion rights side of the argument."21 Citing two national studies that showed 80 to 90 percent of U.S. journalists favoring abortion rights, and his own investigation, Shaw said that "a careful examination of stories published and broadcast reveals scores of examples, large and small, that can only be characterized as unfair to opponents of abortion."

Shaw is not an opponent of abortion, so any restraint that his personal convictions might have had would have been in the pro-choice direction, but there is little evidence of that in his articles. He demonstrated the pro-abortion bias by citing articles and broadcast news stories, by quoting editors and reporters who said they recognized the media's slant, and by showing how the choice of language colored press coverage of the abortion issue. For example, he said the press tends to call individuals and organizations by their own chosen designations, such as calling homosexuals "gays" and Cassius Clay "Mohammed Ali," yet the media generally use "pro-choice" but not "pro-life." Shaw cited
the established policy of the Associated Press to that
effect and even quoted a newspaper editor who instructed his
staff to avoid the term "pro-life." Shaw said the Los
Angeles Times in 1990, eight years after it determined that
"pro-life" was an unacceptable term, changed its policy and
stopped using the term "pro-choice," too. The last article
in his abortion series questioned whether women could cover
the abortion issue impartially and discussed the issue of
women reporters being anti-abortion activists, a topic
similar to his discussion, some 12 years earlier, of social
involvement of reporters.

Advertiser Influence

Advertiser influence, the third historical theme of
self-criticism, is a subject that Shaw largely ignored until
1987, and has not mentioned since. Perhaps the reason for
his scant attention to the subject that so enraged George
Seldes is explained in his belief that,

A high, thick wall has arisen between the
news/editorial and advertising departments at
most responsible papers, and editors,
publishers, and advertising executives alike
speak of this wall as a largely unbreachable
barrier, akin to the separation of church and
state in our society.22

Shaw's articles cited a few exceptions to this
observation, such as the reporter who was fired in 1982 by
the Trenton Times for rewriting a press release from a major
advertiser, rather than running it word-for-word, but the
overall impression Shaw left is that newspapers are now much
more independent of advertising influence than they were, even as little as twenty years ago. The biggest problem he identified was advertising supplements and special sections used by many newspapers. The sections typically contain stories that are written by newspaper advertising staff members to promote the advertisers and "could be mistaken for legitimate news coverage." The Los Angeles Times published 1,516 such supplements and sections in 1987, Shaw reported.

At some newspapers, the high, thick, wall between advertising supplements filled with self-aggrandizing stories and the conventional sections of a paper written by news reporters, may be only a difference in typeface. Although Shaw says "editors insist" on the different type face and an "advertising" label, he is not speaking of the editors at all or even a majority of the newspapers in the country. His blanket statement about separation of news and ads--one of the most direct and least qualified statements he has made on media characteristics--still refers to "most responsible papers," which could refer to any number of newspapers. In spite of this overly optimistic appraisal, in one article in the series Shaw did explain, in characteristic detail, how advertising policies regarding tobacco, firearms, adult movies, and contraceptives vary greatly among newspapers, with little consensus on any issue. Some large newspapers require advertisers to provide guarantees to customers that prices advertised as
the "lowest" truly are, and many papers have committees that rule on the acceptability of questionable advertising. Newspaper advertising acceptability standards are not easy to interpret so many newspapers publish advertising codes which range from "a single sheet with a few short sentences on it at several newspapers, to a book of more than 50 pages at the Los Angeles Times." Some of Shaw's examples, such as the St. Petersburg Times giving up a $235,000 annual advertising account because of an appliance store's bait-and-switch tactics, do provide a contrast to H.L. Mencken's observation that three fourths of the journals of the land would print any advertising that was paid for and could get through the mails.

**Shaw's Dual Themes**

While examples of the three major historical themes of criticism can be found in Shaw's writing, they are only tangential to what seem to be the driving forces in his work. Those forces can be traced to his initial conversations with his editor, William Thomas. The picture that emerges from an analysis of Shaw's work is that of two David Shaws: a media reporter and a press critic. David Shaw the reporter explains, in relatively simple language, how the press works, furnishing fascinating behind-the-scenes details, and demonstrating to the public why reporters, editors, columnists, and a cast other specialized journalists do what they do. David Shaw the critic
identifies internal press conflicts, airs ethical dilemmas, and frequently dissects a journalistic issue or news coverage of an event by citing, at length, the conflicting opinions of editors and other experts. These critical dissections sometimes appear as long-winded debates, orchestrated by Shaw, among several experts. Persuasive summations often appear in the quotations of others. In rare cases Shaw includes his own harsh-sounding value judgments or critiques. In other cases, conclusions are left to the reader. It could be said that both David Shaws work on most of his articles, but one of the two is usually in control. Those who have spoken out against Shaw at the Los Angeles Times would say David Shaw the critic has taken over. That is not necessarily the case, although the contents of his work over the past five years indicate that critical, issues-oriented series have predominated and that even in the few recent series when David Shaw the critic contributed a minority of the material, his presence was strongly felt. Development of this trend will be examined later.

One simple way of analyzing--and identifying--each David Shaw would be to determine his intended audience. When interviewed recently, Shaw said he has three audiences for his work: His primary audience is the readers of the Los Angeles Times; the secondary audience is journalists; the third is his editor.²⁶ (Shaw clarified his primary audience by stating that newspaper readers in general have a
higher education than non-readers and that readers of the *Los Angeles Times* represent the higher segment of that group. Beyond that, the specialized nature of his articles and their length dictate that his readers will be made up of only a segment of *Times*' readers.) That Shaw is writing for more than just the Southern Californians who are interested in finding out how the press works, seems obvious. Some of his stories or series are so enmeshed in technical and sometimes minute or arcane topics that one can easily conclude the author has transposed the priority position of his first two audiences. This is not to say that David Shaw the critic is *always* writing for an audience of journalists because readers--as Shaw believes--need to know why newspapers and reporters sometimes make mistakes and sometimes respond to different situations in different ways, yet it is frequently easy to interpret the critic's remarks as not only aimed at, but also written for, the press.

The driving forces behind the work of both David Shaws can be explained through two themes:

1. The press is largely arrogant, unresponsive, overly-sensitive to criticism, and accountable to no one--readers and citizens included--for their actions. The press erroneously believes its sole obligation is to print The Truth. Period.

2. One of the reasons the public distrusts the media and the press in particular is that it does not understand how and why a newspaper operates. It ought to be the
responsibility of a newspaper—that regularly explores every other institution in society—to explore and expose its own internal workings as well.

Arrogance and lack of accountability are the keys to Shaw's first theme. "We observe. We monitor. We report. And by doing so we sometimes hold others accountable for their errors of commission and omission. . .But. . .who observes us. . .?" In developing his theme Shaw seems, at first reading, to be espousing the social responsibility theory. But Shaw's accountability and social responsibility are not interchangeable; the latter is not necessarily the ultimate goal, but a result of the former. Although Shaw sometimes writes about the press's responsibilities to society, the message carried in many of his articles is that journalists must exercise (or be accountable for) their professional duty. That duty goes far beyond publishing the truth. The press should be accountable for doing an accurate, honest, and knowledgeable job, accountable for maintaining ethical standards, and accountable for treating readers, employees, and the people it writes about fairly. By being accountable for professional skills and ethics, the press thus fulfills its social responsibilities.

Arrogance, the other half of theme one, is perhaps more pernicious. It makes the press unresponsive to criticism, no matter what its source, and fosters a "them and us" attitude between reporters and the public. Shaw recognizes that many in the press wrap themselves in the First
Amendment at the first sign of criticism and are thus unresponsive to a questioning public, but he rejects any notion of government control of the press, or any outside control at all, preferring to emphasize self-criticism, while lamenting the fact not enough newspapers practice it.

Recently Shaw wrote that the press has begun to moderate its "knee jerk public response" to criticism from readers. When asked in an interview or at a talk to a school group for his evaluation of the press today, Shaw may repeat the essence of what he wrote several years ago:

I quite frankly think more journalists, and more newspapers, are performing this basic, essential job better today than ever in our history. There are not nearly as many good newspapers in this country as there should be, but I still think that for all our flaws, newspapers collectively (and, in particular, the half dozen or dozen best newspapers individually), are more accurate, more insightful, more complete, more ethical--in a word, better--than ever.

Regardless of the "quality" of the press compared to some historical incarnation, it continues to have serious credibility problems with the public, as Shaw's series on the 1993 Los Angeles Times Poll indicated. As much as anything, the poll, and Shaw's follow-up investigations, pointed out that changes are necessary if the press is to repair its image.

Refinement of Accountability Theme

To see Shaw's arrogance and accountability theme carried out and to trace the development of David Shaw the critic, ten articles or series of articles, dating from 1979
to 1993 have been selected for brief review. These ten samples, were selected not only because they illuminate Shaw's theme but because they are related to ethics and professional practices rather than to a review of specific news coverage. The articles are more technical and analytical than his informational articles and occasionally sound as if they are directed equally to the press and the public.

Deception--Honest Tool of Reporting?
September 20, 1979

Shaw detailed many ways reporters have obtained stories by using false identities or simply not disclosing their true identities and concurrently examined the ethical implications, citing opinions of leading editors. Shaw told how a reporter for the Detroit News had posed as a congressman to show how lax security was at a White House ceremony and how a Los Angeles Times reporter had posed as an employee in a juvenile detention facility to uncover conditions there.

"Reporters should not masquerade," said A. M. Rosenthal, editor of the New York Times, but other editors Shaw talked with were not as absolute. When Gene Roberts, editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, was a young reporter he used a variety of deception, from posing as a high school student to cover civil rights in the South during the 1960s to putting a stethoscope around his neck to gain admission to a hospital emergency room to interview an injured crime
suspect. "I never said I was a doctor, but the stethoscope would certainly have given that impression," Roberts told Shaw. Many of the editors Shaw talked with opposed illegal acts to get stories, but were more willing to accept some levels of deception if the resulting stories were in the public interest.

Shaw's arrogance theme wavers slightly here: the press is seen as using unethical practices, but it does so, presumably, for the greater good of society.

Press Takes Inward Look at its Ethics
September 23, 1981

This article is a cornerstone for Shaw's major theme. He uses the motion picture "Absence of Malice" starring Sally Field, who portrays a crusading but unethical reporter, as an example of the way the public usually sees journalists. "Widespread evidence of such unethical behavior as bias, carelessness, and sensationalism has left [Michael J.] O'Neill [president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors] discouraged, and his discouragement has been deepened he says, by the refusal of many in journalism to adopt anything other than what he calls 'a holier-than-thou attitude,' toward their critics," Shaw wrote.

In the article Shaw mentioned several instances of actual reporters (rather than motion picture variety) falsifying information or otherwise violating the public trust. He examined several ethical issues raised by reporters at The Los Angeles Times and other papers and gave
the reader an impression of a press not necessarily always dedicated to truth.

While almost contradicting this impression with his own judgments and comments from editors, to the effect that the press is more responsible now than it has ever been, Shaw nonetheless sharply questioned occasional ethical lapses at leading newspapers in the country and showed how some newspapers eschew written ethics codes and many others see ombudsmen as useless.

"Sources Said:" Who Are They?  
November 17, 18, 1982

When a reporter does not identify the source of a story, he or she may sometimes attribute the information to "usually reliable sources," or "informed sources." Shaw criticized this practice as imprecise and potentially misleading and he suggested that if the press reduced or eliminated the practice of not identifying news sources, it could improve its reputation. Like other press issues, the problem of unnamed sources is not clear cut. Shaw explained, "When newspapers . . . attribute statements to 'sources' or 'informed sources,' they give their readers no clues whatsoever as to the credibility of the statements or the vested interests of the sources." But, if all news sources were identified in print, Shaw explained, government officials, businessmen, and other sources would be reluctant to provide information, especially comments critical of their superiors or of people in a position to exact
retribution. "That . . . means the press--and the public--would have less information about manipulation, malfeasance, corruptions . . ."

Shaw helped the public understand how government officials sometimes are able to dictate to the press about identification, so that any resulting confusion becomes the fault of the unnamed source, not the reporters. Some of the information, however, sounded as if it could be part of a memo to editors. Shaw said that even though published newsroom policies regarding sources are an effective way editors can change the habits of reporters, he recommended frequent reminders for staff.

Watergate and Vietnam figure prominently in Shaw's theme. In this article he said that President Lyndon Johnson was a man of secrecy and vanity and was especially sensitive as Vietnam criticism mounted. During this time, one of the only ways lower-level administration officials could have their views heard was to obtain anonymity. Watergate, of course, featured "deep throat," the most glamorous of unnamed sources, and spawned a dramatic rise in unnamed sources as every good reporter had at least one "shallow throat." In the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, reporters became more skeptical and cynical when they saw government officials lie. The press thus became more distrustful and more prone to investigate, rather than just report.
More Papers Admitting Their Errors  
August 18, 1983

"Newspapers, long reluctant--institutionally and individually--to admit error or to explain how and why they do their jobs, have gradually been realizing in recent years that their readers are entitled to more consideration . . . "

Thus Shaw explored newspaper corrections policies saying that in 1973 only 24 percent of newspapers with circulations of more than 100,000 ran correction notices when they published erroneous material, but by 1983 the figure was more than triple that.

Shaw examined two significant issues here, issues that Norman Issacs, former editor of the St. Louis Courier Journal would later discuss in his book Untended Gates.35

--Shaw reiterated the findings of a 1981 Times poll that said, "when the press reports a story that a reader personally knows something about, the reader often finds the story inaccurate."36

--The press has not been successful in getting over its arrogance toward readers who call to criticize or ask questions.

In this article, in fact, Shaw told how Issacs established a standing position for a corrections column in his paper. Shaw concluded by saying that while many newspapers publish corrections, most of them are concerned with misstating dates, names, or places, rather than admitting to publishing stories that are misleading.
or unfair.

Plagiarism: A Taint in Journalism
July 5, 6, 1984

In 1981 Janet Cooke, a reporter for the Washington Post, received a Pulitzer Prize for a story she wrote about an 8-year-old heroine addict. After she received the prize it was disclosed that she made up the entire story, that the child did not exist. Shaw has mentioned this case frequently as a landmark in press credibility (or the lack of it). In this article he explored the world of plagiarism from Cooke to Alex Haley, the author who paid a $500,000 settlement arising out of charges he copied portions of his novel "Roots," to numerous reporters at newspapers across the country who either borrowed material from others or had their words appropriated without authorization. Shaw showed the practice to be frighteningly common and provided some of the transgressors' lame excuses.

U.S. Politics: Only Bland Need Apply
August 14, 15, 1988

Not surprisingly, Shaw determined that the media have "a growing impact on the political process of late." From this commonplace foundation, Shaw explored new ways the media are influencing elections. He included the insightful, if not completely original concept, that as a result of increased media scrutiny, the top political offices in the country are often filled with "gray, bland, centrists." Some candidates choose not to run, said Shaw,
because they fear intensive press probing and those with more extreme left or right views are screened out by citizens who are now given more exposure to the candidates than at any other time.

The press, said Shaw, has assumed some of political parties' traditional roles in society such as screening candidates and acting as the opposition to the office holders and party in power. In this examination Shaw revisited the historical charge of mob journalism, this time in the coverage of presidential candidates, and quoted authorities who feel political reporters are nit-pickers peering into dusty corners looking for conflicts, celebrating the trivia and leaping to melodramatic conclusions. (Thus in this article Shaw showed how the post-Watergate press has become more powerful but no more responsible or accountable.)

Press Turns the Mirror on Itself
June 19, 1988

This article may be seen as a way for Shaw to restate his main theme through the words of others. It could also be interpreted as comparison of his reportorial skills with those of other journalists. The essence of the story is this: Shaw interviewed 40 top editors and prominent journalists who had previously been the subject of other reporters' media stories. He wanted to see how editors had responded to being interviewed themselves. What he found was that "virtually all the editors" had strong
criticism of the coverage they received and of their own newspapers.

Shaw quoted Edward Kosner, editor and publisher of New York magazine who said reporters are sometimes "predisposed to be suspicious and negative." Kosner said, "They think, 'There's something really wrong here, and I'm going to get at it, even if I can't uncover any evidence . . . '

Among the complaints Shaw gathered from editors are problems of inaccuracies, laziness in researching, and the practice of approaching a story with preconceived notions. On the other hand, Shaw cited a hopeful note, saying arrogant responses to criticism of the press were becoming far less common. Being interviewed by reporters and misquoted has had an effect on newspaper editors, Shaw said.

"It makes you more understanding of people who call and say 'Everything you wrote about me was out of context,'" says Bill Kovach, editor of the Atlanta Journal and Constitution. "You don't dismiss that complaint out of hand."37

East Coast Bias Colors the Media
November 17, 18, 20, 1988

"An editor in New York once asked a reporter in Los Angeles to stop in Yuma, Arizona, on his way to San Diego. Another New York editor was surprised that . . . Idaho wasn't next to Texas."38 Not only are New York City editors ignorant of western geography, Shaw explained in this series, they generally ignore anything that does not happen outside of New York, Boston, or Washington, D.C. In these three articles Shaw provided dozens of examples of
major stories ignored by the national news media because they did not occur in New York, unremarkable New York stories that became national stories simply because they did happen in New York, and comments from media representatives who attested to "arrogant New York provincialism."

Shaw explained the main reason for the bias early in his first article: The three television networks, Newsweek, Time, and most other magazines, the Associated Press, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the vast majority of major book publishing firms are all headquartered in New York City. Several times Shaw mentioned the relatively common east-coast expression, used occasionally by A.J. Liebling, about nothing of any consequence existing west of the Hudson River.

This article fortified Shaw's image of self-centered journalists and was a link in one of his minor themes of competition between the Los Angeles Times and the major east-coast newspapers. He had previously mentioned east coast bias in other articles, particularly those on film and book reviews.

Media Gives Stories Same Spin
August 25, 26, 1989

Less than a year after his articles showing the east coast bias, Shaw wrote that all segments of the media tended to give the same interpretation to many stories. "Increasingly, it seems, a media consensus forms on major events quicker than you can say 'pack journalism,' Shaw
wrote. "Consensus journalism" arises in part from the influence of television which makes reporters reach for the "safest most obvious explanation," and from the tendency of reporters to all talk to the same sources. Columnist Robert Novak told Shaw, "I don't think a reporter . . . wants to be off . . . from where the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post are. I don't think he has that much faith in his own opinion . . . or much desire to swim . . . upstream." Shaw wrote his circumscribing exploration of the "herd mentality" just before he wrote his McMartin stories in which he identified this effect in the coverage of the child molestation trial.

Trust in Media on Decline
March 31, April 1, 1993

The Times poll showing a decline in public confidence in the media--newspapers and television news--could be the exclamation point at the end of Shaw's work to date. The Times published the results of the poll and three lengthy analysis articles by Shaw for which he conducted follow-up interviews with some survey respondents and also talked with editors, news directors, and journalism educators who voiced their opinions on the reasons for the decline in confidence. This article series was a detailed, direct summary and restatement of Shaw's arrogance and accountability theme, complete with reminders of some of the questionable press practices Shaw has criticized in the past. One almost expected him to say, "I told you so." Some of his
conclusions are indirectly self-serving for him and the 
Times, in as much as several of the authorities he cites 
recommend that the media modify its sensitive responses to 
criticism and spend more time explaining itself. The series 
ends with words from CBS newsman Dan Rather: "We better 
start explaining ourselves more. I do not except myself 
from the criticism that we haven't done a very good job of 
it." 39

The 1993 series was not a repackaging of previous 
interviews or opinions from Shaw, although it gives that 
impression because the survey results and comments from 
industry leaders are congruent with Shaw's themes. The 
series was a new examination of press practices and 
credibility (and public opinion) that stated the same 
conclusions and made suggestions similar to those Shaw has 
explored in the past. To cite just one example, references 
to official lying during Vietnam and Watergate were 
mentioned as causes of press cynicism. In this instance the 
speaker was not Shaw, but Ellen Hume, executive director of 
the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics 
and Public Policy at Harvard University. "What changed 
everything were the lies of Watergate and the Vietnam 
War. . ." Shaw quoted her as saying. This has created a 
"constantly cynical framework [that] doubtlessly feed the 
public's cynicism and distrust of its political 
leadership--and of the piranha press corps which seems 
willing to devour anyone at any time. . ." 40
Obligation to Inform Theme

While David Shaw the critic pointedly encourages the press to improve its professional performance and examine its standards, David Shaw the reporter has given readers many predominantly informational articles that provided an inside view of newspapers and offered both insightful explanations and interesting trivia. For example, Shaw has told readers:

--What a sign in Bobby Kennedy's campaign headquarters said about the press. ("Politicians Read Newspapers, Voters Watch Television")

--The presidential speech that an Associated Press writer decided was not worth quoting in a story. (Lincoln's Gettysburg Address)

--The first newspaper to offer an op-ed page. (the New York World of the 1920s)

--What words editors say their newspapers most frequently use incorrectly. (egregious, enormity, fortuitous, fulsome, hopefully, ironically, penultimate, portentous, presently, quintessential and unique)

--How much a syndicated columnist such as George Will or Mary McGrory makes from each paper that carries his or her column. (The columnists make from $1.50 to $125 per column depending on the circulation of the newspaper. Larger newspapers pay the top rate.)

As an example of the informational David Shaw, his 1985
article series on editorials provided a variety of inside facts about a prominent but misunderstood aspect of newspapers. Most regular newspaper readers, whether they read editorials or not, and even non-readers of newspapers, have probably speculated about how newspaper editorials come about. That a newspaper's editorial positions usually influence its news coverage is a common misconception. Shaw explained how editorial policies are developed and offered insight into the specific ways editorials are conceived and written at seven of the largest newspapers in the country.

In a series that was almost completely devoid of comment or criticism, Shaw explained that at the largest newspapers, an editorial is more likely to be the product of one editorial writer's opinion than the dictates of either the publisher, the editorial page editor, or the editor of the newspaper. Historically, Shaw explained, newspapers were often founded to promulgate a publisher's point of view and people still think the publisher is the main force behind all editorials. In fact, in matters other than political endorsements, meetings of the editorial boards at major metropolitan newspapers largely determine the day's editorial stands. The publisher may not find out what they are until he reads them in the paper.\(^46\)

Shaw told readers that editorials have little impact on the masses, but do tend to hold more influence over more affluent, educated people. He explained how editorial
boards have become more centrist and at the same time more
diverse in their viewpoints. Shaw explained how editorial
boards are becoming more socially responsible and are
increasingly cognizant of their obligations to acknowledge
divergent viewpoints, rather than hammer readers daily with
a one-sided barrage. Shaws' series concluded with
narratives recreating editorial board meetings Shaw sat in
on at the Los Angeles Times, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune
and other newspapers. Readers learned among other things
that the Los Angeles Times was against capital punishment
even though the publisher of the paper favored it in certain
cases and that the Tribune in Chicago was in favor of
capital punishment because editor James Squires favored it.
The best written editorials seem to come from the Wall
Street Journal and the Tribune has the most ideologically
diverse board.

David Shaw the critic wrote but a few paragraphs for
this series, saying "Editorial writers in general seem more
intelligent--or at least more intellectual, more reflective,
better-read--than do most news reporters, and the New York
Times editorial writers seem the most intellectual of
all."\(^47\) Shaw also praised one particular editorial writer

Such is the depth of the inside information Shaw has
offered readers. He has written informational articles on
all-news radio stations, op-ed pages, advice columns,
political columnists, comic pages, front-page news
selection, weather reporting, editorial cartoonists, letters to the editor, book reviews, *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines, foreign correspondents, the Associated Press, The Rev. Moon's *Washington Star*, specialized magazines, the alternative press, and other topics. These articles have answered such questions as: How do newspapers decide what to put on the front page? Who decides which comics a newspaper runs? Do foreign correspondents really dodge bullets and live a life of intrigue? How did all-news radio come about? What's the most popular section of a newspaper? Do newspapers censor or edit the letters they publish? How do newspapers decide which books to review?

His informational stories are not created to praise the press or promote it. Shaw is no cheerleader; he simply explains. The stories are the result of weeks of investigative reporting or of hours and hours reading back issues of publications looking for trends, contradictions, or missing information. Shaw was repeatedly turned down in attempts to interview Rupert Murdoch and it was not until he flew to the east coast and confronted the media mogul face to face at a cocktail party that he agreed to an interview.48

David Shaw has written almost 100 series or single, lengthy articles on the media since 1974. Since he has written extensively about a variety of topics, Shaw has expounded upon other minor themes of criticism in addition to those identified here, and to reduce his nearly 20 years
of reporting to only two themes is in some ways to oversimplify a complex body of work.

**Reporting/Writing Techniques**

In considering Shaw's critical techniques, a few words he wrote in his 1983 book *Press Watch* (and already quoted here in Chapter 1) should be remembered: "Generally, I tend to emphasize our flaws. . ." This remains a focus for Shaw and in an interview he repeated the sentiment, adding that newspapers already spend ample time praising themselves. So, what Shaw has written about some restaurant, movie, and wine critics—that they usually write positive reviews, rather than spend time telling people what they should not buy, watch, or consume—does not apply to the *Los Angeles Times'* newspaper critic.

In spite of his avowed negativity, Shaw does find things to praise at other newspapers and at *The Times*. He has praised *Los Angeles Times* police, foreign affairs, sports, and religion writers, among others. In his 1983 series on religion coverage, he quoted the consensus of several sources who said *The Times* religion writers were "the best team in the country." He gave similar—best in the country—praise for *The Times* sports section. He has also praised *The Times* on its coverage of AIDS and other issues. In addition, most of his informational series obviously reflect a fascination in the details of his profession and its practitioners. Although as a critic he
is sometimes rigid, severe, and unable to overlook lapses in others, David Shaw actually salutes journalism, scars and all.

The most obvious characteristic of Shaw's writing is his inclination to provide an abundance of information and opinions on every topic he addresses. He describes himself as an anal personality and says he is preoccupied with details. (During an interview he was asked how long he had been wearing a beard, and rather than say almost twenty years, he responded with the precise day, month, and year that he stopped shaving.) In his series on newsmagazines, Shaw wrote that magazine editors have to compress large amounts of information in a small space. He quoted a former Newsweek editor saying that this process, "can mean throwing all subtlety and contradiction out the window. On a complicated, controversial subject, you can't avoid doing the reader--and the subject--a disservice." Each of Shaw's articles demonstrates his attempt to avoid those drawbacks.

His articles--both critical and informative--are evidence of his interest in presenting multiple sides to each issue. Examples can be found in almost every Times media article he has ever written. A 1976 article on newspaper endorsement of candidates seemed to say that endorsements carried little weight. But early in the story this not untypical Shaw paragraph appeared:
Nonetheless, all of these generalizations about the influence of endorsements are just that—generalizations, not eternal verities. All are subject to change, contradiction, exception and challenge, for in any given election several of these generalizations may come into direct conflict with each other.\(^52\)

Writing about the influence that civic involvement may have on reporters, Shaw cited one side, then the other, for paragraph after paragraph.\(^53\) Some of the paragraphs began:

"Journalists may, of course, exaggerate their visibility. . . .
"But most editors say. . . .
"Still, some journalists. . . .
"Many civic leaders say. . . .
"But. . . .
"Moreover, says one editor, . . . ."

Although the series on wine writers and the series on consensus or "herd" journalism seemed to lead the reader to one obvious conclusion, an abundance of explanations and counter arguments were provided. The "herd" journalism article said, "Does frequent media consensus. . . . prove that the American media is a mindless monolith? No." Shaw does not provide opposing viewpoints just to give the appearance of impartiality. On controversial topics he offers his own judgments but also provides a forum for debate.

At the other extreme, his recent articles on pro-abortion bias contained fewer quotations and evidence contrary to the main findings of the series than most of the stories he has written. This could have been his way of compensating for his own personal pro-choice bias, or a result of the media's slant on abortion being as conspicuous as the articles seemed to indicate.
Does he go too far? Does he provide too much information or too much debate? Are his articles too long, as some of his critics at the Los Angeles Times have said? In an interview, metropolitan editor Craig Turner said Shaw writes at lengths that are out of proportion to the subjects and the interest readers have in them. As mentioned earlier, Shaw admits his readership in the Times is only a segment of the newspaper's circulation, but he asserts that for those people interested in reading serious stories about the media, he should provide them with full details. In essence then, he is writing for people interested in getting a complete picture of the media, not for people who have a casual interest in scanning his first six or eight column inches. Given an interesting story, Shaw said, if someone reads the first 30 inches, they are much less likely to quit reading, than someone who has only read the first six inches. Demonstrating how he tries to keep his stories lively, Shaw stated that just before turning in an article he rereads it looking for what he calls "nuggets." "Do I have enough good anecdotes, good quotes, nicely turned phrases, that it takes to keep a reader hooked?" In a sense then, Shaw answers the question regarding the length of his articles by saying they are not too long for his readers who want all the details. His response uses circular reasoning perhaps, yet any reader who finds Shaw's articles too long can simply stop reading.
Two other factors should be noted. First, Shaw is also writing for the newspaper industry. Journalists probably read every detail of Shaw's articles to get the full story (or see if he criticizes anyone they know). Second, Shaw is not simply a columnist who writes 500 or 1,000 words of opinion on a topic. Part, if not all, of his uniqueness is in the depth and breadth of the analyses he writes. Issues such as abortion bias in the media or the treatment of minority members by newspapers can not be adequately evaluated in a standard newspaper-length article.

At the risk of analyzing this topic at Shawesque length, one more observation must be made: over the years Shaw's articles and series have become longer. He has said the increased length is mainly a product of the more complex issues he is now writing about. Perhaps then he should consider occasionally writing about somewhat less complex media issues. Many of the articles he wrote in his first ten years as media critic were relatively lengthy, yet still shorter than his current output, and had an intensity that was, in part, a function of the length and tight writing.

In addition to providing pro and con arguments on most issues, another technique Shaw uses is the question. He uses questions to criticize, or simply expand or promote debate. Rather than state a direct opinion, he may phrase it as a question. In more than one series of articles he has concluded with a question that he attempted to answer in the next day's installment. He also asks open-ended
questions in his articles, then follows them up with possible answers from various authorities.

   So why does the [Unification] church and its affiliates continue to pour all this money into the Washington Times?55

   What will happen to the National Review after [William F.] Buckley dies?56

   Should a newspaper mention AIDS [as a cause of death] if it is only widely believed, but neither acknowledged nor proved?57

   Why did these papers publish such stories? Why did they publish them in very different ways? And why--given the solid reputation of the papers and the gravity of the questions they raised--didn't other major newspapers publish similar stories?58

Writing Style

Shaw's style is journalistic. He uses short paragraphs as dictated by newspaper tradition, but he adroitly varies the length of his sentences, sometimes using one- or two-word sentences and one- and two-word paragraphs as transition or emphasis devices. His prose is clear and easy to read, but not flippant or prone to cliches or slang as some columnist/critics' writing can be.59 Because he is a reporter and not a columnist, he never uses the first person, and when he refers to his own research or interviews, he uses Los Angeles Times style: "A Times reporter interviewed more than 60 people. . ." His vocabulary is broad enough to make his generally well-educated readers stretch, but only occasionally. Shaw's unobtrusive style is such that it directs attention to the subject of his words, not the words themselves.
Shaw is also alert to the influence of language in the media. One of his abortion stories explained the use of "pro-choice." In an article on police-press relations he explained how terms for a policeman's billyclub have changed to "nightstick" then to "baton." 60

A sizable portion of every Shaw article is taken up with quotations from others. Shaw handles this aspect of his work with skill and many of his stories contain memorable quotations. The amount of time he has to work on his articles and the fact that he records every interview gives him an advantage; the fact that he transcribes 100 or more taped interviews for each series makes the process more involved. He is also deft at using the words of others, rather than his own, to present viewpoints.

Finding direct, succinct statements of Shaw's opinions requires careful reading. Occasionally finding summaries of the essence or significance of his stories also requires careful reading. Given the style of his feature articles, summary leads would not be appropriate, but the expansive nature of Shaw's writing means that readers have to invest time to discover his main points. Frequently Shaw provides a type of summary when he explains the research he has conducted for a particular article. Usually within the first 10 or 12 paragraphs he includes a description of his research, how many people he interviewed over how long a period of time. This description summarizes what he was
trying to find out or what he discovered. In a 1985 series on book reviews and reviewers Shaw, after a seven-paragraph feature lead, asked a series of questions about book reviews. He followed that with:

In an effort to answer these (and other) questions on the book review process, a Times reporter recently spent several weeks conducting more than 100 interviews in a dozen cities with reviewers, book review editors, literary agents, editors and publicists at New York publishing companies, newspaper and magazine editors, and such authors as Gore Vidal, John Irving, Nora Ephron, Anne Tyler and Anne Beattie.

The impression that emerges from these interviews is one of a process that is singularly haphazard and arbitrary--and of a product that varies wildly from newspaper to newspaper.61

In this article, as with many others, the reader seems to learn about the subject along with Shaw, and key points are uncovered along the way, some toward the end of the article. In the last third of the book review article was a quotation from Vidal that seemed to summarize what Shaw had uncovered to that point, "Of all artists, the writer is the only one to be judged almost entirely by his competitors."62

Whether Shaw states his conclusions himself or uses the words of others, the information is usually in the middle or toward the end of his articles. Here are two examples. The first example is from Shaw the reporter in an article about the alternative (underground) press. The second is a Shaw-the-critic conclusion taken from an article on sportswriting.

But the basic mission of The Real Paper--and of most alternative papers--is to provide stories of special interest to their young, sophisticated
readers.63

A careful reading of the nation's major newspapers shows most sports pages to be suffering from a kind of identity crisis these days, vacillating uncertainly between the old and the new. 64

One journalistic practice Shaw seems to avoid more than other writers is the somewhat redundant habit of summarizing what someone has said, then providing the direct quotation. Shaw may make a general statement or conclusion in his own words, however, then provide one or more direct quotations that support and/or amplify that point:

Some critics say L.A. Times obituaries are often as inadequate as they are infrequent. "I just don't get the impression that your newspaper is particularly interested in turning out authoritative, graceful obits," J.Y. Smith, biography (i.e. obituary) editor of the Washington Post told an L.A. Times reporter in an interview. 65

Shaw's scrupulous attention to getting each quotation correct leads to frequent, and sometimes distracting, use of ellipses. Since most people do not always speak in complete sentences, some reporters condense quotations; not Shaw. Of course, deleting material from a quotation without using an ellipsis risks altering the meaning, but so does omitting material with an ellipsis.

Humor does not play a large part in Shaw's articles. When he does use it, he does so appropriately to make a serious or technical subject more interesting or to point out incongruities or media mistakes, but he certainly does not evoke the dark humor or sarcasm of Liebling or Mencken. Shaw humor often comes from the words of others. In his
article on foreign correspondents he demonstrated how reporters have to adjust to different foreign customs.

In Cairo, [said Times correspondent David Lamb] your first week there, when you walk into the kitchen and your cook is praying . . . on a mat when you're starting to mix a drink, you don't know how to react. Do you leave? Do you mix your drink? Do you get down there and pray with him? 66

A scientist told Shaw how headlines can distort the meaning of a story. Shaw quoted him this way:

A few years ago, there was a story in the paper about an experiment of mine with very small bacteria. The headline said 'dwarf bacteria'--dwarf meaning very small. But I got a lot of letters from people who were convinced the story was about a new treatment for dwarfs.67

Occasionally Shaw has used irony to make a point. The most effective example of which was in his story about the press's excessive use of unnamed sources. The article concluded: "Several years ago, when the American Society of Newspaper Editors polled its members on the problem of stories with unidentified sources, 81 percent said that unnamed sources are less believable than named sources. But 28 percent of the editors in the survey requested that they not be quoted by name."68
Notes


(2) Ibid., sec. I, p. 15


(7) Ibid, p. 28.


(14) Ibid., p. 32.


(16) Ibid., p. 22.


(23) Ibid., p. 25.


(25) Ibid., p. 36.


(38) David Shaw, "Read All About It--If It's in NY," Los Angeles Times, 18 November 1988, sec. A, p. 41.


(49) Shaw interview, 15 April 1993.

(50) Shaw interview, 23 February 1993.


(54) Shaw interview, 15 April 1993.


(59) Usually Shaw's metaphors are well chosen; however, in a May 24, 1992, article he referred to the corrupt nature of the Los Angeles police during the 1930s saying they were "more lap dog than watch dog." In his March 31, 1993, article he used the same lap dog-watch dog-metaphor to refer to the change in the news media in the 1970s when reporters turned to investigative techniques.


(62) Ibid., p. 15.


In 1975, David Shaw wrote about "drastic, often traumatic" changes in police/press relations.¹ Four and one half years later, in a 1979 article, he wrote that "ever-present tensions" are escalating between the press and the police in Los Angeles. "Neither side knows how to reverse the pattern."² Then in 1992, Shaw analyzed the deteriorated state of police-press relations in the wake of the first Rodney King trial and the urban rioting that followed.³

Tracing Shaw's writing on a particular subject is one technique for analyzing how his work has changed or remained the same and how his view of different subjects may have changed between October of 1974 when Shaw's first press article appeared and the present. This is one of two ways the present chapter examines the history of David Shaw's criticism. The other area of inquiry, to be addressed first, is the severity of Shaw's criticism. Some of Shaw's in-house critics have charged that his criticism of the Los Angeles Times has become more severe over the past few years; therefore, as a comparison, this chapter looks at
some of the critical comments Shaw has made about his own newspaper over the years.

In essence Shaw has, for the past 18 years, remained critical, giving grudging recognition to what he sees as overdue reforms, while continuously calling attention to laziness, arrogance, and indifference in the press. His persona as reporter has also remained much the same although David Shaw the critic has predominated during the past five years. A simple reading of the topics Shaw has written about since 1987 leads to that impression because only a few articles including those on the Associated Press, William Thomas (biography of The Times retiring editor), the future of the media, and sportswriting were primarily informational, and even those contained some critical conclusions. By contrast, eight of his first 12 articles, from 1974 to early 1976 could be considered informational, featuring such topics as suburban newspapers and advice columns. But an objective counting of articles only shows that he may have devoted more time to his critical side recently; it does not necessarily imply that his individual critical articles have become more demanding, more disparaging, or that his criticism has, as some of his in-house critics have implied, become irresponsible. The answer to the question of whether or not the character of his criticism has changed is like many aspects of Shaw's work, hardly absolute, but a close review of his articles shows that while the frequency of his criticisms (particularly of The Times) has increased,
the severity has not. Shaw has written sharp criticism of both the Los Angeles Times and individual editors and reporters at various times throughout his career.

In order to address the severity of his criticism one has to see what benchmarks Shaw himself has established. The vast majority of Shaw's articles analyze journalism as practiced at the nation's leading newspapers. The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Philadelphia Enquirer, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, and St. Petersburg Times receive the majority of his attention and the work of each paper is generally judged by comparison to the others, although sometimes the newspapers are compared to outside standards, his own opinion of ideal situations, or the opinion of journalism educators, elected officials, or other experts. When he judges his own newspaper, therefore, he does so as compared to the highest possible performance standards of industry leaders. Thus, in 1981 he said, ". . . there are probably more language errors in the Los Angeles Times, than any other paper of its caliber" [emphasis added].

That Shaw frequently applies high standards is an understatement, but his standards seem not to have become in some way higher or harder to attain. The one 12-year-old quotation regarding the Times' use of English could hardly be considered any less severe when compared to anything Shaw has written recently, and it is by no means the only example of earlier serious criticism of the Times.
Sharp Criticism of Times

In an otherwise informational article on op-ed pages in 1975, Shaw wrote that a Times writer asked to be relieved of his assignment as editor of the op-ed page because he thought the newspaper was not interested in giving space to divergent opinions. The reporter said that several articles he solicited were killed for "political reasons." In 1979, Shaw wrote a two-installment story detailing how The Times had missed covering two major local stories, charges of embezzlement that led the president of Columbia Pictures Industries to resign and the story of police shooting of Eula Love, mentioned in Chapter 5. Even though Shaw prefaced the series with an introductory sidebar explaining how other leading newspapers had missed local stories over the years, he nonetheless provided many details of Times' operations that showed how poor communication between departments left huge gaps in the paper's news coverage.

Much of the recent criticism of Shaw was generated by the McMartin series. In it, he not only criticized Times' reporting but he quoted a reporter from the rival Daily News who said the Times' coverage was the "laughingstock of the press corps." To find fault with reporting is to be critical, but to suggest that the newspaper's work is a laughingstock is a direct invitation to derision and scorn aimed at creative people Shaw knows are sensitive to any type of criticism. This was harsh criticism, yes, but not
new. He used the same pejorative in 1985, referring to the Times' book review section.  

At times in his career, Shaw has sharply criticized individual Times employees, occasionally using words that go beyond standard professional evaluations. He once said the Los Angeles Times food critic Lois Dwan "has the critical faculty of an amoeba." He also said, "Dwan praises virtually every restaurant she writes about. On those rare occasions when even she cannot, in good conscience, praise the food, she praises the decor ...." These remarks did not appear in the Times but in Shaw's book, Press Watch. In his Times series on restaurant writers he was more restrained, saying that Dwan was rarely critical of restaurants and that she "... is widely criticized for becoming too friendly with some restaurateurs ...." He wrote the more acerbic comments after Dwan had responded to his newspaper comments by refusing to talk with him for more than a year, a fact he also disclosed in Press Watch.

In his article on the use of unnamed sources Shaw used an example of a Times reporter who included anonymous pejoratives in a profile of George Deukmejian who later became governor of California. When Shaw asked her why she had not included the sources of the pejorative comments in the article she said that it would have "broken up ... the flow of the story." Not only did Shaw include her explanation in his story but he asked William Thomas, editor of the Times, what he thought of the reporter's
reasoning. Thomas said, "That's absolutely the goddamned
dumbest thing I've ever heard." Shaw also included that
response from Thomas, word-for-word, in his story. In an
interview, Shaw pointed out that he did not use the
reporter's name in his story. But that did not assuage the
reporter's feelings because the morning the story appeared
she called her immediate supervisor at about 5 a.m. Her
boss called Shaw at 6 a.m. to say the writer was furious
and that she was going to see William Thomas later that
morning to complain. On occasion Shaw has also leveled stinging criticism at
his bosses, Coffey and Thomas. His criticisms have been
such that Coffey said in an interview that he wonders how
anyone can say that Shaw has not "criticized the top."
Indeed Shaw has not spared the editors when he thought
criticism of them was legitimate, or in one case, when he
was mad at Coffey for removing some words from a story.
The article in question was a sidebar to a series on
sex in the media. Shaw discussed the reluctance of some
editors to approve the use of obscene language:

Are there circumstances under which Coffey
would permit the publication of obscenities?
If obscene language is "in one way or another
deemed essential to the nature of a particular
story," The Times would publish it, he says.
But Coffey did not deem obscene language
essential to the nature of a story on obscene
language--the very story you are now reading--not
even in illustrative examples ranging from the
famous outburst at the 1968 Democratic National
Convention, to the resignation of Agriculture
Secretary Earl Butz, to a recent exchange of
profanity between Boston city councilmen
published in the *Boston Globe*. It is a measure of how uncomfortable most editors are with publishing obscenities that Coffey, who suggested writing about obscenity as part of this series on the press and sex and then said several times that he was prepared to publish the obscene words used in these and other noteworthy cases, ultimately decided to eliminate them from this story.¹⁴

Shaw explained that he used this wording, and included Coffey in his story, because Coffey had, in fact, suggested that he write an article on obscenity. Shaw said he was initially skeptical that Coffey would permit him to use four-letter words in the article, but he said that during the week before the story was to run Coffey reassured him daily that he would permit the words to be used. Just before the series was to run, Coffey changed his mind and refused to permit Shaw to use obscene words. Shaw said he was so mad he swore at Coffey in his office, then later wrote the paragraphs above to explain how Coffey had changed his mind. Shaw credits Coffey and Thomas for having the strength to publish articles that were critical of them.

Shaw was also occasionally critical of Thomas. In an article on ombudsmen and journalistic ethics, Shaw quoted Thomas as saying that he did not like formal codes of ethics because they were unnecessary and that giving reporters a code of ethics would be to treat them like children. Shaw followed that comment with an assessment by another newspaper editor who said Thomas' view was "a lot of baloney."¹⁵

To conclude the severity issue, Shaw, as a critic, is
entitled to use harsh language: critics criticize. Many critics who write about movies, plays, or television, for example, have specialized in vituperative, scathing, derisive reviews. Shaw's critical comments are usually the antithesis of vituperation; however, as the above examples show, he has sometimes gone well beyond polite professional critiques, using biting, mocking criticisms that make one wonder about his judgment, or perhaps his motives, given the delicate sensibilities of his colleagues, the hostile nature of the criticism he has received, and the fact he needs cooperation from Times editors and reporters in the course of his work. He has been harsh at times, but these examples also show that his most recent criticisms are no more pointed than others he has written over the years. Furthermore, he has criticized his bosses as severely as he has criticized others. Thomas said in an interview that he felt any criticism of the Times was a criticism of him because he was responsible for the entire editorial operations of the newspaper.

**Continuing Topics**

Examination of three topics that Shaw has written about over the years--police-press relations, sex, and television news--shows the extent to which Shaw's work has changed, and how his writing has reflected changes in the subjects of his articles. When David Shaw wrote about police-press relations in 1975 he identified and explained a change in
press practices, wrote about socio-political unrest, and gave readers an inside view of the waning mutually supportive roles police and reporters had maintained for decades. His article was analytical, not exclusively informative or critical, and it was one of his best written reports. Through colorful examples he explained how police and reporters used to help each other, then he traced social events over the previous 15 years to show how police-press relations had turned almost mutually suspicious. In the eyes of reporters, the police used to be the unquestioned champions of law. "A cop beating a suspect? The reporter ignored it; after all, he figured, the guy probably deserved it." When the social unrest, riots, and protests of the 60s spread, "the traditional societal consensus about 'good guys' and 'bad guys' and 'problems' and 'solutions' began to break down." There still were times when the police and press worked together, but increasingly they did not. Shaw's article showed how both sides had erred and caused greater misunderstandings. He ended with a striking exchange between police and a reporter during a police training class and followed with a list of recommendations for improving relations between the two groups. Rarely has Shaw provided a list of recommendations for changes or improvements in newspaper practices. His thoughtful list came from suggestions from police and reporters.

If Shaw's first article on the subject could be called an analysis with recommendations, his second article could
be called a warning. In November 1979, reporters were manhandled, and some arrested, while trying to cover police efforts to break up a fight between pro- and anti-Iranian protesters in Los Angeles. Shaw's article, the following month, used the controversy around the incident as the leading example in a review of police-press relations. His article had a similar tone to his earlier one: relations between the press and police were unfortunately eroding due to misunderstandings and confrontations. He cited media criticism of the police and police criticism of the press. Increasing hostility between the groups was more evident in this story than the previous one. This article, too, carried recommendations for improved relations, this time in the form of topics discussed at meetings between media groups and Los Angeles County Sheriff Peter Pitchess. Shaw quoted the president of the Los Angeles Police Commission saying the press had not done an adequate job of investigating law enforcement. Shaw, however, said the press had started writing critically about the Los Angeles police since the 1960s, particularly following the 1965 Watts riots. His last paragraph contained the warning quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

In 1992 as the first Rodney King beating trial was underway Shaw began research into a third series on police-press relations. As he was completing it, the King verdict led to the large-scale rioting in Los Angeles.

The most recent police story was longer, carried
harsher criticism of the *Los Angeles Times* and the Los Angeles Police Department, used a variety of emotionally-charged anecdotes and quotations, and analyzed the competition between the *Times* and the Los Angeles *Daily News* on coverage of the trial and the police department. As in his two previous stories, Shaw reviewed the history of press-police relations. His more detailed approach this time was notable because he not only reported on technical and personnel changes in the LAPD over the years, he also quoted actor Jack Webb from the television series "Dragnet" and novelist Joseph Wambaugh, who wrote "The Blue Knight" and other well-known police novels, to show how the mystique and public image of the department had been molded by more than just the news media.

His historical approach was consistent with his previous articles; in fact, he re-used two anecdotes, one from each of his previous stories, one to show that relations between police and the press used to be very congenial, one to show the rise of hostility. His view of reporters' skepticism arising from the Vietnam/Watergate era (including the social protest of the 1960s) was again alluded to, as it was in the previous articles. His harsher criticism of both sides remains the main difference between the recent article and the two earlier ones, although his comments about failures of the media to investigate the police tended to contradict his statement in his previous article that the press had been writing critically of the
Sex and the Media

Another, completely different topic, for which Shaw's view has remained relatively constant, is sex, and the media's squeamishness or prudishness about it. Shaw's major criticism, made in several articles between 1977 and the present, is that by using euphemisms for vulgar or sex related words, or by avoiding references to the words altogether, the press not only fails to provide a true picture of reality, but in some cases it can mislead readers.

Shaw's 1977 book, *Journalism Today*, contained one chapter that had not appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*: "A Personal View of Obscenity, Timidity and Hypocrisy." He said the press had made minor progress since 1963 when most newspapers did not say that a Dallas police officer called Jack Ruby a "son of a bitch" just as Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald. By excising that reference, Shaw maintained, newspapers did not provide a clue as to the relationship between the police and Ruby. Shaw began his chapter, however, with a more convincing argument against censorship of off-color language. During the 1976 presidential campaign Jimmy Carter was quoted in a *Playboy* interview using the word "screw." Most other media, said Shaw, did not use the word, but substituted other language. The *New York Times* said Carter, "used a vulgarism for sexual
relations." This, said Shaw, would lead the reader to think Carter had used a different word.\textsuperscript{24} In his article, Shaw criticized the prudish press for "silly" changes in quotations from prominent people thus avoiding the use of words that have become "everyday language for a great many of its readers."\textsuperscript{25}

In a 1982 article on coverage of sex crimes Shaw made similar charges, but showed how the press's failure to provide explicit details in rape case testimony had seriously distorted the appearance of guilt or innocence of defendants.\textsuperscript{26} In 1991 Shaw revisited the subject with a series on press treatment of sex, and he exposed a contradiction: The press is often preoccupied with sex scandals and sex crimes trials, yet it is still prudish about using frank descriptions of sexual acts even when they are integral elements in court or crime coverage.

Squeamishness and a perception that it affected a narrow segment of the population (gays) kept the press from adequately covering AIDS in the early and mid 1980s. Shaw pointed out how euphemistic language about AIDS and the ways the disease is transmitted led to "widespread speculation and fear--all of it unfounded--that people could get AIDS from sweat or kissing or sitting on a toilet seat."\textsuperscript{27} A five-part series on rape in the \textit{Des Moines Register} was quoted to show how female editors and writers are often less hesitant than men are to publish sexually explicit material. Shaw's latest article dealt almost as
directly with sex—in terms of specific, graphic language where necessary—as did his book chapter.

**Television News**

Over the years, Shaw has written about the relationship between television news and newspapers as adversarial and complementary. He has written only two series on television news itself—in 1980 on "60 Minutes" and in 1986 on changes in network news—but he has referred to television news, particularly in its relationship with newspapers, in dozens of articles. In 1975, for example, in his article on police-press relations, Shaw pointed out how television news crews with cameras, microphones, and miles of cables caused police to close access to crime scenes where before they allowed print reporters who carried nothing more than a pencil and pad.

In the mid-1970s he explained what he saw as the relationship between the two news media: Television with its emphasis on immediacy made it necessary and possible for newspapers to modify their function, to explain and interpret, rather than just show results. He said the rise of television news pushed newspapers in a direction that some of the better newspapers in the country had already begun moving: to synthesize, scrutinize, and analyze the events of the day. In this way the mediums were complementary. Television news, in some cases, created an appetite for more information that newspapers provided.
Television had a similar effect on newspaper sports news. Rather than emphasize play-by-play accounts of games, sports writers were expanding their coverage, looking for interpretive areas of sports not explored in television's game-day broadcasts. Shaw also showed how television news events were sometimes self-perpetuating. When television broadcast protest marches in Berkeley in the 1960s, students in other cities, who might not have responded to small stories in newspapers, were encouraged to take to the streets themselves when they heard and saw demonstrations in California.

In 1979 Shaw reported on antagonism between newspapers and television—a subject with which everyone in the news media was familiar, but many Times readers may not have been. The article, the second half of Shaw's series on "missed" stories, explained how The Times often did not follow up on news stories originated by local TV stations. One of the reasons, Shaw explained, was that Times' editors did not watch local TV news. A quotation from a local television reporter supplied the other reason: "[Broadcasters] see that as typical of . . . The Times' and most newspapers' arrogant disregard for television as a purveyor of news." Shaw, however, gave local network affiliate KABC credit for investigating police shootings two years before the Eula Love case.

The feeling that many print reporters and editors (and probably Shaw) have for broadcast news also came through in
the article. He said that "sensationalism, superficiality, melodrama, false bonhomie, and contrived show business ploys—the entire 'happy news' syndrome—" make television news hard to take seriously, whatever their "protestations to the contrary."

The negative feeling that newspaper people have for television stems in part from a fear that television is not only responsible for reducing newspaper circulations, but that it is helping to create a generation of people for whom reading is not an important part of life. In a 1984 article on columnists, Shaw quoted a feature syndicate president who said that his firm's most successful products have been political cartoons, illustration and map services. "Readers increasingly accustomed to television find visual images easier to absorb than words; . . . ." 33

When Shaw has reported on television news, as a small element in a larger story on press coverage of an event or issue, he has treated it in the same relative way he has newspapers. But when he has focused attention on TV news for any amount of space, he has invariably included the words superficial, sensationalism or synonyms to indicate that he does not consider TV 100 percent serious journalism. In his 1986 examination of network news, he devoted the same assiduous effort to provide a variety of viewpoints he has in his other articles, and although he generally treated the topic of network news thoughtfully, his ninth paragraph seemed to establish a tone:
Are the networks embarking on an era of slick, superficial, overproduced and under-financed evening newscasts--newscasts in which stories about three-legged sheep predominate? Will network newscasts become little better than the game shows and situation comedies they are now sandwiched among? Will the medium that brought a moon landing and a presidential assassination into our living rooms now bring us "Brokaw, P.I.," "Scarecrow & Mr. Jennings" and "Rather: For Hire"?

Shaw viewed television news historically and said that some aspects of network news are clearly inferior to what they were in the days of Edward R. Murrow. Shaw did find elements of network news to praise. He said that archives of network newscast tapes going back to the 1960s showed that present-day television had moved away from its "headline service" of broadcasting, for example, 25 stories in 22 minutes. He concluded, however, by saying that even though TV news stories are longer, there are also more light stories on the air now than 20 years before. Shaw also cited the study of a Daniel Hallin, professor of communications at University of California, San Diego to show that the average sound bite had shrunk from 43 seconds in the late 1960s to 11 seconds in 1985.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning series on the McMartin trial coverage Shaw devoted one article to Wayne Satz a reporter for KABC-TV in Los Angeles, whom he credited with breaking the molestation story. He said Satz's aggressive style led other television stations, and other media, into a feeding frenzy on the story. There seemed to be little
denigration of Satz simply because he worked in the broadcast news media and Shaw cited sources who lauded Satz's coverage of the trial, and others who said Satz became an advocate for the prosecution.\textsuperscript{35}
Notes


(8) David Shaw, "Choosing the Best of the Book Reviews," Los Angeles Times, 13 December 1985, sec. IV, p. 15. Shaw quoted a Los Angeles writer as saying that the Times book section was not as well written at those of other newspapers and that, "Among writers . . . it's a laughingstock."


(11) Shaw, Press Watch, 261.


(13) Shaw interview, 15 April 1993.


(16) One exception to this generalization is Shaw's article on The Times coverage of police chief Daryl Gates in the wake of the 1992 riots. In an interview with the author, 15 April 1993, Shaw said he went out of his way to use the favorable quotation from New York Magazine critic Ed Diamond in response to "pervasive anxiety throughout the metropolitan staff" regarding The Times' chances for a Pulitzer Prize and the negative effect Shaw's criticism might have on it. He also said his intent was to make the article favorable to The Times because he thought the newspaper did a good job.


(19) Ibid., p. 19.


(21) Shaw, "Coziness to Conflict."


(24) Ibid.

(25) Ibid., 211. In one of many examples showing how silly, prudish changes had led to inaccuracy, Shaw told about a news story on a 69-car accident in the fog. A Times editor changed the story to say a "70-car" pileup because the editor thought the number "69" might offend readers.


(28) David Shaw, *Journalism Today*, 4-5.

(29) Ibid.


CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS: SHAW'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO SELF-CRITICISM

How should David Shaw be categorized? He has chronicled recent history in journalism, writing about personalities and trends in both electronic and print media. He has explored and explained a variety of press practices not usually exposed to public scrutiny. He has provided a forum for reporters and editors to comment on industry ethics and practices. And he has criticized his own newspaper and the leading newspapers in the United States. His work has been relatively unstructured, in terms of the topics he selects, and relatively unsupervised.

Shaw said in an interview that although his official title at The Times is "staff writer" he has never discouraged anyone from referring to him as a critic--which most people do--because he feels it helps to extend his authority.¹ The trade press calls him The Times media critic or press critic² and that is the way he is described on the covers of his books. To be sure, he is--at least at times--a critic, but his method is far different from the typical critic/columnist who writes a regular column usually
dominated by the opinions of the writer. Shaw probably best described himself: "I've become a hybrid of sorts--reporter, analyst, critic--walking a narrow line, that in effect, I draw myself."³

The singular insights Shaw brings to journalism—and The Los Angeles Times—are valuable for practitioners and scholars. He has criticized the press, at times with an intensity usually employed only by non-journalists, but with the inside knowledge necessary to identify specific inadequacies and neglected responsibilities. His criticisms cannot be dismissed as the complaints of a disgruntled politician or a dissatisfied reader who does not understand the newspaper business. He has unflaggingly uncovered dishonesty, bias, and second-rate reporting. In journalistic circles he has become a famous voice for increased responsibility, professionalism, and excellence in the press. For journalism theorists and historians he should be considered not only the latest and most authoritative journalist proponent of the social responsibility theory, but also one of the most comprehensive and significant self-critics of the press in U.S. history.

Shaw's importance is magnified because he is likely to remain unique in American journalism. Editors find it expedient not to have a David Shaw on the staff; they avoid criticism themselves and avoid controversy in the newsroom. An equally compelling reason why Shaw is likely to remain
alone is financial: Few publications in the country can afford to have a full-time critic of the stature and qualifications of Shaw.

**Contributions to Self-Criticism**

Of Shaw's many contributions to press self-criticism, his exposure of the unprofessional practices, the biases, and the sensationalism across a broad spectrum of newspapers ranks as perhaps his greatest distinction. Although he has said that newspapers today are more responsible and professional than they have ever been, Shaw's work shows that in some ways the press seems not to have changed its focus since Hearst and Pulitzer. Academically Shaw's findings call for renewed historical and contemporary examination of press abuses.

In general Shaw's contributions to press self-criticism lie not only in the abuses he has uncovered and the themes he has advanced, but in how he has approached his job and conducted his work. A discussion of Shaw's contributions can be divided into these subtopics:

- Ambitious Research
- Specific Details
- Sense of History
- Honesty
- Independence
- Education Value
- Theory Development
- Theme Continuum

**Ambitious Research**

The total amount of research Shaw has conducted for the
purposes of press criticism equals or surpasses that of any other journalist-critic in U.S. history, with the possible exception of George Seldes, the latter simply because Seldes was a critic for many more years than Shaw. A conservative estimate indicates Shaw has conducted more than 7,500 interviews on press criticism. His research has included the highest authorities available on the subjects he has discussed, including editors and publishers, former U.S. presidents and other national political figures, nationally-known columnists, journalism educators, local Los Angeles political officials, network TV news anchors, and other broadcasters, as well as a cross-section of newspaper readers.

Specific Details
The result of Shaw's exhaustive research is details. He occasionally writes in generalizations, but always follows with specific examples for substantiation. The details he has brought to journalism criticism have enriched his articles on conflicts of interest, helped him point out incongruities in news coverage, and provided background information for his explanations of the inner workings of newsrooms, editorial boards, political magazines, the Associated Press, and many other aspects of the media.

Sense of History
Shaw's articles sometimes place contemporary press problems or practices in an historical context. What has
been the practice in the past? How did this journalistic technique evolve over the years? From a scholarly viewpoint, however, Shaw could provide a greater historical foundation in press self-criticism itself. History provides many examples of journalists who have criticized the same subjects Shaw has, but with the exception of isolated references to Liebling or I.F. Stone, Shaw has rarely cited previous critics or criticism.4

Honesty

It would not be surprising for someone who has inspired as much anger as Shaw has to have been accused of some form of reportorial dishonesty. In the course of the research for this paper, not a suggestion of dishonesty was uncovered and even Shaw's critics concede his unquestionable honesty.5

Independence

Shaw has carried on the tradition of independence that marked critics of the past and has done so even though the most frequent object of his criticism is his employer. The independence that is a requisite for truly impartial criticism has a price. For Shaw, the price has been denunciations and hostility from colleagues. At least one person thinks Shaw has carried his independence too far. Times' columnist and former city editor Pete King said in an interview that Shaw sees himself as an "avenging angel of light. . . [someone who will] even take down his best
friends. . . for truth. Indeed Shaw has on at least one occasion severely criticized a friend in print. In his book *Press Watch*, Shaw explained that a journalist he criticized in his series on restaurant critics used to be his best friend.7

Shaw has not complained about his job, and in fact he has enjoyed it over the years, but his position as in-house critic is as challenging, potentially awkward, and problematical a job as is possible to imagine in the realm of criticism. If he praises *The Times*, his views could sound self-serving. If he criticizes *The Times*, he could invoke swift negative reaction from the people he works with. As Shaw's most recent series demonstrated, the public's faith in the press is waning. The average *Times* reader may look upon the concept of a newspaper's in-house critic as window dressing (even though anyone who has read any of Shaw's particularly critical series knows Shaw is no yes-man). Given a predisposition of readers to distrust the press, Shaw's credibility would be tied to his independence and perhaps to his negative criticism of *The Times*.

Joann Byrd, ombudsman for the *Washington Post*, was asked about the difficulties of in-house press criticism. She said criticizing her employer was far easier for her than writing columns that agreed with the actions or policies of the *Post*. She said the first time she knew she would write a column that said the *Post* did the right thing, she lost sleep the night before worrying about it. "My
credibility--and David Shaw's credibility--is dependent in large part on how tough you look," she said. Shaw's "narrow line" not only separates the critic from the reporter, it separates his internal and external credibility. This last distinction was best summarized, if colloquially, by Arthur Nauman, ombudsman for the Sacramento Bee, who said in an interview, "Outside of Times-Mirror Square [headquarters of The Los Angeles Times] he has a hell of a reputation." 

Education Value

The body of Shaw's previous work and his continuing articles have untapped educational value. As supplemental reading, his books and stories could make significant contributions to journalism curricula. He provides insights into journalism from working reporters and from the leading editors in the country. Shaw's articles contain wisdom from people such as Gene Roberts of the Philadelphia Inquirer, Ben Bradlee of the Washington Post, William Thomas of The Times, Abe Rosenthal of the New York Times, Jim Squires of the Chicago Tribune and other leading newspaper editors of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. For journalism students eager to become modern-day Bob Woodwards or Carl Bernsteins, Shaw's articles provide a dose of reality showing the consequences of practices such as using unnamed sources, invading privacy, and following the sensational call of mob journalism.
Theory Development

Many of Shaw's articles can easily quoted as substantiation for the social responsibility theory of the press; his work abounds with examples. According to author Fred Siebert, one important element in the social responsibility theory was the "development of a professional spirit as journalism attracted men of principle and education and as the communications industries reflected . . . responsibility". It is the "professional" aspect of the theory, as presented by Siebert and others, that Shaw's work addresses most directly and, in fact, Shaw calls for a greater burden of responsibility—professional accountability—than is included in the standard interpretation of the theory.

Although the right to free expression under the social responsibility theory is not unconditional, neither Siebert nor Shaw say that social responsibility requires legal reinforcement. According to Siebert, the social responsibility theory predicates the exercise of press rights on the acceptance of a certain duty. This duty, he says, "is to one's own conscience." Shaw's work supports a concept of duty and expands upon it. Shaw is so exact and demanding of professional ethics, duties, and responsibilities as to establish rigid, critical standards of performance for every journalist, standards that supersede the varying guidelines that individuals' different
If one were to create a "social responsibility theory II," based in part on Shaw's work, it would describe a press that was supremely self-policing to the extent of regularly and publicly airing faults and ulterior motives. The professional duty of journalists would include reporting that was pro-active in its efforts to avoid prejudice, inaccuracies, and sensationalism. Such an extension of social responsibility is a theoretical construction grounded on the assessments and strictures of a practitioner and certainly Shaw would disclaim an intent to reinforce or broaden one of the four theories of the press, yet an analysis of his work demonstrates that he is clearly exerting pressure at the boundaries of the social responsibility theory.

Theme Continuum

Shaw has dealt with so many past themes of criticism that he would be an appropriate authority to be cited in continuing research into a variety of press criticism topics. In fact it would be difficult to find a more authoritative practitioner today. Chapter 5 explored Shaw's work on the three most common themes, sensationalism, bias, and advertiser influence. Examples in this paper have also demonstrated Shaw's treatment of other historical themes including: invasion of privacy, unethical practices, influences of scoop and "herd" journalism, use of unnamed
sources, perils of chain ownership, and interference with the criminal justice system. In his eighteen and a half years as press critic he has, in some way, addressed nearly every historical topic and theme of press criticism. Shaw has not only addressed the historical themes, but has placed them in a modern context.

Unfortunately there are some press issues or themes that David Shaw may never explore because he is not interested in them. Whether he is interested in a subject or not continues to be the main criterion for selection of his topics. Shaw's interest in food and drink has led him to write three series on those topics, for example, but he has yet to discuss business sections and press coverage of business. He did write one series on advertising, but other non-editorial aspects of newspapers such as classified advertising and circulation also do not interest him. He is also not likely to write a series examining journalism as practiced by small and medium-sized newspapers in smaller cities in the U.S., due in part to lack of interest and part to the extensive travel such a series would necessitate.

Topics he is interested in and is considering for future series include the way The Times covers the entertainment industry and economic forecasting in the media. Shaw's next series, scheduled to be completed just after the deadline for this thesis, will examine press coverage of the first months of the Bill Clinton administration.
A Recommendation

If there is one thing that some of Shaw's articles have lacked, it is a label. Difficult as it is to classify or categorize Shaw's writing, the subhead, "News Analysis" was attached to the page-one portions of one of his series. Even though somewhat ambiguous in that it did not say the article was a commentary, the label nonetheless alerted readers to the fact the stories included an examination of the news, not just the unexplained news itself. The series in which the "analysis" label appeared was McMartin, Shaw's Pulitzer Prize-winner. It should be remembered that Shaw received the prize for criticism. His series was, in fact, entered in the beat-reporting category, but was shifted to criticism by Pulitzer board members.

A "News Analysis" label would have several potential benefits for both Shaw and The Times. First, it would identify an article as a study, rather than a breaking story. Since the recent Times' poll showed that readers are skeptical about newspapers' biases, this could help separate news from comment. Second, it could confirm Shaw's status as reporter and critic and possibly extend his authority. Third, the label might, if in some small way, satisfy editors and writers at The Times who have been angry that Shaw has gone beyond pure reporting. This label would not necessarily be appropriate for every one of his series, but based on his own characterizations of his past work, he could probably be counted upon to recommend the label when
it was necessary, or perhaps after consultation with Coffey. Use of this label was suggested to Shaw and he voiced no objections.

**Results of his Work**

One testament to the unique quality of Shaw's work is the unusual feeling one gets picking up the current day's *Los Angeles Times* and reading critical comments about *The Times* on its front page. It imparts a surreal quality almost like reading an autobiographical story someone has written in the third person. Front-page self-criticism is certainly a mark of a newspaper's confidence, quality, and social responsibility. Although Shelby Coffey and William Thomas said Shaw's purpose was not to enhance *The Times'* public image and credibility, that is in fact one significant result of his work—and precisely because he has been critical of *The Times*.

As has been shown, the press is sensitive to criticism, slow to change, and prone to perpetuate sensationalism and occasional bias. As a result, press self-critics of the past have not been particularly successful in bringing about immediate changes. Similarly, Shaw's work has not necessarily made the press measurably more responsible, although his high readership among the journalism community must occasion greater introspection.

Shaw is reluctant to discuss any results his articles may have yielded, though a careful reading of his stories
gives some evidence of what Thomas said were "some salubrious effects of his work." Here are some of the results of Shaw articles:

--Obituaries. Shaw's 1981 series on obituaries showed that The Times ran fewer obituaries than other leading newspapers in the country and that it was probably the only major newspaper that did not have a daily obituary page. Shaw also criticized The Times for not having a large enough stock of advance obituaries of prominent people. According to Burt Folkart, a recently retired editor who was responsible for The Times obituaries, Shaw's article "was a part of the impetus" to improve obituary coverage in the newspaper. In an interview, Folkart said he was initially mad when Shaw's article was printed, but in retrospect he said that Shaw's comments were accurate and that they helped him get changes made.

--Unnamed sources. As soon as Shaw discussed some of his research findings on the use of unnamed sources at The Times and other newspapers with Thomas, the editor first advised his subordinates to tighten up on the use of anonymous quotations and when the verbal instructions did not stem the practice, he issued a written memo to emphasize The Times' more stringent policy.

--Wine writers. Times editors did not know that their part-time wine writer had financial ties with wineries he had written about and when this was brought to their attention, as a result of Shaw's research, the newspaper
"discontinued" the writer's column.\textsuperscript{17}

The wine article had an opposite effect at the \textit{New York Times}. In his article Shaw said that Frank Prial of the \textit{New York Times} was regarded as the best wine writer on any newspaper in the country. When the article came out Prial had already requested and received a new assignment at \textit{The New York Times}, but when editors read Shaw's article, they assigned Prial back to the wine beat, and reassigned the reporter they had transferred to take Prial's place.\textsuperscript{18}

--\textit{Best-sellers}. Shaw's September 17, 1976, article on best-seller lists explained how many lists, including that of \textit{The Los Angeles Times}, could be manipulated by people interested in promoting a particular book. He also showed other drawbacks in \textit{The Times}' list, and as a result the newspaper revised its methodology for compiling its list.\textsuperscript{19}

--\textit{Book Review Section}. In addition to using the word "laughingstock," Shaw demonstrated several inadequacies in the \textit{Los Angeles Times}' book review section when he wrote his 1985 series on books and book reviews. Although the article made the section's editor, Jack Miles, seem less than professional, Shaw asserts that Miles was satisfied with the story because it helped Miles get additional staff and more pages in his book review section.\textsuperscript{20}

--\textit{Monitoring TV news}. Some newspapers have a policy of monitoring television news in the evening, just as they would read competing newspapers. Sometime before July 1979 the \textit{Los Angeles Times} inadvertently discontinued the
policy. When Shaw was writing an article on how newspapers follow up on stories originated on television he discovered The Times' lapse and the policy was reinstituted.

**Future Research**

Although Shaw's work is at present the most authoritative source on the continuing abuses of the press, the extent of the abuses he has uncovered calls for further research in several areas.

Shaw has cited so many concerns about journalism that have been addressed in the past, one is led to conclude that some press problems defy solution. Since the press in the United States is free and unregulated as to the topics it may or may not report upon, it is thus free to use sensationalism, unnamed sources, and a variety of other questionable techniques. While Shaw demands rigid performance standards, he proposes few suggestions for enforcement or self-regulation. Future research might examine the history of the most common themes of criticism with a view toward identifying the most prominent or practical solutions proposed. In addition, a study which examined the history of voluntary and mandatory control of the press could be a valuable addition to Shaw's description of press failings.

Ombudsmen, a subject Shaw discussed in several of his series, also constitutes an important subject for future research. Indeed the ombudsman may be the most promising
voluntary solution to many of the press indiscretions Shaw exposed, even though Shaw explained the unpopularity of the ombudsman position. The concept of an ombudsman is a fitting and appropriate addendum as a supervisory vehicle within the framework of the social responsibility theory. Ombudsmen are like Shaw in that they are occasionally in-house critics, but they differ in that most of their work is driven by reader complaints and inquiries—a close link to a newspaper’s social responsibility. Although some studies have been done on ombudsmen, future research could view the newspaper position in light of Shaw’s themes, the favorable response he has generated in the press, and the unfavorable response he has received from Los Angeles Times colleagues.

Although historical research has been done on sensationalism, further examination is indicated. The number of instances of sensationalism that Shaw has discovered over the years and the rise in popularity of what he calls "tabloid television" shows such as "Hard Copy" and "Inside Edition" demonstrate the public’s continuing interest in—again to use Shaw’s words—"flash, crash, and trash." Upton Sinclair’s The Brass Check discussed several sensational cases pursued by the press, cases that were not unlike the contemporary story of Amy Fisher, the subject of television movies, a young woman who shot the wife of a man with whom she was allegedly having an affair. Further historical research might help explain the present
preoccupation. Of course adequately defining sensationalism has been a continuing challenge to scholars. Shaw's work may provide some contemporary contexts for study, particularly the findings in his last series to date.

In this last series Shaw discussed how "tabloid television" shows and local news programs that emphasize murder and mayhem tend to blur the distinctions "between substance and fluff, between journalism and hype." It would be instructive to examine back issues of major metropolitan newspapers of, for example, the nineteenth century, to see if any parallels can be drawn. Certainly many newspapers used sensationalism, but were there newspaper equivalents of "Geraldo" and likewise newspaper equivalents of CNN or McNeil-Lehrer?

In addition to the journalistic implications, further study of the sociological impact and educational influences that sensationalism had on nineteenth century Americans would be valuable. This suggestion is prompted by one alarming finding from the recent Times study: "More than 40 percent [of respondents] said TV talk shows such as those by Larry King, Oprah Winfrey, Phil Donahue, Geraldo Rivera, and Salley Jessy Raphael are 'a good way' to learn what's going on in the world..." Twenty-three years ago, then-Vice President Spiro Agnew called the press "nattering nabobs of negativism." The history of press criticism from government since then, roughly during the period of Shaw's work, has been uneven.
Contemporary press criticism from politicians, and from broadcasters, academics, citizen groups, and others could be compared to the Shaw's work and compared to the history of external press criticism.
Notes

(1) David Shaw, interview by author, 23 February 1993.

(2) Mike L. Stein, "Criticizing your own paper's coverage," Editor and Publisher, 10 February 1990, p. 12.

(3) David Shaw, correspondence to the author, 16 April 1993.

(4) In an interview, Shaw said he was not familiar with the criticisms of Will Irwin, had read only scant articles by William Allen White, and was not fully aware that Lippmann had devoted a significant portion of his early career to press criticism.

(5) For example, Kathleen Neumeyer wrote in her unflattering Los Angeles Magazine article, "'If I had $10 million that needed someone to hold, and not spend even if he got hungry, I'd give it to David,' says John Dreyfuss, assistant to the associate editor, 'because he's incredibly honest.'"


(11) Ibid., p. 98.

(12) Shaw said in an interview (15 April 1993) that several years ago another Times reporter wrote a multi-part series on business reporting that ran in The Times business section.

(13) Shaw interview, 15 April 1993.


(18) David Shaw interview, 5 May 1993.


(20) Shaw interview, 15 April 1993.


(22) Ibid.

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