

PUBLISHER'S NOTES

President and press

Jimmy Carter delayed longer than most presidents in blaming the news media for his problems. Two-and-a-half years after taking office, he complained that press and broadcasters had "grossly distorted" and "exaggerated" the implications of his shake-up of his Cabinet and staff.

As usual, journalism isn't blameless. It's time, however, for Carter to learn that when a president acts without explanation, leaving an information void, reporters and his own official family will move in to fill the vacuum with the best deductions they can make. It was his own team which supplied the "exaggeration," for example, of Hamilton Jordan's powers under his awesome new title of chief of staff.

(Incidentally, Jordan doesn't strengthen his shaky reputation by saying "the media is..." and "the media has..." The effects is bad.)

The Mirage non-award

After reflection, this column must dissent respectfully from the Pulitzer Prize board, also headquartered at Columbia, in the Mirage case. This, of course, is the case in which the *Chicago Sun-Times* financed two reporters in opening a bar. They soon were solicited by numerous city inspectors and tax agents for bribes. They paid, kept law enforcement authorities informed, and then did an exposé of the whole shabby mess (see p. 51).

The Pulitzer board, after long discussion, decided against honoring this extraordinary feat (and other nominated stories involving reporters "misrepresenting" themselves). The reasoning of the board majority, according to abundant leaks, was that the *Sun-Times* report involved deception bordering on entrapment. To his credit, we think, Clayton Kirkpatrick, editor of the rival *Chicago Tribune*, was one who voted against the majority.

This writer must question the wisdom of the majority. The central issue is: how else could such corruption be exposed? If the reporters had simply quizzed bar owners, none would have provided documented evidence on the record. If one had, he'd soon have been out of business.

Moreover, there are ample defensible precedents for *judicious* use of the technique. Courageous cops stemmed the wave of taxicab hold-ups in New York by posing as cab drivers. They have caught habitual muggers of the elderly by posing as oldsters. And across the country newspapers and broadcast stations have exposed cheating repair shops by bringing in cars or TV sets rigged in some simple way requiring only minor repairs.

Believing the Mirage case to be well within the bounds of responsible, defensible conduct, this column offers its own imaginary award to the *Chicago Sun-Times* for service to its community.

VDT question

While dissenting, this writer also registers reservations about part of one of our own *Review* articles. In the July/August issue, an able young French sociologist, Dominique Wolton, wrote provocatively about the long-term social implications of new communications technology. Speaking of computer-typesetting and video display terminals, he chided American journalists for not recognizing that they were downgrading themselves and could impair their creative role by taking over production functions.

Most news professionals who have used the VDTs seem to us to save much of their own time by easily keyboarding revisions, inserts, and paragraph-switching without having to retype or cut and paste a whole blooming page. Copy editors soon find it a joy to edit by keyboard. And all rejoice that their copy generally comes out as it left the

newsroom, with typographic errors greatly reduced.

To say this downgrades the journalist seems a little like saying direct-dialing of long-distance calls de-means and impedes us all.

Our own copybook

As a succinct summary of the qualities needed by a journalist, the list given to the entering class of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism by the new dean, Osborn Elliott, seems worth repeating (along with his apologies "if some sound as if they were lifted from the Boy Scout Manual"):

- An open mind, a willingness to learn, and the knowledge that things are not always what they seem to be.
- A belief in the dignity of man, and a compassion for those upon whom the world too often heaps indignities.
- A high regard for the riches of the English language, and an eagerness to learn its proper use.
- An appreciation for the conflicts and complexities of modern life, and an understanding that they often cannot be reconciled.
- An awareness that even the best-motivated persons make mistakes, and a willingness—too seldom found among journalists—to admit your own.
- A capacity for hard work and long, irregular hours.
- An abiding concern for justice.
- A dedication to the truth.
- A sense of humor.

To these we would add: "Skepticism without cynicism."

CJR honor

The *Review* was pleased to receive in August an award from the Association for Education in Journalism. It was the first annual award "for professional excellence" voted by the association's Qualitative Studies Division. The presentation cited "dedication since 1961 to press responsibility through critical surveillance of professional performance."

E.W.B.