

Bingeing, bulimic journalism

American journalism is in trouble. All that prurient reporting is not finding favour with the American public. In fact, it's creating a distinct backlash against the Fourth Estate, says Prof Betty Medsger.

Welcome to the New American Journalism at the dawn of the new millennium. It is a frenetic, turbo-charged journalism that has given new meaning to the term "depth journalism".

This breathless journalism moves stories faster than a speeding bullet and saturates the world with its words as quickly as one can spell-check, and, too often, more quickly than one can accuracy-check.

Polls show the public is angry at the press coverage of Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton and supports the President. After a month of daily stories about his sex life, the public gave him his highest approval rating, 65%, ever.

This reaction must be disappointing to journalists and politicians who, even on the first day the accusations of an illicit affair were reported, speculated that impeachment was likely. American journalism has been a virtual whirlwind since the story broke in late January. It was reported first by the Washington Post, the same news organisation that brought us the Watergate reporting that shamed a President to resign more than 20 years ago.

When the Post broke the first Watergate stories, there was great scepticism among journalists, even at the Post, about the credibility of the early stories. The reaction was very cautious, a "let's not rush to judgement" attitude. Furthermore, through the two years that Bernstein and Woodward carefully built the massive Watergate epic, researched fact block

upon carefully researched fact block, with long periods of time between some stories because of the time-consuming, painstaking research required, few other journalists wanted to pursue the story. Evidence then showed that the democratic processes at the highest level of government were being criminally hijacked, but most Washington journalists were content to sit on the sidelines, many of them speculating that these two young guys might fall on their faces. The Washington journalism herd would not become engaged in full-force coverage until the accusations moved into the courts.

What a difference 20 years and access to cyberspace have made.

Now there seems to be little reluctance among Washington journalists about reporting the Monica and Bill story – quickly dubbed "Fornigate" by some talk show hosts. It seemed as though every news organisation not only wanted to cover the story, but each wanted to get its own juicy tidbit – immediately.

Most of them easily out tabloided the tabloids. A study by the Committee of Concerned Journalists of the first six days of coverage of the Bill and Monica story revealed that 30% of the reporting had no sources, only 26% was based on named sources, 21% was based on anonymous sources. Reporters also reported their own assumptions as well as the assumptions of other journalists as news,

Continued overleaf



Scoopmanship:

The rush to get the story
and fret over the accuracy later.

Rich Mkhondo reports from Washington.

For decades Americans have viewed journalists as protectors of their country's liberty, seekers of truth and justice, heroes in the truest sense. Now the media is the well-deserved object of public outrage.

A national survey conducted last December for the Centre for Media and Public Affairs, a non-profit research organisation, said 52% of Americans believe the news media abuse the First Amendment, which guarantees freedom of the press. Substantial numbers in the survey also found journalists arrogant and cynical. Seventy-five per cent of the public says the media make America's social problems worse.

American journalists are themselves painting a dismal picture of the modern journalistic landscape. Their profession is in the sewer, the standards of American journalism have not only slipped, they've disappeared over the years into a kind of muck. Indeed, there is widespread belief in the US that news organisations have slipped into the sleaze, exaggerating, race-baiting and even manufacturing news.

Journalists are so concerned, that reporters and editors are being called to nationwide regional conferences and forums sponsored by the Committee of Concerned Journalists, a soul-searching quest founded by Bill Kovach, curator of the Nieman programme at Harvard University. Recent allegations of President Bill Clinton's marital infidelity have only intensified journalists' self-examination.

For me the height of media arrogance came when journalists began speculating when President Clinton could be impeached and the likely composition of Vice President Al Gore's cabinet. Worse was when the Dallas Morning News printed a story alleging that a secret service agent witnessed President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky in a "compromising situation". The story appeared on the

newspaper's web site, and within hours it was all over the electronic media. I was appalled to see this story appear as the networks' "top story" followed by the caveat: "None of this information could be substantiated".

One could ask: So why was the story run? It's hearsay, gossip, innuendo. Whatever happened to checking and double-checking of sources? Whatever happened to the difference between "news" and "editorial" – between fact and supposition?

Eventually, to the embarrassment of many, the story was withdrawn a few hours later and the television networks had to retract. But the story had been told. To make matters worse, the paper reprinted the story two days later, saying its unnamed sources were right after all.

Then the Wall Street Journal, the country's biggest financial daily, also embarrassingly had to withdraw a story it reported on its website announcing that a White House steward had told a federal grand jury he had seen the president and Lewinsky alone in a study next to the Oval Office.

The situation in American journalism is being worsened by "scoopmanship" in the rush to get the story first – and fret over its accuracy or fairness later.

The problem is made worse by increasingly feverish competition between news organisations, the increasing popularity of Internet-based news organisations, television and cable networks, the explosion of new media and the growing sophistication of media manipulators with their carefully planted leaks.

However, at the end of the day, we in the media are no better than the politicians or criminals we scrutinise if we do not look at our own profession with the same fervour as we examine them. We need to reinstate empirical journal-

Continued overleaf

Rich Mkhondo covers the US for Independent Newspapers. He is the author of Reporting South Africa, which chronicles South Africa's transition to democracy. Mkhondo's second book will be published later this year.

revealing a level of self-confidence and/or narcissism that, if continued, would be a dangerous trend in coverage.

At times the reporting on Bill and Monica has resembled a combination of soap opera and soft porn movie more than news, sort of a joint production of Oliver Stone and Larry Flynt. Instead of unfolding and eventually building a strong scaffold of new facts and context, this story has been a series of exploding firecrackers – a little sensation popping off here, then there, then everywhere.

Taken as a whole, such coverage creates what Wired Magazine media critic Jon Katz calls a “technotragedy”. Writing a few weeks before the Bill and Monica story crashed into everyone’s life, Katz wrote that journalists feel compelled, in this New American Journalism, to place top value on the new super speeds their work can be transmitted, rather than on the overall quality and veracity of what they transmit. In the process, they sometimes wittingly, and sometimes unwittingly, submerge the most important values of journalism, including the search for the truth.

The Monica and Bill story is not the first binge story, but it is the first such story to be based on accusations of possible corruption at the highest levels of national government. Other binge coverage preceded Monica and Bill – the trials of OJ, the life and death of Princess Diana and the trial of nanny Louise Woodward. So strong is the binge pattern by now that journalists might be considered to be either victims or carriers of a rampant new syndrome, journalism bulimia.

Each one of the binge stories mentioned above qualifies for Katz’ “technotragedy” label. Such stories, he writes, begin with a dramatic event, and each has vivid images associated with it. “It helps if murder, mystery, or conspiracy are involved. When the staggering mass of old and new media technologies – print, radio, TV, video, cable, talk radio, satellites, the Net, and the Web – kicks in, these stories quickly become the information world’s equivalent of an F-5 tornado, raging out of even the most intrepid spinmeister’s control.”

Katz continues: “Broadcast instantly and globally, (these) stories ... cause different information cultures – mainstream and tabloid journalism, print and electronic, interactive and passive – to fuse and focus an unprecedented amount of attention on a single story, continuously, for days and weeks on end.”

Presented as “global sporting events” rather than as carefully researched news stories, the technotragedy story “mushrooms, sucking up everything around it and taking on a life and power of its own. Journalism, the institution charged with offering us a clear and truthful perspective, now morphs into a new kind of electronic mob, transmitting distortions instead of correcting them, pursuing revelations over truth, pathos over reason.”

Katz offers important advice: “We have to grasp the ironic reality that, in an era when stories come to us faster than ever, the truth, if it comes at all, is apt to arrive slowly.” Because slowness has become unacceptable, truth is becoming roadkill on the information highway in the New American Journalism.

Our First Amendment guarantees that journalists can be the public’s watchdog, a role we’ve long proudly claimed. Truth be told, during most of our history, journalists have acted more like lapdogs, obediently going along with what spinmeisters handed us, not asking the penetrating questions, not looking out for the public’s interest.

We awoke slowly from a deep sleep during the Vietnam War and through the Watergate years and became alert watchdogs. The public came to trust us. Now, thanks to our long-time propensity for ignoring the fact that we, not technological forces, control the processes of journalism, we have confused the values of sensationalism (fast and dirty) and the values of good reporting (accuracy, fairness, thoroughness, truth).

Consequently, we – watchdogs and lapdogs – are in the doghouse. To get out of the doghouse, we must recognise that we ourselves – not technology –

made us do it.

Technology itself has no values. If journalists embrace as their most important driving force technology’s power and speed, then they, like technology, will have no values. The public will trust us again if we make it clear that, whatever the speed with which we transmit our stories, whatever flames of competitive instinct burn within us, accuracy, fairness, and a desire to search for the truth about matters important to the public interest, are the values that drive us, that shape our work and that we cherish.

Betty Medsger is former chair of the Department of Journalism at San Francisco State University and a former Washington Post reporter. Last year she visited South Africa to evaluate South African journalism education. She is the writer of a national study of journalism education in the United States, Winds of Change: Challenges Confronting Journalism Education.

Scoopmanship

Continued from page 23

ism and the search for the best obtainable version of the truth. Many of my colleagues in the US get depressed when they think about the state of journalism in their country. I’m heartened by all this discussion. It’s like digging for information for a good story. You have to ask the hard questions.

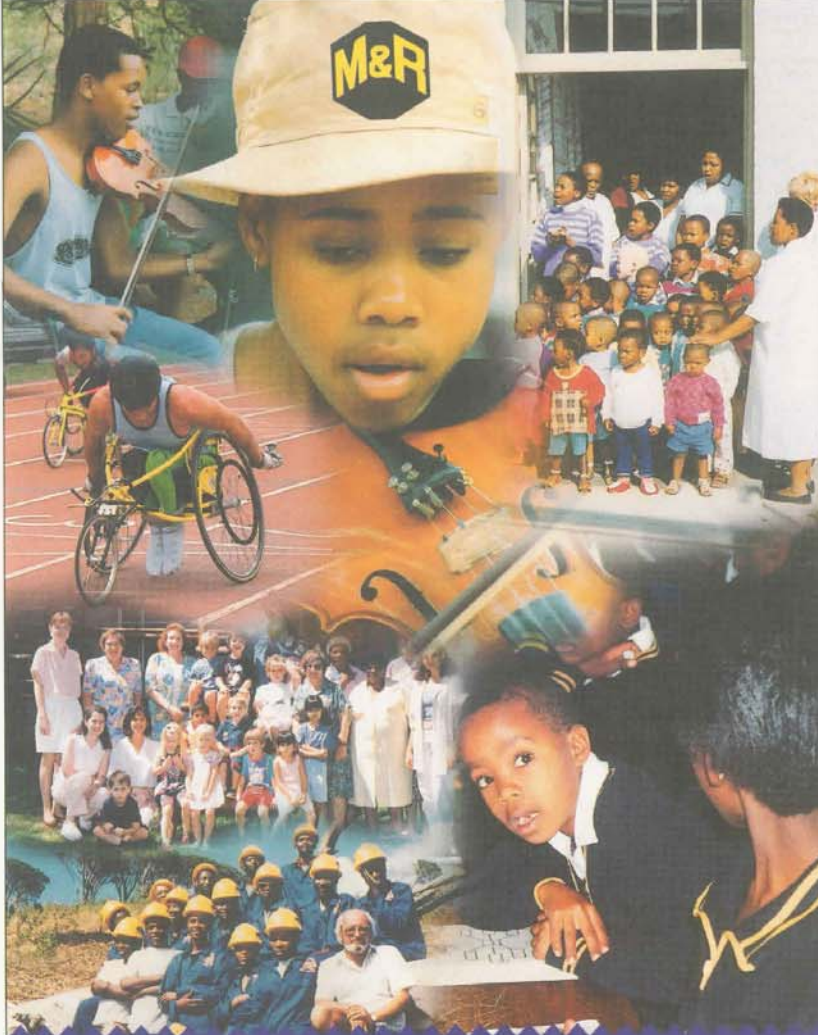
As journalists in the US, South Africa, Britain or anywhere else, we will always re-evaluate and re-examine ourselves and promise to do better next time until the next crisis emerges. We are like generals who embark on each new war using techniques we should have used in the last one.

Sometimes journalism is a messy profession. Whoever said the first casualty of war is the truth, might say the same thing about any huge breaking story, like the death of Princess Diana or the alleged sexual escapades of the president of the world’s remaining superpower.

It is difficult to come up with set rules or ethical standards that apply to every emerging situation, since fresh, increasingly juicy, exotic, sensational and unexpected situations keep on emerging. That’s one funny and exciting thing about news. It’s always, well, new.



A study by the Committee of Concerned Journalists of the first six days of coverage of the Bill and Monica story showed that 30% of the reporting had no sources, 26% was based on named sources, 21% was based on anonymous sources.



REACHING OUT TO OUR COMMUNITY

M&R MURRAY & ROBERTS
PO Box 1000 • Bedfordview • 2008 • South Africa

Tel: (011) 455-1410
Fax: (011) 455-2222