

Tearing down the "Wall" in American Journalism¹

Newspapers in the United States are among the most advertising-dependent in the western world.² The visible result of this dependence is that, in contrast to the dense editorial content of *Le Monde* or *Libération*, leading American newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* consist of nearly three-quarters advertising.³ To combat the compromises inherent in advertising dependence, American journalists have developed the "church/state" doctrine, the idea that just as the prerogatives of church and state are separated in U.S. legal tradition so should business and editorial be kept to their own spheres inside the press.

A *Los Angeles Times* reporter recalled how his editor used to respond to advertising employees who crossed the imaginary church-state "wall": "You goddamned ad goons, what do you think you're doing over here?"⁴ But since the fall of 1997, under new publisher Mark Willes, it has been at the *L.A. Times* that the most public campaign has been waged to tear down that wall so that all the newspapers' employees, including editors and reporters, are focused on the single goal of profits.

Willes, a former General Mills (breakfast cereal manufacturer) executive, created a storm at the *Times* when he began comparing the marketing of newspapers to that of Cheerios, and especially after he fired 700 employees. Some newspaper commentators began calling Willes the "cereal killer." But the local outcry became a national roar when Willes said that he would "get out a bazooka" to "blow up" the wall between the editorial and advertising departments. Henceforth, Willes specified, each newspaper "section" (metro, business, sports, etc.) would be managed by a business general manager and a section editor who would conduct ongoing discussions on how to increase advertising and readership.⁵

At the level of the actual political economy of American journalism, Willes' statements reflect the growing dominance of a bottom-line, marketing

orientation. Of course, compared to France, America's allegiance to economic liberalism has always been much stronger. But during the 1980s and 1990s, commercial pressures increased exponentially as most media companies began to sell public stock on Wall Street and thus compete directly with all other types of companies to maximize shareholder earnings.

At another level, though, Willes' attack on the church-state wall opened up a long-overdue professional debate within American journalism — a debate that has yet to be truly joined. In the past, the wall sometimes kept specific advertisers from exerting specific pressures on journalists to run positive stories or to keep from running negative stories. But the real threat, now more than ever, is not specific but systemic. Media critics writing in the journalism reviews and leading newspapers have accepted this system, the public stock ownership and advertising funding of the press, as beyond beyond the bounds of discussion. Devoid of this more far-reaching critique, the church-state debate has largely helped to legitimate state policies that allow continued unfettered market control of the American press.

The rise and fall of the "church-state" wall in American journalism

According to historical legend, the church-state wall was first created by Horace Greeley and his *New York Tribune* in 1841. Previously, the Revolutionary War printers, partisan political editors, and early penny press publishers had tried to run all aspects of newspapers. But Greeley preferred to write editorials and so delegated management duties to someone else. Still, some press outlets stressed the wall far more than others. The example set by Greeley's *Tribune*, nicknamed "The Great Moral Organ,"⁶ did not become a central tenet of American journalism until the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century.

At the *Chicago Tribune's* headquarters, founder "Colonel" Robert McCormick established separate elevators for advertising and news divisions. Well into the 1970s, the *Tribune's* advertising elevator was disabled from even stopping on the news floors.⁷ Henry R. Luce also made the strict separation of business and news a central tenet of his *Time* magazine.

Yet the early stirrings of a new approach to journalism, variously called "marketing" journalism or the "total" newspaper, were evident in 1987 even as *Los Angeles Times* media critic David Shaw insisted that the "practice of providing big advertisers with news page puffery — or, when indicated, benign neglect — is less common now than ever before."⁸ Shaw noted the changes already underway at the formerly purist *Chicago Tribune*, where editor James Squires dismissed "that old church/state thing" as an "anachronism, something that probably ought to disappear."⁹

1. This is the original English version of an article translated into French as "La logique du profit dans les médias américains," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 131-132 (March 2000): 107-115.

2. Currently, American newspapers, both elite and non-elite, receive an average of 75-80 percent of their revenues from advertising, versus an average of 44 percent among French newspapers. See Table at end of article. As Michael Schudson, *The Power of News*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 170, notes, "The media in the United States in the 1990s, as in the 1960s, are more completely controlled by private corporations than are the media in any other industrialized country in the world."

3. This 1986 figure is from Leo Bogart, *Press and Public: Who Reads What, When, Where and Why in American Newspapers*, Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum,

1989.

4. Quoted in Charles Rappleye, "Cracking the church-state wall: Early results of the revolution at the *Los Angeles Times*," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 1998, p. 20.

5. Willes, quoted in Charles Rappleye, "Falling Walls in L.A.," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Nov.-Dec. 1997. See also Alicia C. Shepard, "Blowing up the wall: the new L.A. Times publisher announces reorganization," *American Journalism Review*, December 1997; James Sterngold, "A Growing Clash of Visions at the *Los Angeles Times*," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1997, D-1, and Howard Kurtz, "Chex and Balance: Former Cereal Executive is Giving the Newspaper Business a New Perspective," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 1997, B1.

6. Charlene Brown, Trevor R. Brown, and William L. Rivers, *The Media and the People*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978, p. 56.

7. Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism*, New York, Macmillan, 1941, p. 271.

8. James D. Squires, *Read All About It! The Corporate Takeover of America's Newspapers*, New York, Random House, 1993, pp. 72-3.

9. David Shaw, "Credibility vs. Sensitivity: High, Thick Wall Divides Editors and Advertisers," *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 1987, p. 1.

In 1989, Squires, the self-proclaimed crusader for tearing down the walls, was fired, in his view, for being insufficiently "corporate." He would lament that he had been horribly wrong to let business considerations mingle so promiscuously with news/editorial, a policy that had spread to newspapers across America. According to a 1998 survey by *Presstime* magazine, 192 daily and weekly newspapers, more than half of those responding, now have marketing committees that include editorial members. Editors on these committees are responsible for such duties as "developing ad-driven special sections" and "targeting demographic groups for coverage."¹⁰ Only a handful of newspapers, including the *New York Times*, are still careful to limit contact with the business side to all but the most senior editors.¹¹

For aiding the corporatization of American journalism, Squires wrote, "I can only offer the lamest of excuses, 'I really didn't know at the time what I was doing.'"¹² Squires of course gives himself too much blame — and credit — in the epochal transformation of the American news media that has taken place since the early 1980s.

As Ben Bagdikian has documented in several editions of *The Media Monopoly*, ownership of the American news media has become increasingly concentrated during the past few decades, with control of half of national newspaper circulation now in the hands of just a dozen companies.¹³ However, it has not been concentration per se that has transformed the newspaper industry, but a shift from one form of capitalism to another: from family-owned enterprises to "publicly-owned" corporations obligated to maximize shareholder value. While there have long been newspaper chains, such as the famous empires established by Hearst, Pulitzer and Scripps, these family-controlled conglomerates, as well as the scattered "independents," saw profit as one motive among many for publishing newspapers. These newspapers were also on average quite profitable, maintaining profits in the 8 to 15 percent range, almost always above the norm for American industry.¹⁴

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of these old family-owned companies, now entering their third generation and thus no longer able to avoid heavy inheritance taxes under U.S. tax law, were virtually forced to sell out or "go public" and issue stock. Times-Mirror (parent company of the *Los Angeles Times*) and Dow-Jones (the *Wall Street Journal*) were in fact among the first companies to sell public stock. Today, even *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are publicly-traded, though the founding families retain a controlling share of the voting stock.

But at most of the smaller independent newspaper, divided family heirs relinquished control and sold out to the highest bidder. Frequently, the new owner was Gannett, whose crass mercantilist style was symbolized by its shark-skin suit clad chairman, Al Neuharth.¹⁵ In addition to its flagship daily, *USA*

10. Joseph S. Coyle, "Now, the editor as marketer," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July-August 1998. See also Doug Underwood, "It's not just in L.A.," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 1998, pp. 24-26.

11. David Shaw, "Breaching the Wall: A Revolution in American Newspapers," *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1998, A-1.

12. Squires, p. 73.

13. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992, p. 22.

14. Bagdikian, p. 7; Squires, pp. 72-102.

15. Bagdikian, p. 74, relates this anecdote about Neuharth: At a meeting with potential investors, someone asked the Gannett chairman "whether the corporate name should be pronounced GAN-nett or Gan-NETT?" Neuharth reportedly "smiled and said the correct pronunciation was MONEY."

Today, Gannett now owns more than 90 newspapers, nearly all monopolies in their local market, nearly all of them, after being "Gannettized" (the euphemism for Gannett's modus operandi of editorial staff cutbacks and shift toward softer, friendlier news), mediocre at best. Gannett routinely earns profits from 25 to 40 percent on its newspapers, setting the new standard by which all other newspaper companies are now judged.¹⁶

While many family-owned "independent" newspapers are far from paragons of journalistic excellence, purchase by a media conglomerate usually results in a decline in quality. Conglomerate takeovers are often funded by massive borrowing. In order to service the debt, the new chain owners cut editorial staff and expenses first.¹⁷ One study comparing a similar group of chain-owned and independently-owned newspapers showed that the chain-owned newspapers ran 16 percent less national news, 35 percent less international news and 25 percent less state and local news, and in particular, much less of the "expensive ... staff-written stories as opposed to syndicated news."¹⁸ By the early 1980s, a new "soft-news" style began spreading across the American journalistic field. Between 1979 and 1983, more than one-fifth of all newspapers substantially decreased "hard" news in favor of more personality and lifestyle features.¹⁹ From 1983 to 1987, 69 percent of newspapers (representing 82 percent of U.S. newspaper circulation) reported making substantial changes in content, with by far the most frequent shifts being increased (pro-)business coverage and increased sports news.²⁰

These changes were due not only to Gannett's example, but to the expert advice of the rapidly growing profession of "newspaper consultant."²¹ Consultants began providing readership surveys to justify the changes that debt-leveraged newspapers found it financially necessary to implement with their smaller, less-experienced staffs: shorter, easier-to-read stories, local features, lots of graphics, news "that you can use" linking targeted consumer groups to potential advertisers.²² These early reader studies are still taken as gospel even though subsequent research has shown that what readers actually "want" is the opposite of many of the changes instituted by newspapers: national and international stories, articles long enough to explain issues in depth, news rather than features.²³

The new media managers have defended their actions by saying that marketing-oriented approaches were needed to win back readers. In fact, the percentage of Americans who say they read a newspaper every day did decline

16. Dan Hallin, "Commercialism and Professionalism in the American News Media," in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch, eds., *Mass Media and Society*, London: Arnold, 1996, p. 247; Squires, p. 126; Doug Underwood, *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 40.

17. Squires, p. 83.

18. A 1978 study by Kristine Keller cited in Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, p. 357. As highly debt-leveraged chain purchases of U.S. newspapers increased during the 1980s and 1990s, there is little reason to believe that this disparity has since lessened.

19. Leo Bogart, "How U.S. Newspaper Content is Changing,"

Journal of Communication, 35/2, pp. 82-90

20. Bogart, *Press and Public*, 1989, pp. 202-3.

21. In local television, "ratings" consultants have played a similar role in changing news content. For a discussion of the breakdown of the "entertainment-news" wall in television and its effect on newspapers, see John McManus, *Market-driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994, and Underwood, *When MBAs rule the newsroom*, pp. 55-70.

22. Underwood, *When MBAs rule the newsroom*, pp. 10-11.

23. Bogart, "How U.S. Newspaper Content is Changing," p. 90.

from 73 to 51 between 1967 and 1991, and newspaper circulation per-household did drop by almost half between the late 1950s and late 1980s.²⁴ What is missing in this story, however, is the extent to which advertising has contributed to the decline in readership.

The need to attract new sources of advertising has been the driving force for the creation of "soft" news sections such as travel, lifestyle, food, etc. These sections have proliferated as hard local, national and international news — among the most read sections of newspapers²⁵ — have dwindled in size and substance. Readership decline has thus coincided with a nearly universal watering down of editorial content. Those newspapers that have gone furthest toward a "soft" redesign have usually not been successful in increasing circulation. In fact, as press historian Thomas C. Leonard notes, "there is evidence that when the sales puffery is wrung out of a newspaper, more people will make time for it."²⁶

Thus, strategies supposedly geared to give readers what they want have helped to push them away. Far from a blueprint for failure, though, this approach has succeeded spectacularly in the one area that counts in the new media arena: profits. Even as readership continued to decline during the 1980s and 1990s, average newspaper profits for American newspapers doubled, from the 8-12 percent range to 15-20 percent, and were often much higher.²⁷

Intensified profit pressures have thus transformed the entire American media industry, but they have not affected all press outlets equally. Professional legacies and organizational structures have served to mediate and to a certain extent resist the changes. Thus, despite Willes' efforts to remake the *Los Angeles Times*, it continues to embody many of the traits of the church-state model. After examining the *Times* news operation in action, I offer a glimpse of its even more market-oriented local competitor, the *Orange County Register*.²⁸ These two newspapers define the two dominant poles of American journalism, an elite pole that continues to preserve to a limited extent the old journalistic traditions and a popular pole that has fully embraced the logic of the market as its own.

The two poles of American journalism

Professional model: *Los Angeles Times*

Several months after the *Times*' controversy, the old professional jour-

24. Howard Kurtz, "Yesterday's News: Why Newspapers are Losing Their Franchise," in *Reinventing the Newspaper*, New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1993, p. 62 and Bogart, *Press and Public*, 1989, p. 16 cited in Hallin, *Commercialism and Professionalism in the American News Media*, p. 247.

25. Bogart, *Press and Public*, 1989, pp. 318-28.

26. See Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming of Age with the Press* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 193-4. Leonard cites the example of the *Miami Herald* which revised its real estate section to include full and sometimes critical reporting on real estate, and contrary to the conventional wisdom, attracted both more readers and advertisers. For the gener-

al ineffectiveness of "soft news" in attracting readers, see also Doug Underwood, "The Newspapers' Identity Crisis," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1992.

27. Squires, 94-95.

28. My assessments of the *Times* and *Register* are based on twenty interviews with current and former employees and free-lancers at the two newspapers, as well as several days of observations of editorial meetings and informal conversations at each newspaper, during February and March 1998. The presence of an outside observer can of course have a censoring effect, but during the initial meetings I attended, most of those present did not know my identity. Editors later told me that they had at first thought I was a new reporter at the paper.

nalistic culture seemed largely intact. The main effect of Willes' profit-consciousness was a smaller staff. Fewer had to do more with less. But with still more than 1,000 news/editorial employees, the *Times* retained one of the largest journalistic staffs in the nation.

The survivors, at least in public, preferred to put a positive "spin" on the Willes approach. As one senior editor explained, the "old regime" had been about "retrenchment," allowing the best reporters to "buy out" and leave, and closing special editions for San Diego, northern California, and Washington, D.C. Willes, though a bit crass, was at least an "optimist" and an "expansionist." The new publisher had promised to increase circulation by 500,000, and he had already moved the paper back into northern California and Washington, D.C.

One code for marketing pressure is "the reader." During a page one meeting, managing editor Leo Wolinsky complained: "I'm looking at my list here and I'm looking for things that really connect with people." But the desire to offer up at least something that connects emotionally, viscerally, is not new to American newspapering. For a time, perhaps a period that is passing, the test of "significance" exerted at least equal power against that of "interest" inside the national prestige media.²⁹ At the *Times*, significance and interest still often coincide, because journalists think of their audience as their professional peers. To the extent that *Times* editors and reporters think of those other readers out there, they see them, and marketing data confirms this impression, as by and large their socio-economic and educational equals.

Los Angeles Times editors describe stories as important, significant, timely, or even a "good read." But they do not speak openly about advertisers. The *Times*' concession to the market is sublimated, indirect. It manifests itself in a certain cautiousness, a felt duty to maintain public order and stability. One long-time *Times* reporter, now at one of the "alternative weeklies," reflected on the reasons for the *Times*' "timidity":

[The *Times*] is powerful, they're almost a monopoly.... Why are they are so afraid? Who's going to shut them down if they start being more truthful about what's going on in the city.... There are two famous phrases at the *LA Times*. "We're taking out this quote, it's too incendiary." These like on the record quotes they think are too upsetting to people.... And the second was "Who else is saying this besides us?" Meaning no way are we publishing this. I thought there should be a plaque above the entrance to the *L.A. Times*, instead of the Thomas Jefferson quote they have there.... It should be — "Who else was saying this besides us?"

In fact, during the several days I spent at the *Times* interviewing journalists and sitting in on editorial board meetings, both phrases were in the air. An editor to a reporter: "I mean, that's pretty incendiary." A reporter com-

29. Dan Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, pp. 170-180.

menting on a story that didn't make page one: "It's pretty controversial, you have to keep that in mind...." And at nearly every editorial meeting: "What's the (Washington) *Post* leading with?" or "What's the (New York) *Times* doing?" or, especially from the business section, "The *Wall Street Journal* had this today."

While looking at possible photos for the next day's page one, L.A. *Times* managing editor Wolinsky said, "There's the *New York Times* photo for tomorrow." After the meeting, I asked him if he knew the *New York Times* would in fact run that photo. "I'm just guessing. It looks like something they'd run." What about it? "I don't know." Is it just significant, but visually boring?

No, it's not significant either. I know they're sitting around like us, they don't have anything.... If I didn't think we had a [local rainstorm] picture, I might run it too. It's like a while back there was a bombing, and all the pictures we had were really grisly. But the *New York Times* found a photo of the same thing but that wasn't so bad. If I'd have had that, I'd have run it too probably. I don't know, there's a certain kind of photo that's a *New York Times* photo. I wonder myself, you look at the front page of *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post* — a lot of times we have the exact same photos. Why is that? Do we talk? No. Yet we make the same choices. It's weird.

Indeed, editors may not talk, but they are increasingly aware of what their competitors are doing, *before* the next day's newspapers hit the streets. The Internet has intensified and magnified the importance of the American journalistic "revue de presse." In some cases, it may increase the conformity and uniformity of the American press, already notable for its lack of diversity. As one sub-editor at the *Times* said, "I am constantly on the Internet checking out the other newspapers. I definitely know more about what other papers are doing now than I used to." But this review evidently also serves as the means by which the old "church-state" newspapers (*The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and still, the *Los Angeles Times*) keep each other in line, and to a large extent, still influence the remainder of the media field. For example, the managing editor of the *Orange County Register* said he checks out the page one stories for the *New York Times* every day prior to his own final page one meeting.

In the year and a half immediately following Willes' *cause célèbre*, the wall between church and state, if a bit battered, had not yet fallen at the *Los Angeles Times*, especially in the "metro" and national news divisions.³⁰ The new business general managers simply found that they had no real authority to tear the walls down. Both a junior editor and a business side staffer confided that despite the concern over tearing down the wall, not much had really changed. To the extent that there was any initiative, it was coming from the

30. Felicity Barringer, "The Difficulty in Being Earnest; Efforts to Reinvigorate the *Los Angeles Times* Falter," *New York Times*, May 17, 1999.

advertising side. The junior editor's main response, however, was simply to "not take the call." And while the two sides might be forced to consult occasionally at work, there was certainly no socializing outside of work.³¹

In June of 1999, Willes stepped down as publisher, retaining his position as CEO (chief executive officer) of the parent company Times-Mirror, but appointed Kathryn Downing, a close ally, to succeed him. The battle to make journalists think like marketers is certainly not over. But it is also likely that at prestige newspapers such as the *LA Times* with national, agenda-setting ambitions, some version of the wall will likely persist because it reflects their elite readers' internal cognitive church-state walls, their dispositions of seeking to separate out the economic profane and cultural sacred in their own lives.

Marketing model: Orange County Register

Meanwhile, fifty miles to the south, near Disneyland, the *Orange County Register*, owned by the "Freedom Newspapers" chain, was already implementing a far more radical market-oriented approach than even Willes had envisioned. Inside the shiny corporate offices of the "trend-setting" *Register*,³² a team of management consultants was holding forth on the "Future of the Newsroom" to more than 100 assembled editors, reporters and business-side staffers. The "concept," one consultant argued, is "being customer-focused, and less internally focused, or manufacturing focused... How do we serve the community better which includes advertisers as well as readers and business?" In the management consultant vision, the advantages of coordinating advertising placement with news is only sensible. Coordination helps assure "we can avoid placing an ad on penile implants inside a special commemorative issue on Mother Teresa."³³ The extreme, humorous example lessens the anxiety that advertising-editorial coordination might not always be so compatible.

The newsroom at the *Register*, like the *Times*, is a large open room. But the *Times* newsroom's personality varied sharply from one corner to the next. Here books and papers piled so high the reporter at his desk is scarcely visible. There posters and reporters' framed awards hanging haphazardly on the walls. On a pole, a collection of fifty disposable restaurant wash-clothes under the wry handwritten title, "Musée des Moistes Towelettes". The *Register's* newsroom is cleaner, more corporate. Desks are left clean. The walls are empty. The *Register* doesn't have editors, it has team leaders. Instead of editors meeting in a closed room, they sit around a small table in the middle of the newsroom. In principle, anybody in the newsroom can walk by and hear them, or join the conversation. In practice, the acoustics aren't so good, and reporters rarely

31. Lack of obvious changes does not preclude more subtle shifts in editorial management and philosophy, nor more direct marketing-oriented conversations in private meetings, both of which might not be visible not only to the outside visitor but also to many *Times* journalists.

32. Underwood, *When MBAs rule the newsroom*, p. xix, names the *Orange County Register* as a national trend-setter in the shift toward market-oriented, reader-friendly journalism.

33. Author's notes from *Register* editorial and business staff meeting, March 12, 1998.

34. Jean G. Padioucau, *Le Monde et le Washington Post*, Paris: PUF, 1985, p. 207, comments on the different spatial organization of news production at *Le Monde*, with its compartmentalized offices reflecting its specialized services, and the *Washington Post*, with its massive "newsroom" gathering together all the generalist reporters and editors in a single space. The comparison between the *Times* and the *Register* shows that American newsrooms, despite surface

come unless expressly invited.³⁴

The “team” concept means a less hierarchical newsroom, brags the new ombudsman. It’s like the “Japanese model.” Everyone at all levels, collaborating. Reporters, photographers, graphics. It’s not just news content, it’s the “whole package.” Reporters aren’t quite so enamored with the package approach. As one reporter explained:

I hate the term packaging. Because packaging means if you don’t have a photo or graphic, no matter how good your words are, it ain’t going on the front page. Not unless there is something very, very dramatic that has occurred. And the other downside is they have this wonderful little creature called the container. Which means you have a damn good story, it better fit in nine inches, including the deck-head, or it’s going to be buried on A-25 as opposed to A-1. Never mind if you can’t possibly do the story justice in nine inches.... One of the things that this newspaper prides itself on is its look, and one of the components of the look is brevity. And I’m not saying that all my words are golden and if you cut out a comma I will slit your throat. But at the same time, there are some stories that are simply not conducive to being told in nine inches and only in nine inches.

“I’ll tell you what makes page one,” said another reporter. “Any wild, undomesticated animal in the house, you know, anything with an oddball twist.”

As for the non-hierarchical team approach, a reporter confided, “That’s horseshit.... There may be something to this collaborative effort. But at the end of the road I’m not sure that that form of populism, that form of democracy is the way to put out a newspaper. Someone’s got to make a decision and that person should be held accountable for that decision.” The team approach, rather than making reporters the equals of editors, encourages reporters to anticipate their superiors’ demands, to squelch their individuality in favor of constantly thinking in terms of the corporate team. As one media researcher notes, “the new newsroom is no place for nonconformists.”³⁵

Where the *Times* managing editor makes the occasional concession to “the reader,” at the *Register*, the reader, or at least a certain conception of the reader, is king. The executive editor, Ken Busic, begins the page one meeting by appraising the previous day’s paper: “I like that it was aimed at consumers” and “The graphics were good” and “That topic was most important for a pretty big slice of our readers.”

The *Register* is skeptical toward government news. As managing editor Larry Burrough comments, “We’re not against government news, but we think most newspapers cover government too much and in too boring a way. Because

similarities, vary in the extent to which reporters and editors in various departments are able to create separate spaces to preserve their autonomy from each other.

35. Underwood, *When MBAs rule the newsroom*, p. 25.

government news, city council news, county supervisor news, is not the only news in people’s lives. In fact for most people it’s almost meaningless.”

Church and state was a battle waged inside news rooms, but one in which journalists emerged the heroes. For newspapers like the *Register*, the hero is the “community” composed of advertisers and readers, that is to say, those readers desired by advertisers. Against this consumer community stand elites who presume to tell the people what they want: government officials, journalists, academics. Susan Miller, vice president for editorial at the Scripps Howard chain, maintains that “newspapers are to be of service to readers and are not staffed by a Brahmin class that was chosen to lecture the population.”³⁶ This elite-community dichotomy has already become the standard justification of local television news. “Quality can no longer be defined just in terms of what elites want,” defended a Los Angeles television news director against charges that his station’s focus on crime and sensation had trivialized the news.³⁷

Reporters at the *Times* write serious, important stories. They report on institutions, but cautiously. At the *Register*, reporters write bright, happy stories. They shun institutions, especially government, and celebrate individuals. These are now the two dominant poles of the contemporary American journalism field, one trying desperately to maintain (at least the appearance of) the old sublimated relationship to business, the other a shameless vehicle of Wall Street profit maximization and consumer populism.

How the defense of the ‘wall’ obscures the real threat

The church/state wall was never a general defense against advertising influence on journalism. It served, and only in some cases, to keep particular business interests from influencing news decisions. But at the highest echelons of news management, there was never a wall. Publishers drew lines, top editors internalized what could and could not be written, and journalists below adapted to if not always internalized the business-influenced definition of news.

The presumption is that the wall has made a significant difference, that it has allowed journalists in the past to write “hard-hitting” stories about advertisers without fear of losing their jobs. Senior reporter David Shaw asked rhetorically in a special *Los Angeles Times* series on the changes if increased cooperation between editors and advertising directors in the business section would make it “tempting” to cover “only those subjects most likely to lure advertising — and to cover them favorably?” If so, Shaw continued, “that could slight the kind of general economic reporting that doesn’t directly bring in ad revenue — and the kind of tough investigative reporting on financial institutions that takes time and might offend potential advertisers.” Wall or no wall, this is the kind of reporting that has never existed to any significant extent in American newspapers.³⁸

36. Cited in Underwood, *When MBAs rule the newsroom*, p. xix.

37. Steven Cohen, KCOP news director, Remarks at the University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School Conference on Local Television News, March 4, 1998.

38. David Shaw, “Breaching the Wall: A Revolution in American Newspapers; As Business Section Expands, so do the Potential Problems,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1998, p. A-11. See, e.g., Ronald K.L. Collins, *Dictating Content: How Advertising Pressure Can Corrupt a Free Press*, Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Commercialism, 1992, and C. Edwin Baker, *Advertising*

Nor has the wall been much of a defense against the commercially-driven trivialization and sensationalism of the news. Long before the wall began to crumble at the *Los Angeles Times*, the news content at even the national prestige newspapers had begun suffering from the same trivialization as the rest of the American media. From 1977 to 1997, the percentage of front-page stories that emphasized "human interest, quality of life, the bizarre, personality and public fear" tripled in the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* from just 8 percent to 25 percent. Front page scandal stories also tripled from under 4 percent to nearly 12 percent.³⁹

Given these epochal transformations in the American news media, the church-state debate has tended to obscure rather than expose the threat posed by dramatically increased profit pressures. Leading journalists have been more concerned about how the absence of the wall will affect the public's perception of their credibility than with addressing the fundamental problems of public stock ownership and advertising funding. If the choice is presented as limited to a professional model that tries to ignore its business constraints and a marketing model that sees the public interest as simply giving the public what it wants,⁴⁰ profit pressures will be able to continue unabated.

For now, many critics are relieved that at least *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are still controlled by the founding families.⁴¹ But there has been no public discussion of how to move beyond the benevolence of publishers to establish more far-reaching institutional reforms, such as *Le Monde's* permanent organizational structure in which ownership resides in the positions of the top editors (the dominant share) and the journalists and other employees of the newspaper.⁴² Missing from the American discussion has been whether it might be possible to go beyond the negative barrier of the "church-state" wall to institute more durable positive barriers against commercial pressures.

The church-state debate has been just that, a debate, not a movement. Rank-and-file journalists, mostly non-unionized and rightly fearful of losing their jobs, quietly grumble and make do as best they can. The single greatest locus of journalistic activism has been the "Unity" movement bringing together Hispanic, Asian, Native American and African-American reporters and editors to promote the hiring of "journalists of color" and news coverage that more accurately represents minority "communities." The American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Radio and Television News Directors Association,

and a *Democratic Press*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994. Schudson, in *The Power of News*, p. 211, notes that "fundamental queries about the role of private enterprise and the delegation of power from government to business lie largely outside the realm of legitimate political discussion" covered by the news media. To the extent that the press has critically examined the corporate world, it has not been prompted by its own sense of independence, but by government campaigns to regulate business, increasingly infrequent since the 1970s.

39. Tom Rosensteel, Stacy Forster and Dante Chinni, Project for Excellence in Journalism, "Changing Definitions of News: A Look at the Mainstream Press Over 20 Years," Report issued March 4, 1998.

40. Expressing this philosophy, Mark Fowler, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission under President Reagan, is reported to have said that the "public interest is that which interests the public." Cited in Hallin, "Commercialism and Professionalism..." p. 258.

41. See, e.g., Susan E. Tift and Alex S. Jones, "Scion of the Times: How Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., has struggled to keep the family newspaper what it was — and what it must become," *The New Yorker*, July 26, 1999, pp. 52-67.

42. See, e.g., Padioleau, 1985, and Patrick Eveno, *Le Monde 1944-1995: Histoire d'une entreprise de presse*, Paris: Le Monde Editions, 1996.

along with large philanthropic organizations such as the Ford Foundation, have generously supported Unity. Far from challenging the commercialism of the news media, Unity urges that "the commitment to the corporate bottom line continue so that investment in diversity has a return..."⁴³ Unity's 1998 national conference in Seattle, which attracted some 6,000 minority journalists, was billed as the "largest gathering of reporters and editors in the United States" and was visited by many of the major presidential candidates.⁴⁴

For media corporations, a tip of the hat to ethnic and racial diversity costs virtually nothing. It seems progressive, and in fact, media managers are quite concerned with how they will appeal to the growing population of non-white, affluent readers. Both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Orange County Register* have established "diversity committees" that bring together journalists of color to address issues of ethnic and racial representation in the newsroom and news content.

Promoting diversity is one thing, challenging the economic and class structure is another. In October of 1998, progressive activists and reporters for "alternative" media sponsored a national Media & Democracy Congress in New York City to protest the concentration of media ownership and the single-minded pursuit of profits. In a local article promoting the event, media scholars Mark Crispin Miller and Robert McChesney wrote that the time had come for "serious talk about the democratic possibilities for curing" the media's ills.⁴⁵ Scarcely a single major national news organization covered the event.

TABLE

American and French newspapers:
Percentage of revenues from advertising

U.S. Average:	80
French Average:	44
<i>Le Figaro</i>	70
<i>Le Monde</i>	21
<i>Libération</i>	20
<i>La Croix</i>	7

Sources: U.S. Average is 1998, from David Shaw, "Breaching the Wall," *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1998 (Baker, Advertising and a Democratic Press, p. 16, cites the figure of 79 percent for 1987); French Average is 1991 from Daniel Junqua, *La Presse Ecrite et Audiovisuelle (Paris: Editions du Centre de formation et de perfectionnement des journalistes, 1995)*, p. 85; *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde* and *La Croix* are 1996 from Pierre Albert, *La Presse Française (Paris: La documentation française, 1998)*, p. 83 and *Libération* is 1988 from P. Albert, *La Presse Française (1990 edition)*, p. 81. Proportion of total revenues from advertising may vary, however, from year to year. Pierre Albert notes that *Le Monde's* advertising revenues increased significantly in 1997 and 1998.

43. "Unity Update," by Paul DeMain, Unity President, from website of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists.

45. Konstantin Richter, "In the Shadow of the Giants," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 1998, p. 13.

44. Ben Stocking, "Bush changes course, visits with journalists," *San Jose Mercury News*, July 9, 1999.