

CHAPTER 14

Reporters, Readers, and the Pursuit of Trust

HAROLD EVANS, the respected former editor of the *Sunday Times* and *The Times* of London and then president and publisher of Random House, once said: “Readers trust their bodies to their doctors, their children to their teachers, but they open their morning newspaper like a virgin entering the sergeant’s mess.”

Polls abound showing widespread distrust of the press. Overcoming that and earning reader trust is a never-ending battle. We took pride in a Harris Poll in August 1969 that found *The Wall Street Journal* was the most trusted newspaper in America. Even so, there always were readers, as well as people we had written about, who complained we had been inaccurate or unfair or biased in our reporting. Sometimes they were right. Other times, their complaints reflected their own prejudices and perspectives, and truth lay in the eye of the beholder.

We began the fight for reader trust by trying to hire, train, and retain reporters of skill and integrity, then having not one but several layers of editors scrutinize their work and that of fellow editors. Some of our reporters were hired regionally by local bureau chiefs, but most job candidates wound up being interviewed by me while I was managing editor. In addition to examining their résumés and clippings, I often asked new college graduates about their grades, thinking it might be one indicator of intelligence—realizing it was only one among many, and imperfect at that. I

also asked questions such as: Why do you want to work at the *Journal*? What would you like to be doing in five or ten years? Do you have any questions we can answer for you?

I was taking in the quality of their replies, probing for what that might reflect about the quality of their minds and also the extent to which they had done their homework. The latter, by indicating how much preinterview research they had done about the *Journal*, might shed light on their potential as good reporters.

After Al Hunt had become Washington Bureau chief in 1983 and a frequent panelist on CNN's *Capital Gang* and other TV shows, he recalled on several occasions the time I interviewed him in 1965, fresh out of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, for an entry-level reporting job on the New York staff. I had asked him about his college grades, he recalled, and with sinking heart he said he had received a C in economics. He felt that disclosure ended his chances for a job, and he was surprised when I hired him anyway. Al obviously had been impressive in other ways—and he continued later to impress generation after generation of government bigwigs as one of the most knowledgeable and perceptive reporters in Washington, a model also for generations of Washington reporters to aspire to emulate.

Among other impressive young interviewees was R. W. "Johnny" Apple, about to graduate from Princeton and destined years later to be the *New York Times*'s high-profile Vietnam correspondent, Washington Bureau chief, and finally roving reporter on global food, wine, and restaurant discoveries. I have the dubious distinction of having had to fire Johnny from the *Journal* staff—and certainly not because his talents and bright promise went unrecognized. He stood out as an exceptional reporter and writer from the start. Our New York reporters worked nine to five at the time, reflecting the workday of the businesses they covered and the 5:30 copy deadline for the first edition. The deadline was earlier than most papers' because of the need, at our regional printing plants, to accommodate postal-truck schedules for national distribution. Day after day Johnny's colleagues at neighboring desks had to cover for him until he finally drifted in around eleven, at which point he would regale all within ear-

shot with tales of his exploits the previous evening on the New York nightlife circuit and with the details of how he got laid the night before.

I had many heart-to-heart talks with him about how he was imposing on his colleagues, forcing them to take his phone calls and cover stories on his beat until he showed up, and how it was untenable for me to allow the precedent of chronic late arrival for one reporter, no matter how talented, while others on the staff chafed at not being accorded the same privileges. Johnny promised again and again to reform, but he never could, and I issued many more “final warnings” than I would have for anyone else who was less talented and less of an asset we truly wanted to keep. Finally, as Johnny prepared for navy service, I told him: “I’m going to suspend you, not fire you as I had threatened. You go into the navy. Maybe you’ll mature and develop more self-discipline there. When you finish your navy service, your job will be waiting for you if you want to return.” Two years later, his navy service completed, he did return, avowing he was a new man. But the story soon repeated itself, and after another round of “final warnings,” I let him go. He took a job at NBC News, then went to the *Times*—where I presumed their much later deadlines permitted a later start of the working day that meshed more felicitously with Johnny’s needs. (I heard in later years that Johnny’s version of these events differed from mine. The *Journal* newsroom reminded him of working in an insurance company office and he quit, he allegedly said. But my memory is crystal clear.)

Once, after I had become publisher, years after I had been managing editor, I was strolling through the newsroom and stopped to chat at the desk of Steve Swartz, then a young new reporter. I had not been the one who interviewed and hired him, but I asked him then that question about what he would like to be doing ten years from now. “Your job,” he replied without hesitation, looking me in the eye. I admired his guts, answering like that, and thought, “Good for you.” Steve later became editor and publisher of *Smart Money*, a magazine Dow Jones and the Hearst Corp. owned jointly. He subsequently rose to be Hearst’s chief operating officer, after supervising its newspapers.

We used a variety of techniques to train new reporters in the *Journal's* methods and standards. At the start, they often were paired, in a buddy system, with more experienced reporters, who were charged with teaching and counseling them. In March 1961 I wrote and distributed a "Guide to *The Wall Street Journal* for New Members of the News Staff." Besides giving background on the paper's history and philosophy, its ethical and accuracy standards, and the demographics of its readers, it most importantly contained instruction on the *Journal's* reporting and writing techniques from Lindley Clark, the page one editor, Lindley's predecessor Jack Bridge, national news editor Sam Lesch, and others.

In addition, the copydesk editors and the page-one desk editors were charged with trying to teach reporters how to improve their reporting and writing, in the course of correcting flaws in their copy. Most younger reporters were more receptive to this help than some of the old-timers, who tended occasionally to resent copy editors' changing their stories for reasons and in ways they didn't always agree were necessary. Hence the age-old reporters' insult: "Every copy editor should have a pimp as a brother—so he'd have somebody he could look up to."

Norman Isaacs, former editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, who became a good friend and was a credit to his profession, wrote a 1986 book, *Untended Gates*, about journalistic shortcomings. He opens the first chapter with the story of Jim Detjen, who had worked for a midstate New York newspaper, had had an environmental series of his considered as a finalist for a 1978 Pulitzer Prize, but had quit his reporting job at the paper at age twenty-nine to attend the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. "Every time there was a protest call [at the paper he had left]," Detjen was quoted as saying when asked why he had quit, "whoever was on the city desk would take it. The call might have something to do with a fouled-up obit, or a wrong date for a meeting, or a totally warped quote. The city editor or his assistant would cup a hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone, turn and shout so everybody could hear, 'I've got a crazy on the line.' No matter what the goof-up, the caller was always 'a crazy.'"

This was not our mind-set at the *Journal*. There was, and doubtless still is, a reflexive action by some newspaper editors, hopefully not many, to stand by a story almost automatically, even if a complaint might have merit, to protect and demonstrate loyalty and support for the reporting staff and, not incidentally, protect the editor's own relationship with his reporters. We were not always immune from this failing over the years. But we worked hard at avoiding reflexive defensiveness. We were committed to investigating every complaint seriously, and then to doing the right thing if we were found to be in the wrong.

Despite all the effort that went into training reporters and editors and into trying to maintain the highest standards, the daily flow of complaints and our follow-up investigation of them showed we sometimes slipped. If the truth be told, though, one would think we slipped much more frequently if one took at face value the sheer volume of complaints that poured into the office. Errors of fact, when investigation showed a complaint of inaccuracy was justified, were dealt with in a daily corrections column to set the record straight, and once in a while in a retraction story if the sin was of sufficient magnitude. Less clear-cut were some of the charges of unfairness, or even bias, that we examined. The complainant's sense of injury was rarely assuaged even when, after careful reexamination, we concluded the story in question had indeed been fair and accurate.

I recall the chairman of Southern Company, a large Atlanta-based electric-utility holding company, coming in to see me, incensed about something we had written about his company. His temper rising when I told him we had gone back over the story and double-checked it after learning of his displeasure, and we stood by the story, he hissed "You lack manhood" as I escorted him to the elevator. In another incident, Andrew Heiskell, then publisher of *Fortune*, phoned to tell me he was "outraged" by our story on *Fortune's* labor negotiations, which he felt echoed the union position. And Dick Fisher, a friend and neighbor from Brooklyn Heights, later to become chairman and CEO of Morgan Stanley, phoned and reached me while I was traveling to say

his boss, the Morgan Stanley CEO at that time, had asked him to let me know that a story of ours that day about a trading scandal at Morgan Stanley had carried a headline that he thought impugned the firm's integrity and reputation, and that they were enormously upset and resentful.

One of the most bitter, long-lasting fracas occurred years later, however, after I had left the newsroom and was publisher of the *Journal* and CEO of Dow Jones, its parent company. It involved Mobil, the global oil company, and what we perceived to be conflicts of interest there. The *Journal* published a front-page leader detailing how oil-shipping contracts had been awarded to a tanker company partly owned by the son of William P. Tavoulaareas, Mobil's president. Later, we ran another story about Mobil purchasing real estate in Chicago from a real estate company affiliated with the son of Rawleigh Warner, Mobil's chairman and chief executive. Mobil pulled all its advertising out of the *Journal*—it was substantial and lucrative—when we saw no reason to back down. It also embargoed any press releases that normally would have gone to our paper, right down to earnings and dividend reports, and forbade any Mobil officials from talking to *Journal* reporters. We stood our ground and they stood theirs, never resuming their advertising while I was there.

It so happened that Jim Riordan, vice chairman of Mobil, a friend, and at one time in his youth a pitcher for a Brooklyn Dodgers farm team, was a Dow Jones director at that time. I was sure he would feel obliged to resign from our board, because I imagined his Mobil colleagues questioning why he stayed on and perhaps questioning his loyalty as well. But to my surprise and delight, Jim remained on our board as the intercompany warfare dragged on. He and I avoided bringing up the controversy. But early one morning preceding a Dow Jones board meeting, it came up at a meeting of the board's Executive Committee. A front-page profile of Mobil President Tavoulaareas was in the *Journal* that morning. It recounted, among other things, that he was a diamond in the rough, a street-smart guy who had worked his way up from a tough Brooklyn neighborhood, and that he was prone to pepper his speech with salty language, including obscenities.

Bill Agee, chairman of appliance maker Bendix Corp. and a Dow Jones director at the time, called to Riordan across the table, as I looked on uncomfortably: “Jim, what did you think about the story on Tav in this morning’s *Journal*?” Riordan snapped back: “Any story that implies that foul language is used around Mobil is a f*cking outrage.”

Jim’s wit complemented a keen intelligence. He was as savvy a director as any on our board. And the reach of his retentive memory was nothing short of phenomenal.

Another battle that erupted, also long after I had left the newsroom and was publisher of the paper, similarly involved charges of bias and our alleged intransigence in refusing to acknowledge that. The government of Malaysia took umbrage at our Asian edition’s coverage of the resentment the country’s Muslim majority felt toward the Chinese minority’s strong economic influence and disparity of wealth, and the political jockeying related to that. Longtime Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohammed and his ministers charged repeatedly that, by reporting this, we were trying to foment racial unrest in their country. For weeks and months at a time, they would delay our papers at customs for several days, until the news in them was stale, sometimes releasing the paper only after censors had cut out what they regarded as offensive stories or editorials.

At one point, Maurice “Hank” Greenberg, chairman of the American Insurance Group (AIG), with operations and influence in countries throughout Asia and elsewhere, approached me and suggested he thought he could broker a settlement of this long-running confrontation. He suggested that he arrange a meeting between Mahathir and me in the prime minister’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel suite when Mahathir was in New York for a United Nations General Assembly meeting. I was not optimistic but agreed to the meeting, wanting to leave no stone unturned.

In Mahathir’s suite, Greenberg proposed, with the prime minister assenting, that we replace our correspondent in Malaysia’s capital, Kuala Lumpur, and that we then let bygones be bygones and start with a fresh slate. I said we could not do that. “You didn’t like the coverage of our last correspondent and you prob-

ably won't like the coverage of our next one," I told Mahathir as respectfully as I could, "since their job is to report on what is going on in your country, not ignore what is troublesome. And besides," I explained, "I could not live with the precedent of replacing a reporter on a beat whenever the leader of a company or a country became displeased with his coverage. I would soon be replacing our Houston Bureau chief every time an oil company was angered, and our Chicago Bureau chief every time a banker there was displeased by our coverage and wanted to see if it would get more sympathetic if we put a new reporter on the beat."

"I can't do business with this man," Mahathir said to Greenberg. He arose and walked out of the room and the meeting was over. Later, demagoguing the issue in a public speech to a rally of members of his Muslim majority base, he charged that those running the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, presumably meaning its editor and publisher but also including me, were "agents of the Mossad," the Israeli intelligence service.

I was confident we were on the side of right and truth in the Mobil and Malaysian disputes. I found more troubling, ironically, questions that arose in my mind but were never raised by readers about certain nuanced elements or implications within other stories, stories that won much public praise. One story was about an American company whose Latin American operations were accused of bribery and the exploitation of local workers. The CEO, a devout man who was schooled as a theologian, leaped to his death from his office high in a New York skyscraper. The clear implication was that inner conflict with his moral upbringing brought pangs of conscience and guilt, and this resulted in his taking his own life. I hoped the reporter and editors had checked whether he had any previous history of clinical depression. That could have led to suicidal thoughts, unconnected to his troubles at work, something that is common among depressives and even more so in those days when antidepressant medications were not in wide use.

Another story examined a company's labor practices, particularly its recent large-scale layoffs. A laid-off worker's suicide was

cited as evidence of the human toll. I wondered if anyone had looked into whether the number of suicides per thousand among the company's discharged personnel did or did not exceed the suicide rate in the general population.

If earning readers' trust was a difficult, never-ending goal, satisfying ourselves that we had done our very best to be fair and accurate was often more difficult and equally endless.