



THE MIND OF A JOURNALIST

HOW REPORTERS VIEW THEMSELVES,
THEIR WORLD, AND THEIR CRAFT

Jim Willis

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*To the publisher, editors, and staff of The Oklahoman, a vital part
of the Sooner State's history.*

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THEIR WORLD, AND THEIR CRAFT

Jim Willis

Azusa Pacific University

Epilogue by Marilyn Thomsen

La Sierra University



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Foreword

The Thinking Journalist

Contrary to what many critics of the news media believe, journalists do a lot of thinking about what they do, whether they do it right, how they might do it better the next time around, and what can and cannot be changed about the problems of the media organizations for which they work. In a nutshell, their responses to these and other questions form the focus of this book.

Many journalism books provide good instruction in the art and craft of reporting and writing news and feature stories. There are other books that plumb the ethical dilemmas in which journalists often find themselves. Even more books exist that analyze the role of the news media in our world and the impact of journalism on American society. There are also some fine biographies of individual, high-profile journalists, texts that trace their personal and professional histories. What *The Mind of a Journalist* does is to examine how a cross section of print, broadcast, and online journalists perceive themselves, their world, and their craft. And, in large measure, it lets thirteen of these talented journalists put these perceptions into their own words. The reflections and observations of this nucleus of journalists are joined in the text by many additional observations made by many other journalists over the years. So this text is a combination of both primary and secondary research.

Among the issues the journalists examine are the lure of journalism, the stance journalists take toward the world they are assigned to cover, the ethical challenges journalists face, how close to get to a story or how far to distance themselves from it, journalists and politics, and even journalists and religion. The last issue is interesting because, although I wanted to cover this topic for this book, I wasn't sure there would be enough interest among journalists in discussing it. I discovered just the opposite: that, although many mainstream media are reluctant to cover religion, journalists think about

matters of faith a lot. As a result, the chapter “The Journalist and Faith” became the longest chapter by far in this book.

The observations that the journalists make come from their many years of experience in the news business. Some of these comments are philosophical, but many are anecdotal. Although the remarks may occasionally present ideas often heard about journalism, they are not stereotypes. Veteran journalists know their field better than anyone else because they live and breathe it and often treat it as more of a mission than a job.

I chose a dozen current and former American journalists whom I knew, or knew of, to interview. I asked them about their thoughts regarding the status of journalism and the things about the business they like and dislike. A thirteenth journalist, whom I met later and who had been a key member of the Pulitzer Prize-winning team covering Hurricane Katrina for *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, was added in January of 2008. These are journalists I respect, and they have received the accolades of their peers in the news business. Each responded to a range of questions addressing issues such as their motivation to enter the profession; their stance in the debate about attached vs. detached reporting; their thoughts on journalists and politics, journalists and religion, and the ethical dilemmas in the business; their frustrations as well as gratifications; and so on. These journalists and their observations serve as the foundation for this book, and each of the journalists is profiled in Appendix 2. To their thoughts, I have added observations from other journalists gleaned from a variety of sources; all reflections are arranged thematically in chapters 1–8. In the afterword, I have added my own observations on some of these issues—observations accumulated from my own years as a journalist, which were capped by my experience of covering one of America’s great tragedies, the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

I am indebted to Dr. Marilyn Thomsen, whose work at the Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California, culminated in the interviews of several front-line journalists who covered the war in Iraq. Although these journalists are separate from the thirteen whose comments are spread through chapters 1–8, I chose to include Thomsen’s report on these interviews because it adds an important, contemporary element to how journalists approach their work and the effects that work has on them, both professionally and personally. The subject of how traumatic stories affect journalists who do the reporting is a growing issue, and no story is more traumatic than war.

The book winds up with two appendices, the first of which is a personal look by journalist Michael Perlstein at the coverage of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The second appendix is a series of personality profiles on the panel of thirteen journalists selected to form the backbone of this book.

I hope that, taken together, all these observations will provide current and future journalists with added insight into the various perspectives that

reporters and editors take into this very vital business of covering the day's news in this American democracy.

The thirteen journalists interviewed for this book represent large and small news operations in the print, broadcast, and online media worlds. The group is comprised of both male and female journalists. It includes journalists who have reported from around the world and some who are committed to community journalism. There are Pulitzer Prize winners in the group, managing editors, a foreign correspondent, television news anchors, beat reporters, a past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and a future president of the Associated Press Managing Editors organization. Some are still in the business, decades after beginning; some have left and moved on to other careers. It is interesting, however, that those who have left have moved on to universities, where they teach journalism. Such is my own case, and it speaks to the desire of these journalists to take time to reflect on journalism, discover ways it can be done better, and then pass that knowledge on to students who are majoring in the field.

In the order in which they were interviewed, here are the journalists who form the foundational panel for this study, the news organizations for which they work or worked, and what they do now if they have moved on:

Barry Bearak, Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign correspondent for *The New York Times* and a former national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*.

Jim Redmond, longtime news anchor and reporter for KMGH-TV in Denver and professor of journalism at the University of Memphis, where he chaired the Department of Journalism until the summer of 2008.

Gretchen Dworznik, former reporter for WNWO-TV in Toledo and now an assistant professor of communication arts at Ashland University.

Joe Hight, managing editor for features for *The Oklahoman* and former two-term president of the Dart Center for Trauma and Journalism.

Arlene Notoro Morgan, veteran reporter and assistant managing editor for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, who is now associate dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City.

Otis Sanford, managing editor of *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis and on the leadership team of the Associated Press Managing Editors group, over which he will preside in 2011. Sanford is also the first African American managing editor of *The Commercial Appeal*.

David Waters, producer of the On Faith Web site project of *The Washington Post* and its sister publication *Newsweek* and a veteran religion editor and award-winning religion writer for *The Commercial Appeal*.

Penny Owen, veteran police and feature reporter for *The Oklahoman*, who helped lead that newspaper's award-winning coverage of the bombing of the

Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995 and who stayed on that story for some six years afterwards. She was also an Associated Press reporter in Dallas.

Jim Robertson, managing editor of the *Columbia Daily Tribune* in Columbia, Missouri, long recognized as one of the best community dailies in America.

Peter Bhatia, executive editor of the Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper *The Oregonian*, in Portland. Bhatia is a former managing editor of the *Sacramento Bee* and a past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

Terry Mattingly, syndicated religion columnist for the Scripps Howard News Service, editor of the GetReligion.org Web site, and director of the Washington Journalism Center, a training program for college journalism majors sponsored by the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities.

Michael Walker, former reporter for both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, who now is author of the best-selling book *Laurel Canyon: The Inside History of Rock and Roll's Legendary Neighborhood*.

Michael Perlstein, veteran reporter for *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans who was instrumental in the Pulitzer Prize-winning team coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Perlstein is now visiting professor of journalism at Loyola University in New Orleans.

The observations of these gifted and dedicated journalists are found in two forms within the pages that follow. First, their insights are woven throughout each chapter as they address the focal points found in those chapters. Second, each of the thirteen journalists is profiled in Appendix 2 of the book. When their observations appear in the main chapters, they are not footnoted, although their comments are attributed to them. Their quoted insights all come from the series of interviews I conducted with them either in person, over the phone, or online in the summer of 2007. Michael Perlstein's comments were made in a January 2008 interview, and some of his observations are reproduced with permission from the alumni magazine of his alma mater, Reed College. The full text of the article "Covering Katrina: On Taking It Personally," which he wrote for that magazine in 2006, forms Appendix 1.

My heartfelt thanks go out to each of these journalists, not just for agreeing to contribute to this project but mostly for the talent, wisdom, and dedication they have brought to the profession of journalism over the decades in which they have produced some amazing pieces of American reporting. I would also like to thank the other journalists, from whose wisdom I have borrowed to round out this study of how reporters and editors view themselves, their world, and the craft of journalism. As always, I also want to thank my wonderful wife Anne for her constant love and support and my colleagues at Azusa Pacific University for letting their department chair divert his focus to his publishing ventures yet again.

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I

The Lure of Journalism

What motivates a young person to become a journalist? This is a very competitive profession that primarily takes college graduates who are highly literate and who have high levels of intellectual curiosity. Yet these young journalists received average starting salaries of only \$30,000 in 2006.¹ Why make the effort? Why would a college student, active in student life and in the plethora of organizations that come with it, turn to a profession that tends to isolate its members from socializing with others? Journalism does not rate that high in popularity among the general public, and many parents worry that their children will not be able to make much of a living if they become journalists. Additionally, the newspaper industry is facing serious threats to its survival with readers and advertisers turning to other media platforms such as television and the Internet. Finally, although the average daily newspaper in America is still highly profitable, much of that profit comes from cutbacks in departments seen as “non-revenue producing,” and several media companies perceive the newsroom as one of these departments. Therefore, even as the number of daily newspapers has shrunk from two or three in every major city to one in all but a few cities, the number of reporting and editing jobs on many newspapers has also decreased. The profession is now more competitive than ever. So we return to the question: What motivates a young person to become a journalist?

The Love of Reading and Writing

One of the most common traits found among aspiring journalists is that they simply love to read and they love to write. Part of this love springs from their

insatiable curiosity, but part of it is their love affair with the written word and their artistic desire to create something profound and beautiful. Here's what author Michael Walker, formerly of *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, says about this passion: "What got me interested in journalism was good writing," Walker explains.

My father used to read my brother and me James Thurber short stories as bedtime stories; plus both parents were avid readers of the *Chicago Daily News* in the 70s when it still had Mike Royko and others. Also I was deeply influenced by *Rolling Stone* and the writings of Joe Eszterhas, Hunter Thompson, and Timothy Crouse.

They were such good writers; they made me want to write and report as well as they did. So I took the shortest route I could think of, and, since I liked rock and played in a band, I started writing concert reviews for my high school paper. Stuff like Jethro Tull, Elton John, the Faces, etc. All the big shows that came through Chicago.²

Walker combined those passions of reading, writing, and music and wound up as an arts and entertainment writer for the *Los Angeles Times* and then as author of *Laurel Canyon: An Inside History of Rock and Roll's Legendary Neighborhood*.

Jim Robertson, managing editor of the *Columbia Daily Tribune*, found he could weld his love of writing to newspaper journalism.

"I got my first byline in our community weekly paper at about age 10," Robertson says. "It was an account of a 4-H camping trip, and I instinctively used storytelling technique. The positive feedback was a revelation. I led a team in high school that established a weekly community alternative newspaper. During that time in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the power of newspaper journalism took on a new tone for me as I read reports from Vietnam and Watergate—unprecedented war coverage."

What he discovered was there is a kind of unwritten contract existing between the journalist and the reader when it comes to newspaper journalism.

"I started to understand the intimate connection between readers and their newspapers," he explains, "and the fact that readers expect not only information but leadership. Tremendous potential to be a progressive force. The mix of ego and altruism hooked me early and sustained me through high school and college."

And one Illinois reporter said in response to a nationwide survey on reporter motivations:

Reporters most enjoy the creative process that goes into writing a good story, being able to choose the correct words, organization and mood without the interference of someone else.³

Journalists are, by nature, voracious readers. Walk into most journalists' homes or apartments and you will be greeted by full bookcases and other books scattered about, both nonfiction and fiction. Journalists love to devour information and get a lot of their story ideas and observational clues from other writers' works. They also pick up ideas on writing itself. Many journalists are born or cultivated editors who read not just for pleasure and information but also to see how the author writes. Is there anything about this style that I like or dislike? Can I incorporate it into my own writing style, or even change my style to read more like this? These are questions that haunt journalists as they read, and, consciously or subconsciously, they are believers in the saying that "to write well, you have to read a lot and write a lot." So journalism becomes a favored choice for a profession because reading and writing are what journalists do on a daily basis as they research and report their stories.

As for writing itself, journalists find a lot of creative possibilities existing within the framework of journalistic style because that framework evolves to make room for the best writers and reporters. The traditional "inverted pyramid" format has given way to more narrative storytelling that is nearly identical in form to the narrative style that fiction writers use. But even within the inverted pyramid (summary lead, amplification paragraph, followed by details in descending order of importance), many journalists find creative territory and work with a wide range of creative analogies, similes, and individual words and combinations of them to create beautifully descriptive passages. Ever since Truman Capote shook the journalistic world with his new style of "nonfiction novel" when he wrote *In Cold Blood* nearly five decades ago, other journalists have continued to open what had been a formulaic journalistic structure, to adapt this structure to the styles of many different writers.

An Intense Curiosity

Closely associated with their passion for reading is the insatiable curiosity that journalists have about what is going on. Journalists must determine whether the surface action is as it seems or whether there is something else going on beneath the surface and why. A nationwide survey of reporters revealed the following areas related to curiosity as prime positives of the profession for these responders: learning new things every day, meeting newsmakers, covering a variety of stories, and having a status as an insider.⁴ Journalists, probably since childhood, have wanted to know how things work and have been unsatisfied with pat answers. Frequently, journalists

will say that one of the best things about their jobs is getting to learn new things every day. If a newspaper is the classroom of its readers, then the world is a classroom for journalists—or at least that portion of the world the journalist covers.

One television journalist turned college professor, Gretchen Dworznik, described her motivation this way: “Even as a child I’d always loved the news, and I got most of it from television news shows. Also, Mom was a magazine freak, and I’d read her *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and even cut out articles on major stories like the Challenger disaster and Pan Am 103. Not out of morbidity, but just out of interest.” Her story is not unlike that of many other current and former journalists. If people are interested in slaking their curiosity about the world, then journalism is the career for them.

A Desire to Contribute

The love of reading and writing and an intense curiosity about the world can help drive a person into journalism, but the desire to contribute to society—to right the wrongs and make things better—is often what keeps them there. And, for many, this embodiment of near-missionary zeal is the prime motivator for entering the profession. Listen to what a couple of journalists have to say about this. Here is what Peter Bhatia, executive editor of *The Oregonian*, says about his motivation:

It is the same today as it was when I was a teenager. I loved writing stories, I loved being the eyes and ears for others, and I very much wanted the opportunity to do something that had a social purpose. Working in newspapers has fulfilled my career expectations. I wanted to do meaningful work, have the opportunity to be a witness to history, have an opportunity to make a difference through the work we do in newsrooms.

A deep concern for helping others was a prime motivation for Joe Hight’s becoming a journalist in the first place, and he discovered that many people could be helped simply by learning the truth about situations in the world. He majored in journalism at the University of Central Oklahoma and has spent nearly 30 years in the profession since. He is managing editor for features and newsroom training at *The Oklahoman*, the Oklahoma City newspaper that led the coverage of the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

“Idealistically, I wanted to make a difference in people’s lives,” Hight says. “Early on when I worked at a campus newspaper I learned that the

media have a significant effect on people and how they react to news and events that affect their lives. I also found that, because of the First Amendment, journalists were vital to our democracy. Those two factors, and my instructors and fellow journalism students in college, motivated me.”

The Grady College of Journalism at the University of Georgia conducts an annual, nationwide survey of recent graduates in journalism and mass communication. Among the questions asked are ones related to what new journalists like about their jobs. Every year, these recent grads report a high level of satisfaction derived from feeling they are making a difference in society.⁵

The Independence Factor

Most writers love the independence that comes with this creative craft. Writing or reporting is often an individual effort, although much less so when one reports for a television station, where reporters, videographers, and editors usually work as a team. A newspaper reporter generally pursues a story on her own, however, possibly after initial consultation with the editor and any photographer or graphic artist assigned to do supplements to the story. Reporters love blending into the woodwork of the events they cover. Again, that is harder to do for television reporters because they are on-air talent who are easily recognized by many on the street. Even so, television reporters enjoy the same ideal of independence that newspaper reporters do when it comes to actually reporting and crafting the text of their stories. Few other professions allow their practitioners to enjoy the kind of independence that journalists enjoy, and that is a big draw for many who go into journalism. Even with the ever-present reality of editors, some of whom are prone to make changes to reporters’ copy without first consulting them, reporters seem to feel they have more independence than those in most other professions.

Like other aspects of the business, however, independence is not an absolute. There are pressures and organizational requirements, and the team aspect of television news is one, as has been noted. But there are several other potential restrictions to a reporter’s independence. Among them are the following:

- *Available resources.* Some stories are just too time consuming or expensive for a newspaper or television station to cover. For example, a reporter wanting to do a story requiring expensive travel to another region might discover that the project is too expensive. The story, if done at all, will have to be done from home base. A more common example of a resource restriction is lack of time. A story that would take a reporter a long