

Bill Lascher  
Essay #2  
Journal 580  
8/25/08

### **Competition and the specialized journalist's autonomy**

Of the three areas of autonomy in American journalism examined by Glasser and Gunther, I found the most resonance with specialized journalism in the notion that “autonomy, under the guise of competition, undermines the independence of judgment that good journalism demands.”<sup>1</sup>

It's not unimportant to consider the other areas Glasser and Gunther explore: how autonomy tends to trump accountability among journalists, and how autonomy for journalists *within* the newsroom threatens autonomy *for* the newsroom. Nonetheless, the idea that the competitive drive among many American journalists — motivated so strongly by the market-oriented conception of freedom in which they operate — actually limits their autonomy from one another holds sway.

Glasser and Gunther use Yale Law School professor Owen Fiss's argument that the First Amendment exists “to safeguard popular sovereignty, not individual self-expression”<sup>2</sup> to springboard into their discussion of “the tension between [autonomy's] ascription and its achievement.”<sup>3</sup>

The very notion of “specialization,” particularly as we've established it in classroom discussion, evokes an individualized approach to the profession. Thinking about how competitive instincts threaten autonomy could help a specialized journalist succeed, particularly if one defines success as providing information no one else is able to provide. Acting with initiative, independence and entrepreneurialism, moreover, may provide economic success to working journalists who both inform their public — fulfilling a social responsibility — and provide a valuable “product.”

Glasser and Gunther transition their discussion to the “contested meaning of freedom of the press” by quoting Hannah Arendt's warning in *On Revolution* about the difference between “being

---

1 Glasser, Theodore L. and Gunther Marc, “The legacy of autonomy in American journalism,” *The Press*, Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds. p. 384

2 Glasser & Gunther, p. 384

3 Glasser & Gunther p. 385

liberated' from something and 'being free' to do something else.” Presenting Fiss's and Alexander Micklejohn's position on free expression, the authors explain how the former prioritized the content of expression even at the cost of individual expression and the latter asserted that “what is essential is not that everyone shall speak, but that everything worth saying shall be said.”<sup>4</sup>

This quickly begs the question of how we define “worth.” Likewise, when it comes to the “fairness doctrine” and The U.S. Supreme court's 1969 *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC* decision, we are reminded by the authors that the policy requires broadcasters to “treat controversial matters in a fair and balanced manner,”<sup>5</sup> but no explanation is given as to how “controversial” is defined. As noted by Jonathan Partridge in our Aug. 18 afternoon session, a broader societal shift from modernism to post modernism may affect our values as journalists. Our conception of what is “worth saying” and what is “controversial” and even what justifies an “attack” on an individual depends on one's perspective.

Glasser and Gunther don't dissect these definitions. Instead, their discussion of decisions related to the fairness doctrine show how the court supported the idea that the public interest is a paramount concern when it comes to the first amendment. Although the authors used this discussion to set up their discussion of whether autonomy for journalists trumps their accountability, this concept returns when we think of how working journalists should approach competition. The quote provided from the *Red Lion* decision, that “It is the right of the viewers and listeners, not the right of broadcasters, which is paramount,”<sup>6</sup> should be understood in the context of competition to mean that informative, engaging content trumps market share and ratings.

According to the authors, journalists' challenge to deliver “what is worth saying” to their audiences comes from private market forces. The use of the quote by *Newsweek's* Richard Smith that “We can't shout back against the tide of business change” underscores the idea that journalists can't evade market pressures, that a “faith in the value and values of market-driven journalism” persists.<sup>7</sup>

---

4 Glasser & Gunther, p. 386

5 Glasser & Gunther, p. 386

6 Glasser & Gunther, p. 387

7 Glasser & Gunther, p. 394

Glasser and Gunther argue that there is a preservation of hegemony through “quiet acceptance.”

Journalists don't challenge the status quo, they write, but focus upon whether it is abused or violated.

As long as we continue to think of the media as a concrete institution there won't be room for autonomy, competition or not. This goes to the question of how we define what journalism is.

Ben Bagdikian's point in his media criticism isn't that alternative media outlets don't exist. It's that concentration of media ownership into fewer and fewer hands harms the diversity of information available to the public.

The interesting thing about this argument is that even media ostensibly outside the status quo must contend with the idea of the status quo's existence.

When I helped launch a publication in 2003 called the *Portland Pigeon*, I recall discussions among my erstwhile colleagues about how readers in Portland, Maine were under-served by local media. We didn't think about it in terms of exact audience metrics, but an amorphous idea of important stories we felt weren't being adequately discussed.

In many ways, ours was a “fake it until you make it” approach. There was no structure, no business license, no salary, no style guide, just a group of six or seven people working together without a set schedule to publish those stories when we could scrape together the time and resources to do so.

Was the reporting and writing we did not journalism, even though our primary motivation was to the truth, toward informing our society? I'd say it was, but the question here isn't about quality journalism, it's about autonomy. That's why the issue of competition is different than the discussion of the relationship between autonomy and accountability, although I don't believe we weren't accountable. Ostensibly, we were autonomous. But perhaps we weren't. Even if the stories we approached weren't those covered by *The Portland Press Herald* or the *Portland Phoenix*, we always existed in opposition or contrast to those or other media outlets in the area.

Still, we were autonomous from the media establishment in that we weren't involved in the race to cover breaking stories. By waiting until we had content and funds, rather than finding content to

meet a set print schedule or broadcast time, our information was our currency. In thinking about Glasser and Gunther, I think about the following quote:

“The pressure to be fast and first shifts the journalist's attention away from judgments about what the public needs or wants and toward a calculation of what the competition might do, an intramural contest of some significance to newsroom insiders but of little or no interest to most readers, viewers and listeners.”<sup>8</sup>

Our judgments were about what the public needed or wanted, whether or not we accurately identified those needs and wants. I'd argue this is the case for countless other ad-hoc, alternative, underground publications and even more blogs and online news outlets. We were autonomous in that sense, but we may still have been calculating “what the competition might do” by presuming to offer an alternative.

Still, the danger Gunther and Glasser identify in competition has much to do with the idea that increased competition incentivizes homogeneity<sup>9</sup>. Online journalism may be creating media outlets more focused on judgments of what the public needs or wants, but technology may also be reshaping how we identify those needs and wants.

Twitter, which sends short messages and announcements through a social network, offers an example. As we discussed in class Aug. 11, news of a 5.4 earthquake in Chino Hills spread quickly via Twitter before broadcast or cable outlets could report the story. Information about the extent of damage and any potential danger was able to reach the public more quickly than it might have in the past. On the other hand only limited depth and little context is available with each short “tweet.” Instead of expanding journalism, Twitter feeds in these situations only stoke the “intramural contest” previously mentioned. What's worse, they legitimize certain events that become popular and de-legitimize those which gain little traction on Twitter. The service's utility in the aftermath of the earthquake mean it is more likely to be used for verification of story tips by journalists, but it also will define how journalists seek and convey stories.

---

8 Glasser & Gunther, p. 396

9 Glasser & Gunther, p. 395

Extending Gunther and Glasser's idea that competition prompts a “scoop or shun” mentality<sup>10</sup>, what happens to the stories that aren't promoted via Twitter? Are more established media outlets likely to follow those stories? Probably not, and definitely not with as much zeal as the stories making the rounds on Twitter.

That's why specialized journalism has potential: the ability to develop a unique coverage area and an ability to compellingly convey stories with authority counters that homogenizing influence. The carving of niches is a key component of entrepreneurial thinking which offers more incentive for specialized journalists to make judgments based on public “needs and wants.”

---

<sup>10</sup> Glasser & Gunther, p. 396