

# The Demise of International Reporting

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I'm going to talk about international reporting and why there is a deficit in it, and then ask ourselves what might we do about it and what's the consequence of it and, if there is a consequence, what's the effect on our democracy?

I think that the situation we face as citizens of a free society is very specific. I want us to think about what we're meant to be as a self-governing democracy under the rule of law and go back a ways before Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. Before he wrote the Declaration, he and all the other men - mostly men, but we know from Abigail Adams' diaries there were many women there who were just as smart and were part of it were thinking forward to see what it was they would found in this essentially very under populated country, what they would do to change how they had lived and what their expectations were if they were to actually create a new kind of government here and a new contract between citizens who were governed and those they chose to govern them. Jefferson wrote in one of his many essays that people could not be both ignorant and free. It's the simplest, most straight forward and dynamic proposition that any of us as citizens steps into every day when we walk out the door of our house or apartment. We must engage if we're to be free and we can only engage if we have information in front of us.

So, what is the consequence of what we're going to talk about tonight? We have already suggested it. The consequence of having a diminishing cadre of foreign correspondents, newspaper-by-newspaper, network-by-network, cable-by-cable, broadcast-by-broadcast, is that we are being deprived of knowledge that we need now as much as we've ever needed it in this country. It's due to a whole variety of reasons that have to do certainly with war, but also with the changing nature of the global economy and our place in it. I think that our international reporting may be at the lowest ebb that it has been in since before World War II, and that bears on why it changed. I think if we look historically, not so far back, we can see a break with the entire continuum that most of us grew up in which was the continuum of deeply experienced foreign correspondence by many newspapers and many individual broadcasting organizations, as well as the networks that arose out of the coverage of World War II, the great calamity that divided the first part of the century from all that happened thereafter. In our efforts to try to understand and to be knowledgeable about what happened and for the news media to send and cover that great conflict from the American point of view a required the creation of a cadre of reporters, editors, producers, directors, telecommunications people and others to bring this forward whether they were working for a newspaper and scribbling as I did for 25 years at the *Washington Post*, or whether they were going on the air in radio. That cadre carried us forward into what came next—the Cold War: the most complicated, difficult and hidden and yet very threatening sequence in which the world seemed to be divided into two camps—light and dark, good and bad, etc. That's

a simplistic formulation but certainly it struggled between two separate ideas and two separate systems of approach to how human beings should conduct their affairs.

All through the Cold War these cadres of reporters and editors and producers who were going out to understand the intricacies of this conflict and this confrontation what the American way should be—what was our path forward? What were the challenges in front of us? And so we put correspondents in places like Moscow where I spent four years with my family during Brezhnev and there were many correspondents prior to me at the *Washington Post* that spent time there and are still there. Today Moscow is the world's second largest provider and producer of oil and, therefore, transformed in its economic future at least so long as oil continues to be handled the way it is, who is there for us? Instead of 30 plus American news organizations in Moscow, there are barely a dozen and the cumulative results of that, is that we know less and there's less variation, less individuality, less enterprise and ultimately, I think in the most profound way, less ability to understand, and that's because there are fewer reporters doing that very hard work.

Why did that happen? I think it happened precisely because in 1989 the divided world started to change completely and by 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union the long Cold War contest was over—we had won. I think that we as Americans after the depression, the Second World War, and then the long Cold War, had changed the way this society moved through its history and the way it moved into its future. It was time for us to essentially take a vacation and interestingly it happened at a time when the pattern of disinvestment in news across this country both in newspapers and the networks started to really take force. I think we went on a holiday and the holiday continued for more than a decade.

At the same time there was a trend, hardly seen, but something that really has helped us at NPR and that was that even as foreign correspondence started to shrink in some of our major providers as our lifestyles started to change. Fewer of us could sit in the morning and read our way through the A Section of the paper or the second section or the cultural section. The one thing we always read was Sports, if you're a boy, and many women too, but the place of primacy of the broadsheet newspaper where contextual long—formed, fact—based, skeptically reported, skeptically edited, skeptically fact - checked journalism occurred, started to fade and receded in the American dialogue because people's lifestyles started to change.

I left the *Post* in 1992, I left because Ben Bradlee, the great editor who hired me, retired from the newsroom and I decided it was time for me to move on as well. The paper today is as good as it was when Bradlee walked out of the news room for the last time as Executive Editor. It's a powerful paper, it does a lot of individual high quality investigative, hardnosed and comprehensive reporting and its specialty is contextual journalism. The number of people who read it in the Washington metropolitan area is about 100,000 readers per day—fewer than it was 15 years ago. The Washington metropolitan area, just like the Los Angeles metropolitan area, has about 600,000 or 700,000 more families in it than it did 15 years ago. This trend is not because the paper isn't there; the trend has to do with what's happened in our lives—we don't have time.

Many news people in the newspaper world know what happens. What happens is very psychological—people go out the door in the morning, they take a scan of the contents of the headlines, they catch a little bit of it, they go to the next section and they run out the door, because we're now doing something which has a term—we're "multitasking." Everyone of us is doing six things at once. And what happens by the end of the week is that there's 12 pounds newsprint sitting in the corner. People come home on Friday and the weekend takes over, and about the time they get to Sunday it's not 12 pounds anymore, it's now 15 or 16. It is known—

they've done surveys that ask people why they don't subscribe anymore? They say, "I can't handle 18 pounds of paper going out on Sunday night that I've never read. I feel guilty because I know there are good things in there that I should know as a citizen, but can't get to it, and I'm worried now because it's a burden I have to face and somebody has to dispose of it, because that whole environmental thing is starting to rise. So it's better that we should end the subscription and read the headlines that come to us through CNN or through Google or through Yahoo! who aggregate all these different news services, and get the headlines on the run or get them on my computer or my Pod or whatever, and I'll save whatever time I have for reading something other than the newspaper."

And so these big presenters of this kind of contextual journalism have faded whether we like it or not and concurrent with that came a retreat from foreign reporting because the rockets weren't going to fly any more. We did take a vacation. NPR has been on the air since 1971, and over the 27 year period between '71-'98, the audience had gone up by 500,000 a year cumulatively across the country each year. When I joined it was about 13 million. For reasons that have to do with the intensification of the situation of the American dream and what was happening in America, beginning in 1999 there started to be an upturn of people listening to public radio because they didn't have time to read the newspaper and because when they turned on the television set to look at the network news things they thought they needed to hear or learn about weren't really there anymore.

Forty-five percent of the American population tunes into some form of network news one way or another through the day, we all know it has changed from what it was in the days of Walter Cronkite. We know that what Edward R. Murrow said was happening back in 1958 when he gave the noted speech to the Radio and Television News Directors Association in Chicago -- the speech that frames the movie, *Good Night and Good Luck*, he said there would be a kind of collision of entertainment values and news values that was going to be resolved one way or another but would not stay in stasis. That's what he predicted would happen 50 years ago. I think we're seeing the outcome of what he could see. In any event, what happened at the same time was that there was another service that was easy to get to, that didn't interfere with your lives, that you could listen to on the way to work, while you were jogging or walking the dog or peddling your bicycle and that was radio—one of the oldest of the mass media of the electronic age which had been a major force in this country from the 1920s until the 1950s until television superseded it.

And public radio listenership started to rise. Between 1998 and today, that audience which took 27 years to reach 13 million has doubled in nine years because it was there for people. And we learned from talking to you all that the one thing that people wanted across this country from their public radio station, if they could get it, was high quality, contextual form reporting.

Many newspaper editors will tell you they've reduced their foreign news, "whole" as it's called, down to foreign briefs, or world briefs, or world items, because Americans aren't interested in foreign news. The fact of the matter is we're all interested but we don't know how to get to it and when we do get to it it does violence -- we're good at doing violence. It doesn't do context and we need context because the world we face in the post-Cold War era is much more complicated than anybody had imagined. So came the attacks of 9/11 in September 2001. The audience between 1999-2001 had gone up by a million a year from 13 million to 16 million. Two weeks later the national audience for public radio was 20 million and today it's 26 million to our programming, and another four or five million to other producers in public radio. That says the

opposite. It says that Americans want what will be there for them, that respects them, that pays attention to their needs and their desires for contextual foreign news.

At NPR we have almost doubled the news staff during my time there, nearly 500 reporters, editors, producers and directors and a lot of what we do, even though it's relatively costly to do, I'll just say that, we do a lot of foreign reporting. We have 18 foreign bureaus at NPR. We now have more people abroad in separate bureaus, than my alma mater, the *Washington Post* which has started a little bit of a retreat. The *Boston Globe*, which used to have its own foreign reporting staff at the end of last year and the early part of this year eliminated them all. The *Baltimore Sun*, had five very fine foreign correspondents who were well known to that very small city, but a city that had a great literary tradition, a tradition in literary journalism, they're all gone. And so the effect is that people now are looking for something they can't find actually anywhere else—they don't have a choice, and so the responsibility has come to us in a different way.

As we go forward in this space, we are guided by what our mission was in the beginning. Our mission was not to be a transactional network that was using the airwaves essentially to do advertising and place programming in a way that would support advertising. In that regard, we are released from what the commercial nets and the cables face, we don't have a profit and loss statement every quarter, we don't have stock to trade on the markets, we don't have that pressure against us. We're much closer to what Adolph Fox saw when he bought the *New York Times*, the troubled penny sheet in New York City in 1896, a failing penny sheet, and "from that day to this day," he said, "every extra dollar we earn will go back into this news organization to make it better." At NPR we have the freedom to do that. Because of the public support and because we stay in touch with the listener, we have put a lot more resources into what we do.

And so, we're in Iraq. We have three or four correspondents and producers there who have been there since before the war began almost half a decade that we've been in this war, we just past the four year anniversary. I see at NPR the same thing that happened at the *Washington Post* during the Vietnam War. When I came to the *Post* in 1967, it was emerging as a much better newspaper than its reputation would have you believe and part of its drive forward was because of the Vietnam War requirements to cover that complex war. It created a cadre of reporters and editors who had a wide and deep understanding of both the American stakes abroad and also just the facts of doing reporting in a very remote and often a very dangerous place.

We have now about 20 people at NPR who cycle through the Baghdad bureau. We spend about a million dollars a year, which for us is a phenomenal expense as a nonprofit, to keep our people safe, and so far that's been the case, they have been safe. We know that Iraq is, for journalists, phenomenally dangerous. The figures at the end of 2006, according to the committee to protect journalists, show there were 88 journalists known to have been killed in Iraq. Not all were Westerners, most of them Iraqis. We have Iraqi translators and drivers who help us do our work and I know, we couldn't do our work without them. It's very dangerous for non-Iraqis to move anywhere in Baghdad now, more so than it was four years ago, three years ago, two years ago, and one year ago. We've moved our bureau and we're now in our fifth move to become more secure. We know that our Iraqi staff does not tell their families or anyone else who they work for because of the possibilities and the need to stay absolutely secure. But we're there and the networks are there and the rest of the American media are there, but the question is what will happen afterwards, once this conflict comes to an end as inevitably, in some fashion or another, it will. We will have built at NPR a new cadre of foreign correspondents in a way that few others can match because these people have been out there and doing things for us, going to places and reporting in ways they never could imagine four and a half or five years earlier. What is the

message that comes back from this kind of reportage and what then does it require of us to tell our media? I think that's the third part of this piece that I would like to touch on.

First of all, I want to touch on the inter-activity that's in front of all the central media, one-to-all media, like NPR. These are news organizations which are really in the paradigm of one of the oldest relationships in human history the relationship of the one-to-all or the one-to-many; the town crier to ten listeners, the printing press with moveable type to a hundred readers, the transmitter to a thousand listeners. Suddenly, because of the interactive reality of the digital age, that one-to-all paradigm, that centralized we're going to let you all know and it's all going to be a one-way street, has changed radically and continues to change even as we're here. Our NPR West manager at our substantial production facility a few miles from here was telling me today that we were on the air live with a show that originates from Los Angeles called Day to Day with Alex Chadwick and Madeline Brown and this terrible tragedy started to emerge at Virginia Tech. Within a few minutes the producers on this show started getting online to try to find, first of all, the college radio station, which they found very quickly, and started communicating by email with the kids on the station. From that, the students started vectoring our producers here to blogs that were going on between the students. As the whole thing erupted and knowledge of it erupted after the terrible tragedy actually occurred, and the aftermath was starting to rise like a tidal wave we got in the middle of it through the interactions of the Internet, through people who have blogs, and who have cell phones as the *New York Times* wrote last week the cell phone is the Swiss army knife of the digital age—it can do everything. With cell phone technology we were able to reach out in a democratic almost grassroots way, even as our correspondents from Washington were trying to get to the site. And so we had put information on the air live, or virtually live, almost on the spot from the scene. It became edited, fact-checked, name - checked with rosters that we could find on the web of who the students were and so forth. And so we were starting to use in a new way the interactions of the interactive age to help suffuse our understanding of this remote and terrible event.

In going forward, that capacity will grow to find those connections in interactive global interactions of the Internet. As we start to learn how to do this better we will be able to do it in new places and take it abroad and use it for our foreign reporting. There are several precursors of the interactive age and its power in international reality and here's one: remember in the mid-1990s there was post the International De-mining Treaty. That treaty was not from foreign office to foreign office. That treaty erupted on the Internet and was carried forward by activists in the northeast and elsewhere in Scandinavia, who pushed on the Internet to raise people's consciousness and awareness of the need for an international treaty to help get the mine fields demined in all the remote places in the world where they still exist—in Cambodia, in Vietnam, all across Afghanistan, in the Middle East and elsewhere, in parts of Africa because of the ethnic wars there. That treaty was created by the Internet and it went right around the old paradigm of foreign office to foreign office, and state department to foreign office and ministry of external affairs and so forth. That was a precursor of what was going to come next. At NPR we can see, going forward, that the interactivities are going to be enormously important for us as we reach out from the centralized, edited, fact-checked reporting, with this immense kind of machine of human beings who are devoted to this, to people who just see it on the spot and bring it to us in new ways. That's our challenge to do that well and to make sure we can do it in a way that holds the creditability and holds the integrity of the work that we've been doing up to now.

But in the interactive age as well I want to say that it's a two-way street, that while it's the media who are making the decisions about this investment in news those chiefs, or those program directors or those station managers or those editors and publishers are not hearing from us. If we

are simply silent and inert, if all we do is simply turn it off because it's shallow, and narrow, and coarse, and inflammatory, and ridiculing, and angry, and we don't want to hear it, if all we do is just turn it off that's step one, but they have to hear from us. They have to hear what you want and what you'll put up with, and I want to ask this tonight. You are all a part of the great World Affairs Council, founded in 1953 the year Stalin died, an event that touched our lives, touched lives in East Germany, touched lives in Poland and led to a whole variety of things that included Hungarian Revolution three years later. This organization has a great history of engagement. I would say to you all from us at NPR in Washington, D.C. and here at NPR West that we need to hear from you, but so do our other colleagues in the media.

There should be no immunity simply because you are part of a conglomerate which is owned offshore, or owned by an entertainment company, or owned by a manufacturing company. It doesn't have anything to do with the qualities and the consistencies of the things that have to happen in the news organization that it may own. I think that it's incumbent upon us that if we're to ensure for our kids and for ourselves that we are not to be ignorant if we want to be free that they need to hear from us as well. So, take out the Swiss army knife of the digital age, write the letter to the editor and then write that letter to the publisher, to the general manager and the program director. I think that will close the circle in a meaningful way and give us an avenue to step forth very clearly and concisely and with great trenchant meaning because in the end there will somebody out there listening. They will listen to you if you make yourself heard.

So in the end, the continuum of the decline of international reporting I think relates, to some extent, to the fact that between the end of the Cold War and September 11, 2001, we basically walked away from a lot of things, and we're still to some extent in a state of shock. We have an obligation that goes beyond our sitting here and I want to say this very clearly. All of us in this room, we all know something that only people we tell it to can learn from us, and that is that each one of us in the room has a separate history from our forbearers. Whether by force or by freedom we got here from some other part of the globe. America has been such an extraordinary example, a beacon in the darkness, a symbol of something free and something empowering and something that allows people to reach their fullest aspirations. As Jefferson first wrote it "life, liberty and the pursuit of property" and he kept looking at that and saying, "It's not enough, it has to be something more." Pursuit of something ineffable, the thing that drives all of us which we are free to go after. Pursuit of happiness, however we identify it or somewhere, somehow up our family tree some people came from some other place because of that. We owe them our empowerment here to tell our news media you have to tell us and do better and better because our fate as Americans is not only to be strong and independent as Americans but to give back to the world that gave us to America.

Thank you very much.

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