

Dennis Redmont

# Wanted: watchdog with loud bark

*The media's professional and ethical responsibilities with regards to "sensitive" news about terrorism, battles and crises.*

At an Aspen Institute Italia workshop on "Securing the European homeland" in 2006, participants spent much time on the need to better identify the enemy. Provocatively, I recalled the cartoon character "Pogo" (by the late Walt Kelly) who was fond of saying "We have met the enemy... and he is us".

By that, I meant that while concentrating constantly on outside threats, advanced democratic industrialized societies have not totally come to grips with certain consequences of a terrorist act. Such an act triggers amplification by the media, which in

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turn amplifies the damage (causing us to further tighten security, lament excesses, or simply throw up our hands in despair!)

Some disparate thinking has been done on both sides of the Atlantic, but not nearly enough. Advanced media technology, the all-pervasive "news product" available any time, anywhere, has also confused issues. Digression from evidence-based reporting to infotainment has even further distracted

the news business. Furthermore, the rise of citizens' blogging and an abundance of blathering deluge us with unverified, opinionated factoids which have shuffled the cards on the table.

To give just one example, [www.blogspot.com](http://www.blogspot.com)'s "reporters" exceeded the *New York Times* journalists' news volume/production in March 2006. No wonder Rupert Murdoch says that the media has become like fast food: "Power is moving away from the

old elite in our industry – the editors, the chief execs and, let’s face it, the proprietors.” So where is the old media watchdog, trained to prevent excesses? Has he fallen asleep or been distracted by the glut? Perhaps he needs to be refocused, repurposed, restyled. In which case he needs to bark louder, more clearly and more recognizably.

NINE ELEVEN. That day changed everything: both national security policies and geopolitical perspectives. The role of the media changed too. Televisions and websites worldwide broadcasted the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in real time. Images of the North Tower, just a few minutes after American Airlines Flight 11 hit, were repeatedly shown to a global audience of perhaps one billion – and live footage abounded. Facing this national emergency, the US media system (and its global counterparts), had to decide how to present the dramatic event, while taking into account the sensitivity of viewers. Later, the media faced another urgent question: why the United States? Background and context became essential.

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Video was transferred directly to audiences’ homes, in a way which had never happened before. Viewers felt they were witnesses. Some broadcasters were critical about the use of the visual material. The former BBC senior editor and APTN founder, Stephen Claypole, commented that the repeated use of footage of the planes crashing into the towers and their collapse was “pornographic”. In Europe, there was very little self-policing of the 100 plus all-news channels. Producers often slapped footage on the tube without reflection.

The images of people choosing to jump to their deaths particularly stunned America. There were at least 200 “jumps”, according to *USA Today*. That newspaper decided, as did most others, to run only one photo, and then published no more. It was the most sensitive aspect of the September 11 attacks. During a “Newsworld” conference in Barcelona, the BBC head of newsgathering, Adrian Van Klaveren, commented that a distinction should be made between showing distressing images of people close to death as breaking news coverage and showing them as edited packages.

Differences in sensitivities on the two sides of the Atlantic certainly existed, but they could mostly be explained by the fact that Europe did not suffer 9/11 on its own territory. Yet after two terrorist attacks unfolded on European soil (March 11, 2004 in Madrid and July 7, 2005 in London) the English and Spanish media also each treated these events in very different ways. There is no common approach to displaying such images: is it better to show everything, refusing any attempt at censorship or self-censorship, or is it better to fight terrorism by avoiding the spread of terror, coun-

tering the terrorists' intentions by hiding scenes of bloodbaths and destruction? Every country's media and authorities have their own response.

**TO CENSOR OR NOT TO CENSOR.** Following the Madrid train bombing, Spanish networks transmitted raw and disturbing images. Some viewers even saw and recognized their relatives on tv. Perhaps Spanish news organizations have a different interpretation of journalistic ethics, but I believe the reasons behind the choice to air



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such images goes deeper: the visual culture of Spain is accustomed to the vivid representation of death and destruction. Paintings by Goya, Zurbaràn and Ribera, after all, are full of atrocities; the Hispanic world has plenty of bleeding statues of Jesus Christ. To the contrary, on the evening of July 7, 2005, spectators all over the world looked in vain for images of the London subway bombings. There were no upsetting pictures, no details of destroyed underground trains, no corpses or blood. Incredibly, it was even hard to find scenes of desperation, or of crying people. It happened because the British media, the Home Office and police authorities decided collegially not to air shocking images.

Of course, it is impossible to simply stop the diffusion of all pictures of a disaster. Today non-professionals are also producers of media content; everywhere you go there are digital cameras, cellular phones and other devices which can take pictures. The latest word is to “prosume” (produce/consume).

The controversy over the publication of the Mohammad cartoons is another case in point. Originally published on September 30, 2005, in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, the drawings were reprinted all over the world. In Europe at least 70 newspapers printed some or all of the 12 cartoons.<sup>1</sup> Papers in Norway, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy and Spain decided with dramatic consequences to reprint the cartoons, which are considered blasphemous by Muslims. The riots against the Danish embassies in Damascus and Beirut, protests in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the demonstrations against the Italian consulate in Benghazi, Libya were sufficient to allow us to comprehend the consequences of certain impulsive editorial choices. RAI, in Italy, even aired an interview with the then reform minister Roberto Calderoli, who was showing-off a T-shirt decorated with the cartoons. Following riots in Benghazi, Calderoli was forced to resign.

The American, British, Canadian and Australian press behaved differently. Mainstream newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* and all-news networks such as CNN and BBC unanimously defined their position in many editorials: the images could prompt violent reactions from Muslim communities whereas illustrating the context could be a way of recognizing different cultural and religious sensitivities with respect. The media learned it must take into account the international audiences it reaches, even if it is “national” at the start.

**SENSE AND SENSITIVITY.** In the post-9/11 world, sensitive information is a key factor in protecting homeland security. Journalism, as a counter power, faces a dilemma in seeking to balance freedom of investigative reporting with national security policies. As the watchdog of civil liberties and privacy, the free press has a duty to publish that which is a matter of public interest. Nevertheless, journalists also have the responsibility to cooperate with Defense Departments to preserve the intelligence network that prevents terrorism. This is far from easy.

*The New York Times*, for example, decided to take a more aggressive attitude in investigating the abrogation of civil rights. The December 16, 2005 front-page story on a secret National Security Agency surveillance program caused some serious arm wrestling between the media and the Bush administration. The *Times* story reported that President Bush secretly authorized the NSA to eavesdrop without a warrant on US citizens and others who were communicating with individuals overseas. The paper had delayed publication for a year while seeking additional verification; attempts were made to accommodate homeland security concerns. The White House had ar-

gued that the article could give critical information to terrorists on domestic spying programs and alert them to the fact they could be under surveillance. Finally, the *Times* executive editor Bill Keller decided to publish, omitting some information considered particularly useful to terrorists by administration officials.

“The question was not why we should publish it, but why not,” the editor said in a statement. The media chorus lamented the expansion of authority by the Bush administration, while the US Justice Department argued that the *New York Times* domestic spying story constituted a violation of Section 798 of the 1917 Espionage Act. “I don’t know how far action will follow rhetoric, but some days it sounds like the administration is declaring war at home on the values it professes to be promoting abroad,” Keller told the *Washington Post*.

**CITIZEN MEDIA.** At this point, we must consider the cataclysmic changes that have taken place in the media landscape over the past few years. Power is moving away from journalists as gatekeepers over what the public knows. Citizens are assuming a more active role as “assemblers”, editors, and even creators of their own news. Journalists need to redefine their role and identify those core values worth fighting to preserve. In the future, we may well rely more on citizens to be sentinels for one another. No doubt that will expand the public forum and enrich the range of voices. Already people are experimenting with new ways to empower fellow citizens to gather and understand the news, whether it is anonymous dentists blogging from Baghdad, soldiers sending home cell-phone videos from the front, or students at a US college interviewing Iraqi citizens on the radio.

Yet the changes will probably also make it easier for powerful institutions to move in the dark. And the open technology that allows citizens to speak will also help special interest groups, posing as something else, to influence or even sometimes cover up what the rest of us know. “Citizen media” could also conceivably lead to the decline of any full-time, professional monitoring of powerful institutions.

In practice, the media idealists seem to have lost. The fight for “journalism in the public interest” has been dealt many a rough blow. “If you argue about public trust today, you will be dismissed as an obstructionist and a romantic,” the editor of a major US paper privately told a recent media study.<sup>2</sup>

**WRITING FOR A SKEPTICAL PUBLIC.** These trends come in addition to other recent developments. Among them, the traditional model of journalism – the press

as verifier and watchdog – is giving way to other models that are faster, looser and cheaper. To adapt, journalism will need to move towards making its work more transparent and more expert, widening the scope of its searchlight. Those who would manipulate the press and the public are gaining leverage over the journalists who cover them, according to the Project for Excellence in Journalism study.

The study also showed that the media's credibility in the eyes of the public is dropping to lower levels than ever before. It suggested that at the heart of that declining trust was a "disconnect" over motive. Journalists see themselves as acting on the public's behalf. The public believes they are either lying or deluding themselves.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found further evidence of that skepticism in 2005: 75% of Americans believed that news organizations were more concerned with "attracting the biggest audience," while only 19% thought they cared more about "informing the public." The percentage of people who believe that criticism of the military weakens American defenses has also been rising, and in 2005 reached its highest point (47%) since 1985 (then 31%).

**66** However, the study did show that while there is doubt about scrutiny of the military, there is enduring and even slightly growing support for the press as a watchdog over politicians. Now 60% of Americans believes a critical press "keeps leaders from doing things that shouldn't be done," while in 2001 and 2003 the figure was 54%.

In 2005, Americans expressed heightened criticism of the press in some areas, including increased concerns about bias, criticism of the military, and whether the news media really protect democracy. In short, since the early 1980s, Americans have come to view the news media as less professional, less accurate, less caring and less moral. One credible explanation for why the concept of journalism in the public interest has lost leverage was probably offered by Polk Laffoon IV, corporate spokesman of The Knight Ridder newspaper chain. "I wish there were an identifiable and strong correlation between quality journalism [...] and newspaper sales," he said, "but it isn't that simple."

From here on, in many media companies, the fight on behalf of the public interest will come from the rank and file of the newsroom, with the news executive as mediator with the board. But at many new-media companies, it is not clear if advocates for the public interest will be present at all.

The central economic question in journalism continues to be how long it will take online journalism to become a major economic engine, and if it will ever be as big as print or television. In any case, even if the online revenues at newspapers continue

to grow at the current rate – an improbable 33% a year – they won't reach levels equivalent with print until the year 2017.

**A CODE OF ETHICS?** Nevertheless, some codes of ethics may still have to be implemented, focusing on terrorism and world crisis coverage, not just regular journalistic practices.<sup>3</sup> The US Radio and Television News Director Association and Foundation has created a comprehensive list of resources that can help journalists covering war, terrorism and the issue of national security. Besides individual networks' codes of ethics, RTNDA lists some guidelines on the use of file tapes, the choices of experts to interview, the level of influence that information can have on the public and also the impact it can have on terrorist groups.

On the specific issue of bioterrorism, the RTNDA, with the financial support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, published a journalist's guide, to improve the performance of news media, learning from the mistakes made following the anthrax episode. Covering bioterrorism presents a unique set of challenges, especially regarding public perceptions. If the public panics, responses by government and public authorities may be affected. And developing specific guidelines for each case is undoubtedly difficult to achieve.

**TRADE-OFFS AND HEALTHY TENSION.** In "The media and the war on terrorism"<sup>4</sup> Stephen Hess and Marvin Kalb quote two seminal comments from a journalist and from the US Defense Department, which define the constant conflict: Karen DeYoung, associate editor of the *Washington Post*, said, "It's a trade-off between our argument that the more information we have the better we are able to reflect the truth and all parts of the truth, and their belief that if we limit the information that's available to you and funnel it through one source, then we have control over the information. Sometimes we lose, sometimes they lose. Hopefully, in the end, everyone wins, but do we really have 'common objectives'?"

Victoria Clarke, the military spokesperson and probably the prime architect of the Iraq embedding policy, put it differently: "It is in my interest for the American people to get as much appropriate news and information about this war as possible. If we keep them informed, if we keep them educated, they will stay with us." Turning to the reporters, she then said, "The news media: it's your business. It's your obligation to get out as much news and information as possible. So we do have common objectives. There is a healthy tension. What's the level, what's the appropriate information?"

There are probably mistakes and variations on each side, but I happen to think it's a very healthy tension." The authors conclude: "Trade-offs and healthy tension. These are the keywords that best define what the relationship should be between government and the media in the war on terrorism."

**VARIATIONS ON A THEME.** What are some of the other experiences with watchdog groups or codes of ethics? Various attempts have been made on both sides of the Atlantic to try and come to grips with the problem. One of them has been the ombudsman, a *super partes* editor who looks out for article accuracy and handles the readers' complaints, promoting journalistic integrity. An Organization of News Ombudsmen (ONO), a nonprofit corporation with an international membership, was formed in 1980, and maintains contact with news ombudsmen worldwide. In general, the role is covered by senior editors of the newspaper or television network they monitor. But they must be on the readers' side, explaining the news-gathering process to the public and backing readers' concerns. Ombudsmen have fixed-term contracts to play an independent role and follow terms of reference.

**68** Self-monitoring systems are different from nation to nation. The *Asahi Shimbun* in Japan first established a committee in 1922 to receive and investigate readers' complaints. In the United States, the first newspaper ombudsman was appointed in 1967, to *The Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times*. In Sweden, the press is self-regulated through the Public Press Ombudsman, established in 1969. In France, the public network, France Television, has two ombudsmen positions: "médiateur de la rédaction", and "médiateur des programmes". Readers can refer directly to the ombudsman to obtain information or to express opinions and complaints.

**A CASE STUDY: BRITAIN.** In 1997 *The Guardian* was the first newspaper in the UK to appoint a readers' editor. Ian Mayes, who is also the president of the ONO, runs a column named "Open door", where he publishes daily corrections or apologies. "It is the only form of self-regulation that has this effect of building trust." said Mayes. "It works if it is clear that the system is applied seriously and is not merely cosmetic."<sup>5</sup> The editor's independence is underwritten by the owner of *The Guardian*, the Scott Trust. The newspaper's decision was later echoed by the *Observer*, the *Independent on Sunday* and the *Daily Mirror*.

Another "instrument" implemented in the UK to strike a healthy balance between informing the public and safeguarding state secrets is the DA-Notice System. The DA-



Notice System is a “voluntary code that provides guidance to the British media on the publication or broadcasting of national security information. It is overseen by the Defence Press and Broadcasting Advisory Committee, a joint government/media body that approves the standing DA-notices and monitors their implementation.”<sup>6</sup> The DP-BAC, composed of senior civil servants and editors from national and regional newspapers, periodicals, news agencies, television and radio operates on the shared belief that there is a continuing need for a system of guidance and advice, and that a voluntary, advisory basis is best for such a system. DA-Notices are addressed to editors, producers, publishers and officials; respecting their guidelines does not relieve editors of responsibilities under the Official Secrets Act.

According to the DA-Notice System, in general, all highly classified information related to sensitive issues should not be published or disclosed without first seeking advice. To this end, the DPBAC releases notices to identify sensitive issues, such as military operations, plans and capabilities; nuclear and non-nuclear weapons and equipment; ciphers and secure communications; sensitive installations and home addresses; security, intelligence and special services. Information falling within these categories can potentially be damaging to national security, be useful to terrorist planning and compromise past, present and future security and intelligence operations.

As well as implementing the DA-Notice System, the BBC has doubled its self-regulation by issuing a series of editorial guidelines,<sup>7</sup> approved by the Board of Governors and kept under constant review by the editorial policy team. Section 11 of these guidelines deals with the coverage of war, terror and emergencies. The network’s credibility and impartial analysis must be ensured while at the same time taking into account the emotions and fears of the audience. Content producers must refer to the Controller Editorial Policy and Programme Legal Advice if BBC staff risk a violation of the Terrorism Act (2000). Under the Terrorism Act, reporters have to reveal sensitive information related to national security to the police first, and journalists who break the law are punishable by up to 5 years in prison.

If the BBC were to receive a bomb warning, staffers would not be permitted to reveal code words or other security details. Reporting threats against individuals or identifying possible targets without a previous identification or naming of firms working for military establishments is normally not permitted. Journalists must endeavor not to provide a platform for hijackers, kidnappers or hostage takers. There are a few strict rules: never interview a perpetrator live on air and never broadcast video provided live on air. Senior editorial figures become central in deciding whether or not to

broadcast recordings made by such a perpetrator. Broadcasts of sensitive stories with an unknown outcome (such as a school siege) must be delayed.

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**INFORMATION AND SECURITY, INTEGRITY AND CREDIBILITY.** On the European front, in June 2005, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) discussed the media coverage of terrorist acts. The Council, representing 46 European countries, warned of terrorists' ability to use information technology to distribute their own audiovisual recordings, electronic messages or websites on the internet. Terrorism strategy "compels states and the media to react accordingly." The text adopted by the PACE points out the need to avoid over-sensational media reports on terrorism and contains an invitation to media professionals to "develop through their professional organization a role of conduct for journalists, photographers and editors dealing with terrorist acts and threats, in order to keep the public informed without contributing unduly to the impact of terrorism". Moreover, the Assembly asked the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to monitor media coverage and to prepare a handbook for journalists, under the guidance of and in close cooperation with media professionals. Such recommendations are not mandatory, of course, but help draw ethical lines for the media. Last February, indeed, the Italian vice president of the Communications Commission, Franco Frattini, stated that there is no need for a new supranational code and that the existing national voluntary codes are currently serving journalism well.

In the United States, recent scandals have weakened mainstream media accountability, thus compromising the reader's trust in objective and honest reporting. Moreover, the internet increasingly allows grassroots reporters to reveal errors or lies written by professional journalists. On his "The News Blog", liberal blogger Steve Gilliard presented a modest proposal: "I think it would be a really, really good idea to track reporters, word for word, broadcast for broadcast, and print the results online. Not just for any one campaign or cause, but to track people's reporting the way we track other services." Dan Gillmor, grassroots journalism guru, puts the problem in these terms: "I like the idea that people are watching what I say and correcting me if I get things wrong. But if the idea is to create some kind of organized collection of Truth Squads, I'm less comfortable." Truth Squads may bring heat instead of light to a subject, turning verification into political debate.

More formal standards have also been issued by the US Society for Professional Journalists. Their code of ethics declares principles and standards of practice and identi-

fies professional integrity as the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt the code of ethics, which is voluntarily embraced by thousands of writers, editors and other news professionals.

**A JOURNALIST'S CLUB OF ROME.** In the end, however, the various voices of ethical codes, press councils and ombudsmen might receive some additional support in building a more responsible media and a more transparent government were some sort of international critical conscience to develop. No one is advocating the involvement of UN blue helmets or of "media referees" funded by a politically correct coterie. Nor does anyone look back to the dark days when a "New World Information Order" was championed by non-aligned nations.

Instead, perhaps the time has come to think of an informal "Club of Rome" which would speak up periodically on abuses and ethical issues created by the new conundrum of security and instant information. The group could include a dozen wise figures with moral authority and proven experience to give it a high profile and pedigree. All of them would be media practitioners, who could engage in detached self-monitoring: former editors of *The Economist*, religion or scientific writers, news directors, television anchors or producers and internet architects.

They would not necessarily speak with a single voice, nor be funded by a single foundation, but work across national, ethnic, religious and multimedia lines. Nor would they seek to replace any of the other voices or have any enforcement powers.

But merely by speaking out periodically over issues, and "barking" loudly at journalistic or government lapses, the group would command attention and provoke some intelligent discussion, removing the tone of strident militancy or bureaucratic cover-up which currently dominates the webwaves, airtime and newsprint.

<sup>1</sup> According to [www.editorsweblogs.org](http://www.editorsweblogs.org) and the BBC News report.

<sup>2</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, supported by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the Pew Charitable Trusts, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The international journalists' network lists some 100 codes of ethics from around the world ([www.ijnnet.org](http://www.ijnnet.org)).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Hess and Marvin Kalb, "The media and the war on terrorism", Brookings Institution Press, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/](http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/)

<sup>6</sup> [www.dnotice.org.uk](http://www.dnotice.org.uk)

<sup>7</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/)