

THE RISE OF THE SENSOID

by Stephan A. Schwartz

By the 19th Century, there were hundreds of papers in the country, but until the Civil War, there was no such thing as a press corps. The coverage of the 18th and early 19th Centuries was almost entirely lacking in the kind of multi-sourced interpretive writing which defines modern media. Reporters, known then as correspondents, were eponymously named because their copy was either a reprint of a government release, the publication of a statute, or something like a letter to a friend. Editors made sure the copy of their often ill-educated amanuenses was formed into passable English while, as publishers, they sold the ads announcing ship arrivals, and cows for sale, that made up much of their paper's news.

The Civil War changed all that. In the confusion of the war only rarely did one single informant know the full story of what was occurring, and this forced both the "correspondents" and their editors, for the first time, to work as teams to piece together a "story." That, combined with technical advances in printing presses and the advent of commercial telegraphy, created the first national press corps.

The Civil War also created "beats", reporters with special expertise, as well as the concentrated media wolf pack. These were first seen in Washington and, then, on occasion, in the field with the armies. Propinquity and shared purpose, as

well as commiseration amongst themselves over their frequent social rejection, led to camaraderie, and a drive for respectability, which birthed the idea that reporting was a profession. Long suppressed resentment, and the sense of empowerment individuals always feel when acting as a group, also led almost immediately to expressions of the media's shadow side: manipulation by the press.

The first victim was General George Meade, the Union hero of Gettysburg. As historian Shelby Foote tells the story: after the battle, at the height of his fame, Meade, who most agreed was an arrogant man, publicly snubbed and humiliated a reporter he did not like. The reporter's colleagues, feeling the slight to be unfair, consciously decided to pay Meade back in his own coin: for the remainder of the war, they only mentioned him in connection with loss, misjudgment, or defeat. As a result Meade has slipped from public awareness except as a name on an army base in Maryland while Lee, who had lost to Meade at Gettysburg, and yet who understood the power of imagery and gesture even as he led the Union's enemy, became an icon of the noble military spirit for the press, both North and South, from that day to this.

By the time the war was over, both the political class and the media had learned from their interactions. By 1880, when James Garfield was elected President, the tension over access and aggression between the media and their targets/feeders was well developed. Reporters, formerly impoverished scriveners considered members of the demi-mode, on a plane with gamblers, prostitutes, and loan sharks had, by then, attained a measure of acceptance, if not respectability; this

grew, generation by generation, as the advancement of technology and population growth increased their audience and, because of that, their power.

Half a century later the transformation was complete. By the end of World War II journalists such as Walter Lippman, Stewart Alsop, and James Reston represented the culmination of the process of assimilation; they had become gentlemen. Edward R. Murrow's *sang froid* was both distinctly American and the equal of anything produced by the English aristocracy. Journalists were now celebrities in their own right, cozily intertwined with the power establishment they covered, in many ways the equals of their sources.

As David Shaw wrote in *The Los Angeles Times*, "Today, especially in the New York-Washington corridor where the most influential makers and shapers of public opinion live, top broadcast and print reporters and the public officials they cover often have the same Ivy League education, go to the same dinner parties, have summer homes in the same tony resorts and send their children to the same exclusive private schools." A growing number are also the children of politicians, and individuals on each side frequently change roles as reporters become government spokespersons, and press secretaries and Presidential advisors become reporters and television commentators. And all of this nurtured by a brew of money and celebrity.

A national senator or representative makes \$136,000. Such a salary would not buy an anchor on the local evening news in any of the top 50 television markets, and the reporters are often greater celebrities than the people they cover, by a

similar margin. By the time ABC's Sam Donaldson covered the Dukakis Presidential campaign in 1988 he sometimes drew larger crowds than the candidate.

But there is one big difference between journalists and the men and women upon whom they shine the light of the attention: Journalists get to have private lives, and their financial arrangements are largely unknown to the public.

Should reporters be subject to the same rules of financial and personal disclosure that govern the politicians they cover? Why not? Isn't it as important to know a reporter has a financial stake in something he or she covers as it is to know that a politician is invested in a company whose policies will be effected by how he votes? What is the effect on a reporter or commentator of having a spouse who works for the government, particularly if it involves an agency they report on or about which they comment? No lawyer operating in his or her professional capacity could endure such conflicts of interest, but they frequently happen in the media community. Yet there has been no national debate on any of these corrupting stresses.

Even worse, assimilation, like all Faustian bargains, has attacked journalists at their soul. Stewart Alsop, who was in on the "Ultra" secret -- the fact that the Allies could read German communications traffic throughout World War II -- kept the secret for decades after the war was over. In fact, the story was never broken by a journalist; it took an English spy -- turned writer -- to make "Ultra" public. During Roosevelt's administration, newly assigned photographers to the

White House beat found their cameras knocked to the ground if they photographed the President in his wheelchair; 30 years later, it was still part of journalistic ethics not to write stories about John Kennedy's affairs, although they were blatant and well-known.

But self-censorship was only the tip, not the bill. The real cost was the growing dependence on un-named sources. The judiciously placed leak -- with the active complicity of the reporters who got the story as their reward -- became one of the acknowledged ways one power center in the government spoke unofficially with another. By the 1960s, only a few journalists like the late I.F. Stone and Ralph Nader believed that privileged access corrupted the honesty of journalism, and that hard digging, and the compilation of a myriad of seemingly insignificant and unconnected facts into an explanation of the larger picture was the way to get a story.

Through all of these developments, however, down to the last 20 years, the basic idea that a story had to be based on facts, remained the media's bedrock value. Then, in the next stage of evolution, even that began to change as technology made the reach of media even more pervasive, and the news cycle shrank from months, to weeks, to days, to hours, until real-time alone would answer. It began with Watergate and Viet Nam, the national fascination and horror with each of these long running stories, and the ratings and circulation this fascination supported. In these epic sagas, as baroque and duplicitous as any Hindu legend, it was the reporter and the editor not the politician who had the real power. As electronic reportage replaced print journalism as the nation's principal source of

news, the new time constraints of a shrinking news cycle created sound bites even as the increased number of people seeking new information on the same hot story bred a new even more aggressive kind of reporting. But this time it was not the aggression of the outcast; it was the aggression of a bully with an addiction. Reporters became as dependent as heroin-users on leaked information.

Aggressive competition, particularly after CNN, reached such a level of intensity that by the 1980s it had become the cultural background against which all interactions between the press and public officials played out. Leaking, always an act of self-interest on the part of the leaker, came to profoundly bias almost all coverage, even as the illusion of dispassionate objectivity continued to be held aloft like a holy grail.

All of this created an irresistible pressure and, although it is hard to put a precise date on it -- the O.J. Simpson Trial is probably a good benchmark -- somewhere along this time line media's factual bedrock began to give way, pushed aside by the rise of the sensoid.

A sensoid is an attention grabbing unit, whether pictures, sounds or words, which need not be true, although it often is. A fact is a unit of emotionless information, a datum. Data drives science. It is the basis of sound business. Sensoids drive media. Accuracy is not the main point. *A sensoid is designed to produce an emotional reaction in the person who sees it or reads it, and it is that reaction that gives it its value.* Sensoids are the logical evolutionary next step of a free

media, operating in a intensely competitive free market -- the news product most chosen by the consuming public. Every editor of every publication, and every producer of every television news show, and every reporter writing, or standing in front of a camera today knows that, first and foremost, he or she must capture the attention of a consumer who is constantly being bombarded with sensoids, or lose out to the competition.

To be interviewed, written about, or covered by media today is to become a commodity in a multi-billion dollar business dealing in sensoids. As media companies have been absorbed by larger corporate entities, everything about the business has shifted to the bottom line. Media, particularly news media, in the present marketplace are essentially in a commodities competition, little different from cereal wars in their drive for market share -- whatever the pretension of their trappings. Sensoids have always been a part of the American media landscape, of course, the yellow press of a past age, and the grocery tabloids of this, are two points on this continuum. However, as the product of media shifted from facts leavened with a little opinion to sensoids, the power relationship within the media itself changed. When the *National Enquirer* broke stories that *The New York Times* felt compelled to follow-up on the watch changed. And when it did, reporters discovered, as did doctors joining HMOs, that they had lost real power in the transition.

Sensoids, even more than facts, alter everything they touch; always in the direction of sensation, not insight. What constitutes objectivity in media has always been culturally specific to a time and place and, today, the national

addiction to sensoids has created the modern context. Objectivity has come to mean not actual fairness -- although this may inadvertently result -- but the combative tension between disparate points-of-view. It requires that for every proponent there must be an opponent, and, increasingly, both champions are selected not for their intelligent discourse but for their ability to generate sensoids.

A new class of specialists has developed to meet this need: The Sensoid Samurai. Men and women -- this is a true equal opportunity career path -- whose interest in debate is not to find the common ground, or consensus, or the deeper insight, which is boring and devoid of the potential for sensoid production, but to fight as partisan media gladiators. It remains to be seen but these media samurai, like their warrior precursors, will probably have a limited professional life span. The positions they take create public images that quickly close around them, like scar tissue, hindering growth and the development of insight -- something that is only possible by backing and filling, compromising, and changing directions and opinions as experience teaches deeper insights. It is hard to produce sensoids in shades of gray, or sound bites in the rhetoric of compromise.

The news has become a form of athletics and, in this new world, television is the Sweet Science, and talk-radio the World Wrestling Federation. As with boxing and wrestling, there has to be both the illusion and the reality of injury; humiliation is the currency of these public debates.

To become a sensoid samurai, one must first have attained some measure of public prominence, because authority, or its illusion, is a key to making a sensoid believable. Substance is not essential; the appearance of authority is. Just being on enough “news talk” shows can confer the mantle and, once one has reached the plateau of acceptance, at least on some media outlets, a person is credentialed to comment on almost any subject. The principal weapon of the professional media warrior is the ability to form a sound-bite sized sensoid and then repeat it endlessly, with freshness and apparent sincerity, through each repetition. This new caste emerged during the O.J. Simpson Trial: because of their trial experience and the kind of quick verbal warfare demanded if one is to be successful, lawyers, particularly litigation attorneys, are disproportionately represented in these ranks.

Some media outlets like *The News Hour* on PBS, still committed to real substance, try to use only policy makers, actively serving, or with competence in the area being discussed, but most outlets have no such compunction. Thus, on networks that exist almost entirely on sensoids, such as MSNBC and CNBC, real estate lawyers, failed prosecutors, and criminal defense attorneys who have tried only a handful of cases regularly comment on Constitutional law, sociology, politics, and foreign policy, morals and family values. For former federal prosecutors, it has practically become a career step.

The sensoid wars have also dictated that reporters now come to every story with attitude. David Shaw, of *The Los Angeles Times*, in an insightful 1996 self-examination of media, recounts a story told to him by Senator Paul Simon. A

reporter, before he became a politician, Simon said that when he was a journalist “The great weakness of journalism was whiskey.” Simon described how his boss and others kept a fifth in a desk drawer, an image adapted and adored by the movies. Now, however, said the Illinois Democrat “the great weakness of journalism is cynicism.” Another former Senator, Alan K. Simpson, a Republican from Wyoming, agrees. He sees, “a total disregard and distrust by politicians of the media, and a total cynicism and distrust of politicians by the media.”

In the fall of 1995, when the media climate was less committed to sensoids than it is today, *ABC World News Tonight* anchor, Peter Jennings, told a convention of television and radio news directors, “The general tendency in the press to treat all public figures as suspect” was a significant threat to the stability of the Republic. Alan Murray early in 1996 echoed these sentiments and described one of the outcomes of this attitude. From his vantage point as Washington Bureau Chief of *The Wall Street Journal*, he wrote: “The writings of many political reporters today read like a perpetual sneer. Little wonder that truly thoughtful and conscientious politicians from both parties are throwing in the towel.” Senators Simon and Simpson , along with Senator Nunn of Georgia, and a lengthy list of other once prominent members of Congress probably would not give that as their main reason for leaving, but would certainly acknowledge it as a factor. Stories persist that General Colin Powell and former Governor Mario Cuomo, both considered corrosive media cynicism as a factor in their decisions not to seek the Presidency..

Reporters develop cynicism not because it makes for better stories, although the healthy side of this cynicism is probing skepticism, essential to good journalism, but because every reporter fears appearing to seem a gullible fool *in the eyes of colleagues*. This is what empowers the pack consensus, and the reporter who goes against it had better be proven right or face the withering scorn of fellow hunters in the pack. As the former ombudsman for *The Washington Post* Geneva Overholser, observed, "A reporter can soar professionally on a reputation for being tough, even ruthless," but their career can be destroyed if their colleagues come to view them as "too soft."

Her colleague at the *Post*, reporter Paul Taylor, put such sentiment into action. After a 26 year-long career, he felt he had no choice but to leave journalism because, as he put it, "I really do believe as a journalist we are not painting an accurate picture of who we are as a people and what our political institutions are like."

During President Kennedy's administration 75 per cent of Americans polled said they trusted their government to do the right thing most or all of the time. Today the figure hovers at 25 per cent. Part of it is obviously what a long list of public officials have been caught doing since Kennedy's time, but part of it is also the reorientation of media once the decision was made that sensoids sold better than facts, and that negative sensoids lent themselves far more easily to sound bites and debate than complex issues such as which corporations under which structure will control communications in the 21st century. These complex, subtle, and demanding issues are hard to reduce to sound bits and sensoids.

Sensoids have another negative function. They conveniently cloak issues of enormous importance. If an individual reporter chooses not to file a story because it is about a friend, or a cause to which he or she has a bias, theoretically another reporter will step in and make the needed revelation. However, as media mega-corporations accrete like growing crystals, subsuming everything from radio stations to theme parks into interlocking conglomerates, control of what not just America, but potentially the five and a half billion people of earth, will see and hear slides into the control of fewer and fewer corporations. And it is happening with essentially no public debate. In this unhealthy consolidation of power and loss of differential between entertainment and news, a new kind of self-imposed corporate censorship seems to be arising to complement, and add pressure to, the already existing self-censorship stresses faced by the individual journalist.

The problem of CBS covering the tobacco industry when Andrew Tisch, the son of CBS' chairman was the CEO of Lorillard, Inc. was a particularly egregious example of the troubling aspects of this new self-censorship issue. At least one CBS program, *60 Minutes*, reported difficulties. A dispute arose in early fall 1998 concerning the decision to kill a 20/20 segment that was critical of ABC's parent, Disney. Why the story got dropped was disputed, but *Washington Post* staff writer Howard Kurtz, a nationally known media observer, reported that credible people at the network felt corporate self-censorship was at least a partial reason. Is it any wonder that a 1997 Roper/Newseum survey discovered that 63 per cent of Americans believe the news is manipulated to favor special interests?

As for the accumulation of power into the hands of fewer and fewer corporations, media critic Ken Auletta noted: "When Disney and Westinghouse made the deals with ABC and CBS...the arguments were all about synergy and marketing, not about how to improve the news." What receives far less attention, yet may ultimately be more important, is that control of both news and entertainment is in the hands of not just fewer corporations, but of fewer people. The U.S. media and entertainment industries, which create the myths and news stories that mold the perceptions and attitudes of billions, are controlled by a tiny group of men and women whose backgrounds and attitudes are disturbingly similar. While the anarchic democracy of the Internet provides some counterbalance, a survey of 25 television producers revealed this unsettling consensus: As the century closes, probably no more than 65 decision-makers determine what is seen on American television, and in American films.

For most of American history, even when "news" was highly partisan and sometimes little more than polemics, the separation between news and entertainment was clearly understood. Now, just as the country and the world is experiencing the genuine globalization of news, instant event reporting, more and different media outlets, and a 24-hour cycle, the distinction between the two realms is disappearing, transmogrified into the dimension of the sensoid, where news -- of a type -- is the ultimate reality programming. Cheap to produce and utterly compelling.

The principal manifestation of this new world order is the international real-time sensoid opera. Precursors of this new media species can be seen in the Lindbergh kidnapping, the McCarthy Hearings, the early NASA flights, and the biggest one of all, the Viet Nam War. But they are only precursors, because they occurred at an earlier technological stage, before the 24 hour news cycle was technically feasible, and before commercial priorities made sensoids dominant. The first complete exemplar was the O.J. Simpson trial. It embodied the elements of a series like *Dallas*, with the gravitas of the evening news, and the spice of race, and that made it the most popular show in the world for weeks. Everybody made money with it, and it catapulted obscure individual careers onto the national stage and shaped entire networks. The sensoid samurai were annealed in the heat of its coverage, and it is a measure of how dependent the media became on the sensoid opera that, when the first O.J. trial was over, ratings and newspaper sales dropped precipitously. The Jon Benet Ramsey murder tided us over, but it was not until the Clinton-Starr-Lewinsky story broke, in January 1998, that the new media engines were able to get back up to speed. Scott Peterson, Kobe Bryant, and Martha have kept us going since then, getting far more coverage than any of the real issues that shape our lives, like global climate change, or the rise of fundamentalism as a political force in countries across the globe.

Part of what keeps the sensoid operas going is that, at their essence, they are perceived -- whether this is true or not -- as not having much immediate impact on the lives of average citizens, but are nonetheless real. Like the sacrificial king or virgin of the classical world, we make someone a celebrity while death waits

in the wings – which sometimes means ritualized state sponsored execution, and sometimes reputational demise.

This isn't like having your kid in a rotten school, or not having medical insurance, or being laid off at 50. Those things actually hurt. The opera, for this reason, can become an addiction. It is an essential part of a sensoid opera that it be a morality play all carried out on a plane removed from everyday life. Because of that distance, passionate feelings can be expressed, and the inherent media competitiveness can be continually sated. Although people regularly profess opinions to the contrary, the ratings compel recognition that a significant percentage of us, both in and out of media, clearly do not care that we have turned the first family into *The Truman Show*.

The sensoid opera may be entertaining for the public and profitable for the media, but there seems little doubt that the constant drum-beat of negativism and sensationalism these running stories generate is having a coarsening effect. For those in high office, or considering a run for such an office; thus, it is affecting American democracy itself. Many researchers feel this accounts for the consistently downward trend in voting. As the century ends, America has the lowest rate of voter participation of any industrialized country in the world, and survey after survey reveals an electorate infected by cynicism and a sense that their involvement makes no difference. Sadly, it is only when the opera leaves the plane of theater, and comes to earth, threatening our personal lives by disrupting, say the economy, that we wake up to what it really represents. In the Clinton-Lewinsky matter, for instance, both media and public placed the civility

and function of our system of governance second to the production of the sensoids the story promised, until what impeachment might do to the country really sank in. Only when individual citizens realized that the effects could have powerful implications for many aspects of their well-being, were the polls overwhelmingly clear that people wanted the opera to stop.

Iraq, which began with those wonderful light shows in which people were killed, but never seen, seemed a perfect sensoid war. High drama, high purpose, low risk, but unlike an impeachment it could not be controlled, as we have learned to our ongoing peril and dismay.

The one group who thrive in today's sensoid driven environment, are the leakers, the anonymous information dealers, who have grown more powerful, protected by their addicted clientele of reporters, editors, vice-presidents of news and entertainment, and so on up the ladder to the shareholder, who is also the consumer. Whether it is Chalabi stovepiping to the Vice President, or a figure in the shadows spreading the dirt on the Fox network, we are all complicit in the process and, as with any addiction distribution network anywhere, there is no shame. Through our purchase decisions, as consumers of news, we regularly support people who trash other people's lives with a complete lack of conscience, in order to get what they need to provide us with what we want. At the end of the century everyone in America is being forced to confront his or her own values, and it is proving to be a painful process. Most of us are in various stages of denial, or projected anger; whining and complaining about the media -- even as we watch or read it -- instead of confronting our own involvement in what we

almost universally acknowledge has become a degrading process. And, if present trends continue unabated, it is going to get worse. The next development in this new world of sensoid dominated media can already be seen in *The Drudge Report*: Gossip, the kind of stories once told by reporters to each other in saloons, launches on the Internet and become the next day's headline because the sensoid count is so high the story can not be ignored by even the most august and respectable journalistic institutions.

There are some promising things about this new media world, however. The constant polling that goes on, as a way to find out whether the population is listening, and what is catching their attention, has revealed that ordinary people are just as smart as Congress persons and commentators, and, being less invested in personal bias, are actually often capable of reaching clearer, fairer conclusions. Even as they deplore the operas, average citizens are becoming far more sophisticated in seeing through to the real essence of the issues -- something both media people and politicians seem incapable of doing, at least in their public utterances. It will be an ironic unintended consequence if the net result of sensoids and political soap operas is a populace seduced by sensation but educated into substance and participation in the process of governance.

In many aspects we have come a long way from the 18th Century printer/publisher pulling single sheet newspapers off his press. As Al Neuharth, chairman of The Freedom Forum and founder of *USA Today* noted, "...mainstream journalism as a profession has improved dramatically since I started out in the business 50 years ago. Many consumers of news don't realize

that, just as many journalists don't understand the higher standards to which we are being held." But in other, and more important ways, the advancements of technology have only proven what the Founder's believed in the first place: The collective consciousness and judgment of its citizens is democracy's greatest strength. In fact, it is democracy.