

Press Relations

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Part 2

Critics of the press media have likened the newspaper to a mirror reflecting society's conflicts. The newspaper reflects the misunderstanding of unpopular causes, the conflict of old and new values, and the use of ideology selfish economic gain. Yet the press in this country not only mirrors these things, but perpetuates them. The news media, through distortions and misrepresentations, contributes to the nation's social and political unrest.

When Vice-President Agnew attacked the press media as being biased and one-sided, and criticized news gathering agencies for their lack of representation of what he felt was the truth, his words caused a furor in the news industry. When the criticism was coupled with subpoenas from the Justice Department for reporter's confidential notes (See this column, July 17, 1970), politicians and liberal news media officials started to talk of government censorship.

A close look at the news media reveals, however, that newspapers and news magazines have been employing a form of self-censorship that is as detrimental to the working of a free press as any government form of censorship.

This self-censorship is one of distortion and omission which news agencies have been employing as a matter of policy for some time. In many cases, it is a tacit and subtle censorship which arises not from any press rule, but from the press' own view of its role in the reporting of the news.

All too often, the press is willing to go along with the government line, or channel the news so as not to offend their tenuous relations with government officials. Rather than investigate the background of a news story, the press media is content to present superficial facts.

Last October, Washington Post Pentagon reporter George Wilson filed a story regarding charges made in a Baltimore court by two Army intelligence officers. They claimed that a top-secret CIA and Army program, Operation Phoenix, was using torture and assassination techniques in its training

When the Post checked out the story, the Pentagon denied the facts and the paper killed the article rather than investigate the Pentagon's story. Later, the story proved true and was covered by the Associated Press. Yet the fact remains that the Post saw fit to follow the government line and kill Wilson's story.

When Seymour Hersh wrote his now-famous My Lai massacre story, the press as a whole ignored coverage until the Dispatch News Service, a non-establishment press syndicate, broke the story. The Song My massacre story was ignored until it was given large coverage in the London Times and had already become a scandal in Europe.

During the Kennedy years, close ties between the eastern establishment press and the White House resulted in a downplay of the Bay of Pigs invasion story. Last year, according to the Village Voice, newspaper editors "decided to ignore the story of Kim Agnew's involvement in a pot-smoking incident at the National Cathedral School, for which several of her schoolmates were suspended." At the time, the underground press carried rumors to that effect, but the establishment press, receiving no official word from the White House, never bothered to investigate the matter.

Earlier this year, the news media played up the bomb deaths of Ralph Featherstone and Robert Payne in Bel Air, Maryland. This was at the time of Stokely Carmichael's trial. Newsweek (which advertises "We separate fact from opinion") was content to carry a lengthy police version of the in-

cident, but only lightly covered the version given by the black community.

Like any business, the news media must cater to its market to survive. Yet the press meets the demand for news not by enlightening their readers, but by pampering them with stereotyped and parochial views. Rather than increase the awareness of their readers, the press uses subtle distortions and omissions to maintain a stance of non-controversy. Social change is discouraged by either the suppression or distortion of unpopular ideas.

According to the Village Voice, which regularly runs reviews of the press: "The editorial pages of the major dailies, which could do so much to legitimize new programs and ideas---and to delegitimize other ideas and personalities---instead tend to restrict the public imagination. Editorial writers never discuss issues like war crime trials, the appeal of the Black Panthers to ghetto teenagers, or the possibility that the NLF should win the war, because in the world where they all speak to each other these are not legitimate issues to think about. Some perspectives (both left and right) gain legitimacy as they bubble up through the radical press and new political parties, but who can say how many important insights never are considered, or how much of society is destroyed while the establishment press waits for positions to gain their own legitimacy. (Next week: How Newsweek and the Los Angeles Times distort the news).