JOURNALISM & DEMOCRACY

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING A 'PUBLIC NUISANCE'

by BILL MOYERS

Hi. My name is Bill, and I'm a recovering Unimpeachable Source. I understand "Unimpeachable Source" is now an oxymoron in Washington, as in "McCain Republican" or "Democratic Party." But once upon a time in a far away place—Washington in the 1960s—I was one. Deep Backgrounders and Unattributable Tips were my drugs of choice. Just go to Austin and listen to me on those tapes LBJ secretly recorded. That's the sound of a young man getting high... without inhaling. I swore off thirty-four years ago last month, and I'm here to tell you, it hasn't been easy to stay clean. I can't even watch *The West Wing* without breaking into a sweat. A C-SPAN briefing by Ari Fleischer pushes me right to the edge. But I know one shot—just one—and I could wind up like my friend David Gergen, in and out of revolving doors and needing to go on *The NewsHour* for a fix between Presidents.

But I'm not here to talk about my time in the White House. I haven't talked much about it at all, though I do plan to write about it someday soon. During the past three and a half decades, I have learned that the job of trying to tell the truth about people whose job it is to hide the truth is almost as complicated and difficult as trying to hide it in the first place. Unless you're willing to fight and refight the same battles until you go blue in the face, to drive the people you work with nuts going over every last detail to make certain you've got it right, and then to take hit after unfair hit accusing you of having a "bias," or these days even a point of view, there's no use even in trying. You have to love it, and I do.

I always have. Journalism is what I wanted to do since I was a kid. Fifty years ago, on my 16th birthday, I went to work at the *Marshall News Messenger*. The daily newspaper in a small Texas town seemed like the best place in the world to be a cub reporter. It was small enough to navigate but big enough to keep me busy, happy and learning something new every day. I was lucky. Some of the old-timers were out sick or on vacation and I got assigned to cover the Housewives' Rebellion. Fifteen women in Marshall refused to pay the new Social Security withholding tax for their domestic workers. The rebels argued that Social Security was unconstitutional, that imposing it was taxation without representation, and that—here's my favorite part—"requiring us to collect [the tax] is no different from requiri[ng] us to collect the garbage." They hi[red th]emselves a lawyer—Martin Dies, the ex-Congressman best known (or worst know[n]) for his work as head of the House Committee on Un-Americ[an] Activities in the 1930s and 1940s. Eventually the wom[en] wound up paying the tax—while holding their noses. The st[o]ries I wrote for the *News Messenger* were picked up and mov[ed] on the Associated Press wire. And I was hooked.

Two years later, as a sophomore in college, I decided I want[ed] to become a political journalist and figured experience in Was[h]ington would show me the ropes. I wrote a man I had never me[t], a United States senator named Lyndon Johnson, and asked hi[m] for a summer job. Lucky again, I got it. And at summer's e[nd] LBJ and Lady Bird offered me a job on their television stati[on] in Austin for $100 a week. Looking back on all that followed—seminary, the Peace Corps, the White House, *Newsday*, PB[S], CBS and PBS again—I often think of what Joseph Lelyveld, t[he] executive editor of the *New York Times*, told some aspirin[g] young journalists. "You can never know how a life in journa[l]ism will turn out," he said.

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It took me awhile after the White House to learn that what['s] important in journalism is not how close you are to power b[ut] how close you are to reality. Journalism took me there: [to] famine in Africa, war in Central America, into the comple[x] world of inner-city families in Newark and to working-cla[ss] families in Milwaukee struggling to survive the good times. M

life in journalism has been a continuing course in adult education. From colleagues—from producers like Sherry Jones—I keep learning about journalism as storytelling. Sherry and I have been collaborating off and on for a quarter of a century, from the time we did the very first documentary ever about political action committees. I can still see the final scene in that film—yard after yard of computer printout listing campaign contributions unfurled like toilet paper stretching all the way across the Capitol grounds.

That one infuriated just about everyone, including friends of public television. PBS took the heat and didn't melt. When Sherry and I reported the truth behind the news of the Iran/*contra* scandal for a *Frontline* documentary called "High Crimes and Misdemeanors," the right-wing Taliban in town went running to their ayatollahs in Congress, who decried the fact that public television was committing—horrors—journalism. The Clinton White House didn't like it a bit, either, when Sherry and I reported on Washington's Other Scandal, about the Democrats' unbridled and illegal fundraising of 1996.

If PBS didn't flinch, neither did my corporate underwriter for ten years now, Mutual of America Life Insurance Company. Before Mutual of America I had lost at least three corporate underwriters, who were happy as long as we didn't make anyone else unhappy. Losing your underwriting will keep the yellow light of caution flickering in a journalist's unconscious. I found myself—and I could kick myself for this—not even proposing controversial subjects to potential underwriters because I had told myself, convinced myself: "Nah, not a chance!" Then Mutual of America came along and the yellow light flickers no more. This confluence of good fortune and good colleagues has made it possible for us to do programs that the networks dare not contemplate.

Commercial television has changed since the days when I was hired as chief correspondent for CBS Reports, the documentary unit. A big part of the problem is ratings. It's not easy, as John Dewey said, to interest the public in the public interest. In fact, I'd say that apart from all the technology, the biggest change in my thirty years in broadcasting has been the shift of content from news about government to consumer-driven information and celebrity features. The Project for Excellence in Journalism conducted a study of the front pages of the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, the nightly news programs of ABC, CBS and NBC, and *Time* and *Newsweek*. They found that from 1977 to 1997 the number of stories about government dropped from one in three to one in five, while the number of stories about celebrities rose from one in every fifty stories to one in every fourteen.

Does it matter? Well, as we learned in the 1960s but seem to have forgotten, government is about who wins and who loses in the vast bazaar of democracy. Government can send us to war, pick our pockets, slap us in jail, run a highway through our garden, look the other way as polluters do their dirty work, take care of the people who are already well cared for at the expense of those who can't afford lawyers, lobbyists or time to be vigilant. It matters who's pulling the strings. It also matters who defines the news and decides what to cover. It matters whether we're over at the Puffy Combs trial, checking out what Jennifer Lopez was wearing the night she ditched him, or whether we're on the Hill, seeing who's writing the new bankruptcy law, or overturning workplace safety rules, or buying back standards for allowable levels of arsenic in our drinking water.

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I need to declare a bias here. It's true that I worked for two Democratic Presidents, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. But I did so more for reasons of opportunity than ideology. My worldview was really shaped by Theodore Roosevelt, who got it right about power in America. Roosevelt thought the central fact of his era was that economic power had become so centralized and dominant it could chew up democracy and spit it out. The power of corporations, he said, had to be balanced in the interest of the general public. Otherwise, America would undergo a class war, the rich would win it, and we wouldn't recognize our country anymore. Shades of déjà vu. Big money and big business, corporations and commerce, are again the undisputed overlords of politics and government. The White House, the Congress and, increasingly, the judiciary reflect their interests. We appear to have a government run by remote control from the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Petroleum Institute. To hell with everyone else.

What's the role of journalism in all this? The founders of our nation were pretty explicit on this point. The First Amendment is the first for a reason. It's needed to keep our leaders honest and to arm the powerless with the information they need to protect themselves against the tyranny of the powerful, whether that tyranny is political or commercial. At least that's my bias. A college student once asked the journalist Richard Reeves to define "real news." He answered: "The news you and I need to keep our freedoms." Senator John McCain echoed this in an interview I did with him a couple of years ago for a documentary called "Free Speech for Sale." It was about the Telecommunications Act of 1996, when some of America's most powerful corporations were picking the taxpayers' pocket of $70 billion. That's the estimated value of the digital spectrum that Congress was giving away to the big media giants.

Senator McCain said on the Senate floor during the debate, referring to the major media, "You will not see this story on any television or hear it on any radio broadcast because it directly affects them." And, in our interview, he added, "The average American does not know what digital spectrum is. They just don't know. But here in Washington their assets that they own were being given away, and the coverage was minuscule." Sure

enough, the Telecommunications Act was introduced around May of 1995 and was finally passed in early February of 1996. During those nine months, the three major network news shows ...ed a sum total of only nineteen minutes on the legislation, and ...one of the nineteen minutes included a single mention of debate over whether the broadcasters should pay for use of the digital spectrum.

The Founders didn't count on the rise of mega-media. They didn't count on huge private corporations that would own not only the means of journalism but also vast swaths of the territory that journalism should be covering. According to a recent study done by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, more than a quarter of journalists polled said they had avoided pursuing some newsworthy stories that might conflict with the financial interests of their news organizations or advertisers. And many thought that complexity or lack of audience appeal causes newsworthy stories not to be pursued in the first place.

I don't mean to suggest there was a Golden Age of journalism. I told you earlier about covering the Housewives' Rebellion in Marshall, Texas, fifty years ago. What I didn't tell you is that it was the white housewives who made news with their boycotts of Social Security, not the domestic workers themselves. They were black; I wasn't sent to interview them, and it didn't occur to me that I should have. Marshall was 50 percent black, 50 percent white, and the official view of reality was that only white people made news. I could kick myself for the half-blindness that has afflicted me through the years—from ... times at the White House when I admonished journalists for ...ng beyond the official view of reality in Vietnam to the times I have let the flickering yellow light turn red in my own mind on worthy journalistic projects.

I'm sure that growing up a Southerner and serving in the White House turned me into a fanatic—at least into a public nuisance—about what journalism should be doing in our democracy. In the South the truth about slavery was driven from our pulpits, our newsrooms and our classrooms, and it took the Civil War to bring the truth home. Then the truth about Jim Crow was censored, too, and it took another hundred years to produce the justice that should have followed Appomattox. In the White House we circled the wagons, grew intolerant of news that didn't comfort us and, if we could have, we would have declared illegal the sting of the bee. So I sympathize with my friends in commercial broadcasting who don't cover the ocean they're swimming in. But I don't envy them. Having all those resources—without the freedom to use them to do the kinds of stories that are begging to be done—seems to me more a curse than a blessing. It reminds me of Bruce Springsteen's great line, "It's like eating caviar and dirt."

But I am not here to hold myself up as some sort of beacon. I've made my own compromises and benefited from the special circumstances of my own good luck. But the fact that I have ...n so lucky shows that it can be done. All that is required is ... journalists to act like journalists, and their sponsors—public or private—to back them up when the going gets a little rough. Because when you are dealing with powerful interests, be they in government or private industry, and bringing to light what has been hidden, the going does—inevitably—get a little rough.

Let me give you a couple of examples of what I mean—why the battle is never-ending: Some years ago my colleague Marty Koughan was looking into the subject of pesticides and food when he learned about a National Academy of Sciences study in progress on the effects of pesticide residuals on children. With David Fanning of *Frontline* as an ally, we set about a documentary. Four to six weeks before we were finished the industry somehow purloined a copy of our rough script—we still aren't certain how—and mounted a sophisticated and expensive campaign to discredit the documentary before it aired. They flooded television reviewers and the editorial pages of newspapers with propaganda. A *Washington Post* columnist took a dig at the broadcast on the morning of the day it aired—without even having seen it—and later admitted to me that the dig had been supplied to him by a top lobbyist in town. Some station managers were so unnerved that they protested the documentary with letters that had been prepared by industry. Several station managers later apologized to me for having been suckered.

Here's what most perplexed us: Eight days before the broadcast, the American Cancer Society—a fine organization that in no way figured in our story—sent to its 3,000 local chapters a "critique" of the unfinished documentary claiming, wrongly, that it exaggerated the dangers of pesticides in food. We were puzzled: Why was the American Cancer Society taking the unusual step of criticizing a documentary that it hadn't seen, that hadn't aired and that didn't claim what the society alleged? An enterprising reporter in town named Sheila Kaplan later looked into this question for *Legal Times*, which headlined her story: "Porter/Novelli Plays All Sides." It turns out that the Porter/Novelli public relations firm, which has worked for several chemical companies, also did pro bono work for the American Cancer Society. Kaplan found that the firm was able to cash in some of the goodwill from that pro bono work to persuade the compliant communications staff at the society to distribute some harsh talking points about the documentary that had been supplied by, but not attributed to, Porter/Novelli.

Others used the society's good name to discredit the documentary, including the right-wing polemicist Reed Irvine. His screed against what he called "Junk Science on PBS" called on Congress to pull the plug on public broadcasting. PBS stood firm. The report aired, the journalism held up (in contrast to the disinformation about it) and the National Academy of Sciences was liberated to release the study that the industry had tried to cripple.

But there's always the next round. PBS broadcast our documentary on "Trade Secrets." It's a two-hour investigative special based on the chemical industry's own archives, on documents that make clear, in the industry's own words, what the industry didn't tell us about toxic chemicals, why they didn't tell us and why we still don't know what we have the right to know. These internal industry documents are a fact. They exist. They are not a matter of opinion or point of view.

They state what the industry knew, when they knew it and what they decided to do.

The public policy implications of our broadcast are profound. We live today under a regulatory system designed by the industry itself. The truth is, if the public, media, independent scientists and government regulators had known what the industry knew about the health risks of its products—when the industry knew it—America's laws and regulations governing chemical manufacturing would be far more protective of human health than they are today. But the industry didn't want us to know. That's the message of the documents. That's the story.

The spokesman for the American Chemistry Council assured me that contrary to rumors, the chemical industry was not pressuring stations to reject the broadcast. I believed him; the controversy would only have increased the audience. But I wasn't sure for a while. The first person to contact us from the industry was a public relations firm here in Washington noted for hiring private detectives and former CIA, FBI and drug enforcement officers to do investigations for corporations. One of the founders of the company is on record as saying that sometimes corporations need to resort to unconventional resources, and some of those resources "include using deceit." No wonder Sherry and I kept looking over our shoulders. To complicate things, the single biggest recipient of campaign contributions from the chemical industry over the past twenty years in the House has been the very member of Congress whose committee has responsibility for public broadcasting's appropriations. Now you know why we don't take public funds for reports like this!

For all the pressures, America, nonetheless, is a utopia for journalists. In many parts of the world assassins have learned that they can kill reporters with impunity; journalists are hunted down and murdered because of their reporting. Thirty-four in Colombia alone over the past decade. And here? Well, Don Hewitt of *60 Minutes* said to me recently that "the 1990s were a terrible time for journalism in this country but a wonderful time for journalists; we're living like [GE CEO] Jack Welch." Perhaps that's why we aren't asking tough questions of Jack Welch.

I don't want to claim too much for our craft, but I don't want to claim too little, either. The late Martha Gellhorn spent half a century observing war and politicians and journalists, too. By the end she had lost her faith that journalism could, by itself, change the world. But she had found a different sort of comfort. For journalists, she said, "victory and defeat are both passing moments. There is no end; there are only means. Journalism is a means, and I now think that the act of keeping the record straight is valuable in itself. Serious, careful, honest journalism is essential, not because it is a guiding light but because it is a form of honorable behavior, involving the reporter and the reader." And, one hopes, the viewer, too.

Editors' Postscript: This article is adapted from Moyers's speech to the National Press Club on March 22, hosted by PBS to observe his thirtieth year as a broadcast journalist. The chemical industry's trade association did attempt to discredit the March 26 documentary, "Trade Secrets" (see "The Times *v. Moyers," April 16), accusing Moyers and Jones of "journalistic malpractice" for inviting industry participation only during the last half-hour of the broadcast. Moyers replied that investigative journalism is not a collaboration between the journalist and the subject.*

Bill Moyers is executive editor of Public Affairs Television, the independent production company he founded in 1986.

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