

A Jaundiced Look at Yellow Journalism

by Maia Cowan

“All I know is what I read in the newspaper.” (Will Rogers)

I’ve been a technical writer and editor for 15 years. This experience makes me very, very picky about information. I want it correct, complete, unambiguous, and unbiased.

Reading the news these days is an exercise in exasperation. Too much journalism these days is Yellow Journalism.

It wouldn’t be so bad if the journalists flat-out lied. False information can be refuted by comparing it to verified correct information. Yellow Journalists are more insidious than liars. They use rhetorical tricks to make insinuations look like facts and bias look like objectivity.

Night Is Day, Up Is Down

News editors know that most people read only the headlines, and maybe the first paragraph or two, not the whole article. The headline, therefore, is “what they’d **like** you to believe.” It often doesn’t match the story. (We can’t blame the reporters for this one; they have no control over the headlines.)

For example:

- Last October, the Associated Press reported that when George W. Bush was a director of Harken Oil, the company neglected to clean up pollution from leaking storage tanks. Got that? Harken owned the tanks, the tanks leaked, Harken didn’t clean it up. The headline for this story was “**Bush led oil cleanup.**” Your eyes do not deceive. The headline said the opposite of what the story said.
- More recently, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg gave a speech at George Washington University, in which she expressed support for a proposed moratorium on executions in Maryland. The Associated Press headline? “**Ginsburg Backs Ending Death Penalty.**”¹ But Justice Ginsburg did *not* back ending the death penalty; a moratorium is a pause, not an end.
- The most notorious recent example is the *Miami Herald* headline, “**REVIEW SHOWS BALLOTS SAY BUSH [won].**”² The review of the ballots, however, identified more uncounted ballots for Gore than for Bush — enough that, if all valid votes had been counted, we’d have President Gore today. Several different ways of deciding which ballots to count did result in more votes for Bush; but the scenario that most closely match the requirements of Florida election statutes gave Gore the victory.

¹ See for yourself at http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/ap/20010409/pl/scotus_ginsburg_1.html.

² The story is available at <http://www.miami.com/herald/special/news/flacount/docs/032868.htm>.

A Tilted Pyramid

News stories should be written in “inverted pyramid” style: the most important information in the first paragraph, down through the least important details at the end. Many stories that present more than one side of an issue, however, sort the information according to “what they’d **like** you to believe.” People who read only the first few paragraphs miss crucial information that would lead to a very different conclusion from that suggested by the lead.

For example:

- The opening paragraphs in the original *Miami Herald* story about its review of the Florida ballots describes only the scenarios in which Bush would get more votes than Gore. A reader who browses only the beginning of the story would never know that the case for a Gore victory is much stronger (being based on counting the ballots in accordance with Florida statutes, not partisan considerations).³
- In the midst of “Pardongate,” the *Los Angeles Times* reported allegations that President Clinton’s half-brother Roger was soliciting payments to arrange presidential pardons. The article describes in detail the activities of two men who approached relatives of felons with this offer, claiming that they were associates of Roger Clinton. Not until nearly the end of the article does the story mention that the people approached with this offer never actually saw or spoke to Roger Clinton himself. When **all** the facts are known, it seems most likely that the men soliciting the pardons were con artists using Roger Clinton’s name without his knowledge or consent; but the story as written explicitly portrays Clinton as a knowing accomplice in their activities.⁴

Information-Free Content

How do you write a news story about something that never happened?

It’s easy: base it entirely on speculation, using weasel words like “may be,” “suggests,” “reportedly,” “alleged,” “if.” We naturally and often unconsciously resolve such uncertainty, filling in the gaps as needed to draw a conclusion. Since few people read (or watch) something that they expect not to be reliable, a Yellow Journalist’s audience will resolve the uncertainty in favor of the statements being factual and true.

³ See footnote 2 on the previous page.

⁴ Stephen Braun and Richard A. Serrano, “2 Lawyers Say Roger Clinton Sought Payment for Pardons.” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 March 2001.

For example:

- Outgoing Clinton Administration staffers expressed their annoyance at ceding the White House to Republicans by doing \$200,000 worth of damage to the building and furniture. Or so the story was reported in all the major newspapers, not just in the U.S. but around the world.

This story originated in an article written by Matt Drudge, in which he cited an unnamed Bush staffer. That's the sum total of the definite information about the alleged vandalism: Matt Drudge alleged that a Bush staffer told him about it. All the other news stories merely recycled the Drudge Report. None of the reporters included any information beyond what Matt Drudge reported (and a statement by White House spokesman Ari Fleischer that encouraged the story by pointedly rising above discussing it). They neither quoted nor named any eyewitnesses to the damage. They didn't see the damage first-hand. They didn't see photographs. They didn't have **anything** except a rumor from Matt "I don't believe in fact checking" Drudge.

After nearly a week of steadily increasing damage estimates, CNN reported that President Clinton's chief of staff was asking the Bush staff for proof of the damage. A couple of newspapers followed up with reports of skepticism about the original reports. Then George W. Bush told a group of reporters there wasn't any vandalism, none at all. Oops. But it was a great story while it lasted, wasn't it? Indeed, it's lasted long after it was debunked; most people who heard the original reports of vandalism never heard what passed for retractions of the story.⁵

⁵ The "evolution" of this story is shown by the sequence of reports in CNN:

1. 23 January: "Letter 'W' missing from White House keyboards" (*no link*)
2. 25 January: "White House 'cataloguing' pranks by departing Clinton staffers"
<http://www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/stories/01/25/bush.pranks/index.html>
3. 26 January: "Clinton aide denies reports of White House vandalism"
<http://www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/stories/01/26/whitehouse.pranks.02/index.html>
4. 27 January: "Clinton's chief of staff calls White House over vandalism reports"
www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/stories/01/27/w.h.pranks/index.html

Also on 27 January, the *Washington Post*, the first major news outlet to repeat the story (in Howard Kurtz's "Media Notes" column), reported "White House Scales Back Prank Reports." (And note that the "vandalism" was demoted to "pranks.")

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A53681-2001Jan26.html>

A transcript posted in the White House web site, dated 26 January, contains George W. Bush's dismissal of the reports of vandalism. (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20010126-7.html>)

And a few honest journalists weren't taken in:

- David Goldstein, "Reports of vandalism at White House have few facts to back them up." *Kansas City Star*, 8 February 2001. <http://www.kcstar.com/item/pages/home.pat.local/37751dff.208.html>
- Joshua Micah Marshall, *Talking Points Memo*, January 2001. <http://j-marshall.com/talk/jan0104.html>
- Even the *Washington Post* displayed a belated skepticism: John F. Harris and Dana Milbank, "At the White House, 'Moving On' or 'Piling On'?" 18 February 2001. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A20393-2001Feb17.html>

- The authors of a March 18 *Los Angeles Times* story described in details the difficulties of providing “overwhelming proof” of a “quid pro quo” in the pardons President Clinton granted. They never mentioned the possibility that no evidence had been found because there wasn’t any — because there wasn’t any wrongdoing. Every time they had to mention that there’s no evidence, they countered that admission with a discussion of what sort of evidence *would be* needed for an indictment and what *would* happen next *if* the evidence were found. The entire article was one long hypothetical question, nothing more. It relied on the belief that “where there’s smoke, there’s fire” to give the premise credibility; but it really only demonstrates that “where there’s smoke, there are mirrors.”⁶

Who Are Those Guys?

News reports about the pressing issues of the day always include quotes from Experts. When an issue is hotly contested along partisan lines, the opinion of an impartial outsider provides credibility or refutation, as appropriate, for the assertions of the partisans (for example, the White House vs. Congressional Democrats).

I’ve been checking the backgrounds of the “outside” experts cited in news reports about the Bush regime. The overwhelming majority are from right-wing think tanks. A significant number have close associations with the Republican Party and/or the Bush family.

For example:

- After the Senate passed the campaign finance reform bill, several newspapers quoted **Jan Baran** expressing doubts about whether the bill was Constitutional.⁷ He was identified as “a Washington lawyer who litigates election issues.” What the articles didn’t mention is that he’s also a former head of the Republican National Committee.⁸
- A *Washington Post* article about the Bush regime’s approach to the Middle East⁹ included several quotations by **Richard Perle**. The article identified him as a conservative (an American Enterprise Institute fellow and former Reagan administration official) but didn’t reveal that he was an adviser to the Bush presidential campaign, and in fact had attempted to discourage the Israeli government’s participation in the July 2000 summit arranged by the Clinton Administration.¹⁰

⁶ I analyzed this story in detail for Media Whores Online, <http://www.mediawhoresonline.com/cowan.htm>.

⁷ Reported by Howard Kurtz in his “Media Notes” column in the *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A31266-2001Apr3.html>.

⁸ As mentioned in an ABC News report, http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/DailyNews/ELECTION_baran_chat.html.

⁹ Charles Babington, “Leaders Urge Bush to Face Foreign Policy Issues.” *Washington Post*, 20 March 2001. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A31454-2001Mar20.html>.

¹⁰ Julian Borger, “Anger at peace talks ‘meddling’.” *Guardian* (UK), 13 July 2000. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4039958,00.html>.

- A more recent *Washington Post* article analyzing the Bush regime's handling of the "spy plane" crisis quoted four experts on China — all of them members of the right-wing Council on Foreign Relations, one a member of the elder George Bush's administration and one a likely State Department nominee for the current regime.¹¹

It's Not What They Say, It's What They Don't Say

You can "prove" anything, depending on what evidence you ignore. Yellow Journalists frequently omit details that could ruin their story by contradicting their preordained conclusion. Such deliberate omissions are much harder to counter than other journalistic fallacies. The best you can do is learn to avoid "unreliable sources" after you catch them leaving out crucial information.

Such as:

- Again in Pardongate, the testimony about the people who urged President Clinton (possibly with monetary incentives) to pardon Marc Rich was reported in detail. The news media, however, somehow forgot to tell us about testimony that justified the decision to pardon him (e.g. from Dick Cheney's chief of staff, who had been Marc Rich's lawyer), and testimony that officers of the Clinton Library argued against the pardon (i.e. donations to the library did not buy influence).¹²
- When George W. Bush reversed President Clinton's executive order instituting ergonomic regulations, the news reports dutifully repeated his description of the order as "hurriedly issued at the last minute." Almost none of them mentioned that the regulations were based on 10 years' worth of study and discussion — initiated by Elizabeth Dole in the elder George Bush's administration. How "hurried" can a regulation be that's been in the works for 10 years?¹³

¹¹ Charles Babington, "Crew's Release Serves China's Interests." *Washington Post*, 11 April 2001. <http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A5267-2001Apr11.html>. I got background information about the "experts" quoted in the article — Arthur Waldron, Elizabeth Economy, Robert Manning, and Gerrit Gong — by searching with <http://www.google.com>.

¹² As reported by various acquaintances who watched the hearings on C-SPAN.

¹³ "Cries in the Dark: The Myth of 'Midnight Regulation'," *OMB Watcher Online*, Vol. 2 No. 1, 8 January 2001. <http://www.ombwatcher.org/ombwatcher/text20010108.html#reg>

Caveat Lector

These are only a few of the many tricks Yellow Journalists use to lead us to the desired conclusions in the absence of (or in spite of) the facts. So what's a Seeker After Real News to do?

The rhetorical tricks only work if we're not aware of them. Crank up your skepticism to "high" when reading or listening to the news. If you can filter out the "yellow," what's left can be reliable information.

If you see an egregious example of skewed news, write to the journalist, the editor, and a few media watchdogs (such as the *Columbia Journalism Review*): if enough of us tell the Yellow Journalists that their cover is blown, we may even force them to try their hand at straight journalism.

Journalists have a responsibility (no matter how often they neglect it) to give us good information. But we, too, have a responsibility — to think about what we read or hear, not just absorb it. As you read or watch the news, ask yourself:

- Where does this information come from? If the reporter doesn't reveal the sources, why not?
- Who are those people being quoted? Why is their opinion significant?
- Most important, if hardest to answer: What are they **not** telling us?

You won't always be able to get satisfactory answers to these questions. But by asking them, you make sure the corporate media aren't telling you what to believe.

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