

**34th Annual  
Fourth Estate Award**

**Honoring  
Marvin Kalb**



**National Press Club  
Washington, D.C.  
November 9, 2006**

## **Program**

### **Presiding**

**Jonathan D. Salant**  
President, National Press Club

### **Toasters/Roasters**

**Daniel Schorr**  
Senior News Analyst, National Public Radio

**Barbara Cochran**  
President, Radio-Television News Directors Association

**Bernard Kalb**  
Former Television Correspondent

**Henry Kissinger**  
Former U.S. Secretary of State

**Ted Koppel**  
Managing Editor of the Discovery Channel  
and Senior Analyst for National Public Radio

### **Recipient of the 34th Fourth Estate Award**

**Marvin Kalb**  
Senior Fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press,  
Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University

### **About the Award**

The Fourth Estate Award is conferred on the person who, in the judgment of the National Press Club Board of Governors, has achieved distinction for a lifetime of contributions to American Journalism.

Acceptance Speech by Marvin Kalb  
Fourth Estate Award  
National Press Club, Washington, DC  
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A few weeks ago, the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard celebrated its 20th birthday. As founding Director, I could not help but be as proud as a peacock. From all over the world--Japan, India, Germany, Italy, Ireland, England, Canada; from all over the US, former fellows and faculty, all dressed in the warm colors of nostalgia, returned to Cambridge. They found the weather uncharacteristically bright and clear—the kind New Englanders describe as a “spaakler.” They reminisced about jobs and families, research and books. A few could not resist a walk through sunny Harvard Yard. They knew that, even in their absence, the seminars, one after another, would proceed, each one devoted to different aspects of the central theme of the day, namely “The Future of Journalism.”

It was the central theme, in part because everyone wondered whether there was a future in journalism, and if there was, what would it be? Bill Keller, the editor of the *New York Times*, was not there to offer his vision, but Arianna Huffington, the socialite-turned-editor of a new, engaging and expanding website, called The Huffington Post, was there, representing the “web-world” of the rapidly changing landscape of American journalism. I think she would probably be the first to admit that she is not a journalist by background or profession; but she is already a star in the new media constellation, and, as Arthur Miller once said of a salesman, “attention must be paid.”

In seminar after seminar, attention was paid. The Internet was seen, unquestionably, as the rising force in American journalism. It defined the future. Everything else—network news, newspapers, magazines—was considered the past. To survive, journalism would have to bend to its requirements, and these were not yet fully articulated or understood. The big question was, could it? Could it, without breaking?

Scholars had their answers, journalists theirs. Almost everyone, it seemed, was in a state of fluttery despair, as though journalism had never faced a challenge such as this one before. And maybe it hasn't. Reference was made to collapsing professional ethics and performance at networks and newspapers; even more alarming, to financial challenges coming directly from Wall Street having little to do with the practice of journalism, such as “profit margins,”

“corporate mission statements” and “quarterly budget revisions”—concepts relatively new to most editors.

One insight offered by John Carroll, once the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* and the Baltimore Sun, was that most newspapers currently operate on a 20% profit margin and pump the profit into an expansion of their websites rather than into their daily journalism. The upshot is that newspaper quality has suffered—it’s become thinner, less newsy. Carroll argued that newspapers ought to operate on a still healthy 10% profit margin, and use the remaining 10 % to strengthen both the newspaper and the website.

Don’t hold your breath, he seemed to be warning; the demands of Wall Street would almost certainly trump the needs of daily journalism.

No one at the seminars had to be reminded that newspapers all over the country were slashing editorial staffs to meet high profit expectations at variance with the sometimes costly pursuit of responsible journalism.

A recent study of newspaper circulation for six months ending September 30, 2006 showed an 8% drop in circulation for the *Los Angeles Times*, a 3.3% drop for the *Washington Post* and a 3.5% drop for the *New York Times*. As a consequence, the owners of the *Los Angeles Times* demanded further staff cuts, the editor wouldn’t go any further, and he was fired.

As these symbols of an earlier era in American journalism shivered in the cold of financial pressures, Google giggled in the warmth of a 92% profit increase.

In the world of network news, the story was the same. Ratings for the evening newscasts continued to slip and slide, as a new generation of anchors replaced Dan, Tom and Peter—one of them, heavens!, a woman.

Inevitably, the question was heard: can the evening news survive? Or, more generally, can the news business itself survive in a world now increasingly dominated by the Internet, especially when the Internet amplifies the noise of 24/7 cable news, talk radio and the many blogs with a strong political agenda?

It’s clear the mainstream media, what on many websites is often referred to as MSM, as if the media were some sort of disease, has been in trouble before.

Has anyone seen the movie *Good Night and Good Luck*? You’ll recall, it begins and ends with Edward R. Murrow’s 1958 keynote address to the RTNDA—the Radio and

Television News Directors Association. Murrow was chastising the industry for failing to use “this weapon of television” in the battle against “ignorance, intolerance and indifference.” He then uttered these words, echoed in a thousand classrooms ever since: “This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box.”

Thirty-five years later, Dan Rather told the same group, “We’ve all gone Hollywood . . . because we were afraid not to.” Fear in the news room has always been one of Rather’s central concerns. He said (I believe, with a heavy heart): “the post-Murrow generation of owners and managers aren’t venal—they’re afraid. They’ve got education and taste and good sense, they care about their country, but you’d never know it from the things that fear makes them do—from the things that fear makes them make us do.” Rather was describing his own capitulation to frightened executives. Ironically, some of these same frightened executives forced him to quit CBS earlier this year.

Five years later, in 1998, the respected editor of the *Oregonian* newspaper, Sandra Mims Rowe, expressed the same theme at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Listen to her words. “This is a grim time for newspapers,” she said. A time of “frighteningly low [reader] respect.” Credibility?—“we have none.” Trust?—None. She urged the editors to resist the pressures of “dumbed-down TV news,” of the “runaway Internet,” of “the trivial, the perverse, the bizarre.” “We can and must stop,” she cried. “It is a time for inspired and courageous leadership.”

From Murrow to Rather to Rowe, can anyone honestly say that things have improved? That as we scan the horizon of the MSM, of the Internet, of the blogs, of the websites, of the entire communication industry, we see a new generation of “inspired and courageous leadership,” ready to tackle the challenges of reporting on this crazy, turbulent world?

I don’t see it. Maybe, because I don’t know enough about the Internet. What I do know about the Internet, I value, but only up to a point. I have become a fan of email. I wrote my last two books on a computer, not on my old 1931 Royal typewriter, which I’d used up to that point. I regularly check the Drudge Report and other websites for gossip and information about the media, politics—and more. The Google Book Search has opened the

possibility of making every book in every language available to every person who has access to a computer. A fantastic prospect, though under litigation!

I know serious people who actually trumpet the Internet as God's gift to democracy, a magnificent way of blowing elitism to the winds and leveling the journalistic and political playing fields, allowing a blogger in Milwaukee or a Marine in Falluja to express his views about the war in Iraq much the same as Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* or Bill O'Reilly on Fox—everyone using the Internet to communicate with everyone else—it's a modern tower of Babel. But, as Elie Wiesel once said, is this communication that leads to information, and information that leads to knowledge, and knowledge to wisdom—an ascending ladder of self-awareness and sensitivity that makes this a better world?

I must admit this awesome technology worries me deeply. For a moment, think globally: In Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Internet is a valuable tool for everyone, but it is also an inexpensive weapon for al-Qaeda, carrying its hateful propaganda, perhaps even tactical instructions, to every spot on Earth. The capacity of terrorists to function in this new environment has been vastly enhanced.

During the summertime war in Lebanon, we learned a good deal about how the modern media can be used. An open society runs the risk of being stripped bare by the new technology, while a closed society has a much better chance of controlling the media—and therefore the image and the message that it wishes to convey to the outside world.

Israel, for example, is a wide-open democracy. It allowed foreign journalists, including al-Jazeera journalists, to cover its side of the battlefield "live." Anchors from everywhere interviewed Israeli soldiers on their way to battle, and Israeli generals, some critical of their government's military strategy—all "live" for anyone to see. Hezbollah, on the other hand, a closed "state within a state," allowed no such coverage—throughout the war, there was never a single report on a Hezbollah fighter or stronghold; all we saw were old women, young children, tattered dolls and bombed-out homes and buildings, presented as proof of Israel's "disproportionate" response to Hezbollah's precipitating attack.

Open Israel was sharply criticized, closed Hezbollah praised, often by Western journalists afraid of being frozen out of the Hezbollah side of the story. I have long ago given up on the capacity or willingness of most Arab reporters to tell the truth about their governments. So far as I know, only CNN's Anderson Cooper had the courage to report on Hezbollah's

tightly controlled and successful media strategy, which was, after all, a key element in the war.

A picture may on occasion be worth one thousand words, but it may not be worth two cents, to mix a metaphor, unless it is backed up by experience, knowledge, sound judgment, legwork and a determined pursuit of truth and fairness—in other words, MSM kind of journalism.

What can be done to arrest the slow erosion of journalistic quality in a world so dominated by the Internet, where it has been said everyone is a journalist and no one an editor? As Thomas Wolfe wrote, there is no going home again. The old, pre-Internet world of journalism will not return, and maybe it shouldn't; but the new world of journalism cannot and should not be accepted as the working model without a fight for better standards, higher ethics, more civic-minded management, more patience. This is a fight worth fighting.

As a charter member of the “nattering nabobs of negativism,” I remember when the fight began. Vietnam provided the backdrop—the war seemed endless, casualties were high, the public was losing heart. All presidents hate criticism, but there is little doubt Lyndon Johnson's attitude towards the media was different from Richard Nixon's. On one occasion, an angry Johnson actually called me after a broadcast, denouncing my report as inaccurate--and worse, that it could lead to the death of many Americans in Vietnam. I was left trembling, literally, doubting my sources, wondering if I had done the right thing; but that was it. No threats, no actions against me or CBS followed. In fact, Johnson set me up for an exclusive the following week. This was the norm between reporter and official.

Nixon was different. He really despised reporters. In November 1968, he had his Vice-President, Spiro Agnew, lash out at the networks in three blistering speeches, accusing “elitist” reporters and anchors of helping the enemy, undermining our troops, weakening the country in the midst of war. He didn't say the reporters were un-American, but he left that implication. Nixon wanted a fight. He, Agnew and the others dug into their conservative constituent base and whipped up a hurricane of anti-media suspicion and doubt. Were it not for the media's negative coverage, they seemed to be saying, the US would be winning the war in Vietnam, not, as ultimately happened, losing it. Nixon's “silent majority” actually came to believe that the media lost the Vietnam War.

At roughly the same time, interestingly, my CBS offices were broken into, my tax returns audited, my phone tapped, my name added to an “enemies list,” where I joined a distinguished group of American writers, scholars, politicians and journalists, including my colleague Dan Schorr. Agnew’s strategy was to drive a wedge between the press and the public, to turn widespread unhappiness about Vietnam into a weapon against the media. Nixon wanted to frighten us, to intimidate us-- to use another term, he wanted us to “back off” and stop criticizing the administration. For the first time in my career, I was seen as playing a role in a political war, a role I did not seek. And it has only become worse.

Over the next twenty to thirty years—with the rise of talk radio, essentially conservative in outlook (think of Rush Limbaugh and all his satellites); with the birth of Fox radio and television ten years ago (think of Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity and the others); and with the emergence of the explosive power of the Internet (think about the Drudge Report), the media has been transformed. If it was once a vehicle for conveying news and information, it has now become a messy mix of opinion, mischief-making commentary, and only occasionally news. And if there are political wars in this deeply divided country, the media is now definitely a player, more powerful, more political, than ever before.

Add another set of extremely important ingredients to this messy mix—9/11, terrorism, government secrecy, nonstop war against a deadly insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan and a remarkable ineptitude in our governance. It has been argued that 9/11 changed everything. It has certainly accelerated disturbing trends in journalism.

A few minutes ago, I asked, what can be done to arrest this slow erosion of journalistic standards? Forgive the soapbox, but I do have a few ideas. I have no illusion, by the way, that any will be enacted.

First, the simplest of requests: please, let us stop using the words, “I think.” These two words have infested radio and cable news with opinionated, often ill-informed commentary. Instead, tell us what you know, what you have seen, what you have experienced, what you are sure is dependable, accurate. The legendary NBC producer, Reuven Frank, once told reporter Ron Nessen, “Nobody cares what you think.”

Second, newspaper reporters ought to stick to newspaper reporting. Stop accepting invitations to appear on talk shows. Let the talk shows do their thing, which rarely resembles news in any case.



Same with the evening news shows. They ought to stick to what they do best—hard news. If they need commentary, label it as such, and whenever possible, they should use their own reporters. If they feel their own reporters are not good enough, they should get better ones. Drop the habit of featuring former generals and admirals—they are not journalists.

Finally, drop the pursuit of celebrity status. Your principal job is to inform, not to entertain.

I am arguing, clearly, for a purer form of journalism at a time when it runs the risk of becoming very thin gruel indeed, when everyone from Larry King and Arianna Huffington to Ted Koppel, Dan Schorr, Bernie Kalb and Barbara Cochran all represent the media. All of them. While it is indisputable that Koppel, Schorr, Kalb and Cochran are journalists, representing sadly only a separate and shrinking segment of the media, King and Huffington are not journalists, though, as they used to say, they play that role on television. In other words, there is a difference between a Koppel and a King, and this difference must be accentuated, not fuzzed over. We are not PR people—we don't sell toothpaste. We are not hucksters. We are not businessmen. We are journalists.

To restore that word to whatever luster it once had, we have an urgent need for new leadership, new educational training and new infusions of capital. Vartan Gregorian, President of the Carnegie Corporation, shared a promising idea with us at the Shorenstein Center birthday party. He thought that a number of foundations, including his own, ought to get together, pool their resources and buy one newspaper, one TV station, one radio station, hire the best reporters, and then build strong journalistic institutions, free of the sort of financial pressures now crushing the industry.

Though it is easy to be discouraged about the state of American journalism at this time, an unafraid, vibrant journalism has never been more important to this country and to the world. The US is again at war, deeply enmeshed in a misadventure it does not understand and cannot manage. What institution is there to question government policy and behavior?

The institution is the Fourth Estate, the name of this prize and the essential guarantor of our national freedom. Even when annoying, even when on occasion irresponsible, mean and obnoxious, it is still the only institution able, in Professor Richard Neustadt's phrase, "to speak truth to power," to lift the veil of secrecy, to inform the public of official malfeasance.

The White House may complain that the media, in publishing official secrets, is only helping the enemy. That, if true, would be most unfortunate, but as Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* wrote last summer, “the only thing worse than a press that is ‘out of control’ is one that is under control.”

With all its faults, the Fourth Estate remains a shimmering necessity for us all.

As the man who hired me used to say, “good night and good luck.”