

Fear and Favor in the Newsroom

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Back in 1990 we started work on FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM, a documentary narrated by Studs Terkel which shows that ownership of the press by a small elite constricts the free flow of ideas and information upon which our democracy depends. We wondered to what extent the corporate influence over the mass media which we documented in the film was going to undermine our own ability to complete and then distribute the film to the public.

Well, seven years later we found those pressures have weighed on FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM. We also found, however, that there are a considerable number of people who want to challenge the corporate stranglehold on the news, and those people have helped us bring FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM to the public.

We made FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM to challenge the pervasive assumption that the major news outlets provide us "fair" and "objective" reporting. Organizations such as Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) and Project Censored have long exposed the mainstream media's partiality to what can be termed a "Fortune 500" point of view. We hoped to use the medium of video to bring this analysis to a broader audience.

Typically what the public hears about the corporate news media is the story they like to tell about themselves, which is that they do not favor the interests of the wealthy and the powerful. Indeed, defenders of the corporate press buttress their case by pointing to the news they report which does antagonize the powers that be.

True enough, but, this proves too little. The partiality of the corporate press lies in the fact that when a reporter discloses unflattering facts about the powerful he or she is "in a dangerous area," as Lowell Bergman, a producer at CBS's "60 Minutes" explains in FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM. Pursuing those stories too often can damage a journalist's career.

So, to be safe, journalists usually cover such stories only if they reach a "higher threshold of drama and documentation," to borrow Ben Bagdikian's nice expression, than other stories. In other words, the major news outlets employ a double standard, one for stories that could offend the powers that be, and one for all other news. It is this double standard which gives the news its Fortune 500 spin.

"FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM" is a film about this double standard, its effect on journalists and its consequences for the news. Of course, as the journalists explain in the film, this double standard is not written on a bulletin board. Owners and editors don't walk through newsrooms telling journalists to lay off their friends and business associates. The standard is generally expressed more subtly. For example, editors tell reporters, "no one is interested in that," which, as Ben Bagdikian, Dean emeritus of UC Berkeley's Journalism School, tells viewers, would be legitimate -- if it were true. Or they might ask the reporter, as former Atlanta Journal Constitution Assistant Managing Editor, Wendall Rawls explains, "What else you got on your plate?"

To make this double standard clearer, FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM looks at what happened to journalists, and to their work, when they didn't take the hints, when they proceeded to cover the powers that be as professional journalists, rather than as followers of the double standard. Even though our subjects were all award winning journalists at prestigious news organizations, what we uncovered was a pattern of obstruction by superiors, suppression of stories, and in some cases, severely damaged careers.

One of the stories we present is that of Sydney Schanberg, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist at the New York Times. Schanberg explains to viewers how, while he tried to report on abuses of power by the wealthy and a city government closely tied to them, his superiors at the Times consistently interfered with his work - and how, ultimately, they took away his column because of such reporting. We were also able to show the man who

canceled Schanberg's column, Sydney Gruson, the former assistant to the Publisher and Vice Chairman of the New York Times Corp., substantially acknowledge Schanberg's contention, explaining that the Times cancelled Schanberg's column because it disapproved of the unflattering light in which Schanberg's writing had cast the New York Times itself.

FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM also examines the case of reporter Jon Alpert, winner of numerous Emmy Awards, who brought NBC news the first uncensored footage from Iraq during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The footage depicted widespread damage to civilians inflicted by U.S. bombing - evidence which contradicted the official story of "surgical" strikes against Saddam Hussein. Jon Alpert explains to viewers that he was able to sneak the footage out of Iraq and beat their censors, but he was unable to beat the censors in the U.S. After the staff of the NBC Nightly News had scheduled it for broadcast, Michael Gartner, then President of NBC News, personally spiked the story and then fired Alpert on the spot. Any doubts that Gartner's actions were censorious are put to rest when Michael Gartner justifies his actions by citing an infraction (shooting a reenactment of a flag raising) which Alpert had committed two years before the Iraq story - and after which NBC had continued to air Alpert's work.

In another case FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM shows footage deleted by editors at PBS's McNeil Lehrer Newshour (now the Jim Lehrer Newshour) from a story, produced by award winning reporter Peter Graumann. The story concerned a controversy over the construction of a proposed radioactive waste storage facility near a small California town. The deleted footage depicted the "technology" to be employed at the facility -- an unlined pit in the ground -- and the dismal track-record of serious radioactive waste leakage established by other radioactive waste facilities - including facilities operated by the firm which was supposed to manage the proposed facility covered in Graumann's story. Graumann then explains to viewers that, after he watched the edited story on McNeil-Lehrer, he realized that the edits created the impression that opponents of the facility, i.e. residents near the California site and environmentalists, were a bunch of anti-technology nuts. By deleting this footage, McNeil-Lehrer viewers were prevented from seeing the compelling evidence on which opponents of the waste facility had based their opposition. Conversely, Graumann explains that the editing reinforced the credibility of the large corporations and the government, which supported construction of the radioactive waste facility.

Based on the critical response the show has received, FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM is a success. Press analysts Robert McChesney and Peter Phillips have described it as "superb" and "important," respectively. The San Francisco Bay Guardian labeled it a "landmark documentary" and the Village Voice described it as "tough, gutsy and vital." Moreover, a broad range of commentators unconnected with the alternative press, including journalist and former State Department Spokesperson, Hodding Carter, Columbia Journalism School Professor, James Carey and reviewers at The San Francisco Chronicle, Boston Globe and The Quill (the journal of the Society of Professional Journalists) found that FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM cogently and accurately documents how journalists are discouraged from pursuing stories which challenge accounts put forth by the wealthy and the powerful. The most unfavorable review we have encountered appeared in the San Jose Mercury News (a paper whose dirty laundry does make an appearance in the film) and even that reviewer said that the program merited a broadcast on public television.

Notwithstanding the broad and highly favorable recognition the show has received, public television has been, on the whole, extremely resistant to the show. In fact, we first encountered this resistance during production.

At several points we sought production assistance from public television's FRONTLINE series, from P.O.V. (PBS's special series for independent documentaries) and from the Independent Television Service (established by Congress for the purpose of funding independent film). Each time, we were rejected. Of course, given the large corporate influence at public television, a documentary exposing unflattering facts about corporate power -- including unflattering facts about corporate influence over public broadcasting - this resistance was not entirely unexpected.

However, we were surprised by how brazenly one public television executive announced his pandering to corporate sensibilities. After viewing a sample clip of the show early in the production process, P.O.V. executive producer Marc Weiss told us straight out that P.O.V. probably would not be interested in the project, because it was not likely to be favorably reviewed in venues such as Redbook. (Randy, handicapped by his ignorance of this publication, nonetheless intuited that Redbook was not the kind of journal that reviewed films exposing the dark sides of corporate power.)

With public funding closed off, support from private foundations was not forthcoming. Of course, most foundations

were not sympathetic to the film's thesis. Several foundations that were otherwise sympathetic to the film's thesis will not fund media as a matter of policy. (Apostles of the Fortune 500 world view should have this problem.) This is why it took us 6 years to complete the documentary. Ultimately the show was financed through grants from several small foundations, a few individuals and in-kind contributions.

When we had shot the film and required only access to "on-line" facilities for the final edit of the show, we literally had no place to go. Then Danny McGuire, the executive producer at KTEH, San Jose's "renegade" public television station came to our rescue. McGuire provided us a professional editor, an edit suite and left control of the content of the program entirely with us. McGuire recognized that FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM was "the story the corporate media won't report," and explained that was why he and KTEH "wanted to see it completed, aired and distributed." This of course, is the raison d'être for public television. Regrettably, as Trudy Lieberman noted last spring in *The Nation*, KTEH's commitment to the goals of public broadcasting is extremely unusual.

Two considerably larger public television stations, KQED in San Francisco, and WTTW in Chicago (which had won a regional Emmy with Beth for broadcasting her first documentary film) declined to provide any support whatsoever for "FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM." Even after the program was completed with KTEH's assistance, PBS rejected the program for national broadcast as did its special independent documentary series, P.O.V. American Program Service, a smaller source of public television programming than PBS also rejected the program. It was, according to APS, "not balanced enough."

Finally, in the summer of 1997, after a year of negotiations, KTEH's Danny McGuire secured a satellite feed of the show to all public television stations nationwide through the National Educational Television Association, NETA. NETA is apparently the smallest and least influential source of national programming for public television. Because this meant we were effectively at the bottom of the public television programming food chain, we essentially had to persuade each local public television station to download the satellite feed, and then to broadcast it.

To aid us in our efforts we asked people to contact their local PBS program directors to urge them to broadcast FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM. Some producers had warned that this technique could backfire by annoying program directors. In our case we felt we had nothing to lose. How many public television stations would air a documentary that exposes the undersides of corporate power, including corporate power at public television, if their viewers and members did not demand it?

The lobbying effort picked up steam when "Citizen Vagrom," a group of media activists in Seattle, produced a video segment on FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM and on public television's resistance to the show. In addition to distributing the segment through their free video magazine, they put the segment on their web site and linked it to Free Speech TV's website. FAIR and other grass roots activist groups posted their own web-site notices, as did our educational distributor California Newsreel. Suddenly an internet/e-mail campaign to air FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM was born. Viewers and activists around the country began to lobby their local PBS affiliate to air the show, often e-mailing us the responses they were getting from their public television programmers.

The internet campaign became so strong that it generated a sort of "multiplier effect. Alternative newspapers in far off places (from us) such as Tennessee and Chicago were publishing stories about FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM and its fate in public broadcasting. Even "Wired Magazine," which we understand to be the arbiter of cyberspace fashion, published a story on it the show and the internet campaign to get it aired.

One participant in the campaign, Andrew Barbano, a Nevada journalist and activist, has been using his newspaper column as a virtual battering ram in order to "raise hell" so that Nevada's public television stations would air the program. Barbano connected with local labor and environmental activists who joined the campaign whose result, Barbano just reported to us, is that public television in Reno has scheduled FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM for a prime time broadcast. Las Vegas public television, and other stations in the region have not committed, and Barbano and the activists are proceeding apace.

Several community radio stations, including those in Minneapolis, Madison, Austin, Seattle and Portland Oregon did programs on FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM and its fate at public television, as did Jim Hightower, "Making Contact" and Pacifica Radio's "Democracy Now." KPFA the Pacifica affiliate in Berkeley did numerous shows on the program. FAIR's national radio show "Counterspin" did a segment on the program. These radio shows also seem to have made a considerable impact. When several public television stations were called to get a sense of how many had already been contacted about "FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM," those located in markets where there

had been local radio interviews seemed to have had the most calls to the program director.

In one case the impact was manifest. After Beth was on the "Peace and Social Justice" show on public radio in Chico, California, we were told the local PBS station was inundated with calls encouraging the station to air FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM. The station agreed, but there was a catch. Although the documentary was offered to the station for free, the station required an underwriter. A small, feisty (they had been vandalized and received bomb threats, apparently in response to their reporting) independently owned newspaper, the "Sacramento Valley Mirror," came forward to underwrite the documentary.

One place where the campaign almost certainly made a difference was at KQED, San Francisco's public television station. FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM began to attain visibility in San Francisco after a local screening jointly sponsored by Project Censored and The Northern California Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. Shortly thereafter, KTEH in neighboring San Jose aired the program. This resulted in reviews in the San Francisco Examiner, in the alternative San Jose weekly, the Metro, in the Berkeley Voice, and in Disgruntled, a Berkeley based on-line Magazine. KQED radio, the principal NPR affiliate in San Francisco, also devoted a full hour to the program.

About this time Dennis Bernstein and Julie Light, investigative reporters and producers at Berkeley's listener supported KPFA radio's "Flashpoints," began the first of three programs on FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM and its troubles with public television. Chris Welch and Philip Muldari, who co-host "The Morning Show" at KPFA also did several programs on the show as well. In addition, KPFA news often issued reports on our progress, or lack thereof in getting broadcast.

The result, we were told from several sources, was a barrage of pressure from the community on KQED to air the program. KQED's president made a public statement that KQED would consider the program for broadcast when it was offered. And, indeed, when we subsequently submitted the show to KQED, they aired it and they aired it in a prime time slot, which earned the show a favorable review by the San Francisco Chronicle's television critic. We, of course, were not privy to KQED's decisionmaking process. However, given their utter lack of interest in helping us finish the show, it is difficult to imagine that pressure from the public was not a factor in their programming FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM.

Of course, public pressure does not always prevail. One station we know that will not run FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM is San Diego's KPBS. Responding to inquiries by activist Bill Lott, KPBS's program director complained to Lott about all the telephone calls and faxes people were sending her about "FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM." She then sent Lott a written explanation of their decision not to broadcast the show. The letter, whose charges were absolutely inane -- e.g. we shouldn't have shown Ralph Nader suggesting that the public was interested in nuclear power stories, because he had no expertise in "television psychographics," - belongs in a museum of corporate apparatchik culture.

As it stands, FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM has been or will be broadcast in Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, San Jose, Redding, San Mateo, St. Louis, Long Island, Reno, Denver, Hawaii, and Maine. Some of these stations, such as those in Chicago and St Louis, have scheduled it outside prime viewing time, thereby substantially reducing the number of people who would otherwise see the show. So, while FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM has not been entirely frozen out of public television, at least as things stand now, the vast majority of the public television audience will not be able to see the program.

One vehicle we had thought would have helped us increase the show's visibility and thereby enhance its chances for television broadcast was public screenings. The screenings, we thought, would have their own multiplier effect by generating newspaper and magazine reviews, radio shows, etc. We were wrong.

FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM screened at the national convention of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) in Washington D.C. In addition, local chapters of SPJ held screenings in Philadelphia, and several in New Jersey. To our knowledge, these screenings did not generate a single story, which, of course, is a bit surprising since journalists obviously were aware of and interested in the show - having screened it themselves.

FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM was also screened at New York University's journalism school and the screening was followed by a panel discussion with several of the journalists who appeared in FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM. The event attracted over 300 persons, including, we are told, a number of journalists from local and national media. Yet, only Raymond Schroth in the National Catholic Reporter reviewed the film in an article

titled "Corporate Influence Makes Sure You'll Never Get to See This Show." As Trudy Lieberman noted in her June 23, 1997 column in *The Nation*, "Almost no one, including the city's media organizations, had come to write about it--a twist consistent with the film's central thesis: The media avoid uncomfortable topics that strike too close to home." Even the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Washington Journalism Review* and the *American Journalism Review* have ignored the program.

One exception to this pattern was the *Boston Globe*, which published a story after the show screened at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and Bill Kovach, curator of Harvard's Niemann Foundation (and whose story is examined in the documentary) participated in a discussion following the screening. Occasionally, the corporate press can pleasantly surprise you.

Unfortunately, with some notable exceptions, most of the major alternative press outlets ignored the show until the grass roots campaign to air it began - one full year after the show was completed and brought to their attention by our distributor, California Newsreel. In light of power of the alternative press to mobilize people on this issue, in those cases where it has covered it, this was particularly distressing.

Our challenge remains to get our documentary seen by as large and varied of an audience as possible. One venue in which the show is being widely seen is in colleges and universities, where California Newsreel has already sold hundreds of copies. Several professors have reported that their students consistently find the film stunning and that lively debates follow each screening. Interestingly, one journalism school decided not to purchase *FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM*, because students would find it "discouraging." While one might question a journalism program which effectively trains journalists to avoid bad news, that might not be a bad way to hold onto a job in journalism - or in public television for that matter.

We, of course, will continue working with other individuals, activist groups and journalists to try to break down the barriers at public television to air "*FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM*." The broader problem, however, is not televising "*FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM*" but insuring that the public has access to news which is not distorted by a Fortune 500 spin. That, of course, will require establishing a news media with a large revenue source which is independent of the discretion of the Fortune 500 and, of course, of the government.

There is plenty of money available to support such a news media. One virtually painless method of obtaining such money would be through a .5% securities transaction tax, which was proposed by economists Lawrence Summers formerly of Harvard (currently Deputy Secretary of Treasury), and Joseph Stiglitz, former Chairperson of the President's Council of Economic Advisors, now at the World Bank. Dean Baker, an economist at the Economic Policy Institute, has calculated that such a tax would raise about \$30 billion per year. Moreover, Summers' and Stiglitz's analysis shows that such a tax could actually benefit the economy by reducing unproductive speculation, and thereby rendering securities' markets more stable.

Financing the press through such a tax would also be extremely equitable. Even when pension funds are considered, only persons whose incomes place them in the top 3-5 percent of earners, would pay any significant amount towards the tax. So, the burden of the tax would fall on those best able to bear it, those with incomes over \$150,000 per year.

Baker has also formulated a proposal which points to a fascinating, simple and highly attractive method of allocating such funds - which is letting individual citizens determine the allocation. \$30 billion in revenues works out to about \$150 per adult citizen. Using the analogy of taxpayer check-offs to political parties, one could allot to each adult citizen (regardless of tax status) the opportunity to direct the government each year to allocate \$150 to the news organization of his or her choice (or portions thereof to several such organizations).

Presumably it would be desirable to require such organizations satisfy the requirements for non-profit status (otherwise large private firms might use their tremendous marketing power to bring most of the funds back into their own pockets). As it stands, an extremely wide range of social, cultural, educational and activist organizations have satisfied these relatively easy and non-discretionary IRS rules. So, a non-profit condition would not enable the government to influence the content of what is produced by such organizations.

The potential impact of such a policy on journalistic freedom and the breadth of public discourse, could be revolutionary. Large corporations, small corporations, advertisers, governmental appointees, Congress, foundations etc. could be entirely removed from the process of selecting, evaluating, writing and distributing the news. The purse strings of news organizations would lie in the hands of their audiences, which, given the

alternatives, would not be such a bad thing at all.

Moreover, the gap between professional journalist and citizen would narrow in the sense that virtually anybody could become a journalist. If a person could persuade 100 fellow citizens to direct their \$150 (or 200 citizens to direct half their \$150) to his or her newsletter, for example, that newsletter would have a \$15,000 annual operating budget. That may not be enough to live on, but it could cover significant expenses and yield some compensation for the journalist. Given the number of community and non-profit organizational publications and websites already in existence, such a policy would almost certainly yield an explosion of these institutions. Think of the impact of I.F. Stone's newsletter, and imagine if the resources were available to support thousands of I.F. Stones.

And that sort of explosion of persons involved in investigating, analyzing, writing about and discussing issues of concern to them and their communities is what we need to move from our increasingly corporate dominated society to a democratic one.

In short, the possibilities which are available if we successfully build a movement to democratize the press are extraordinary. Ultimately the measure of FEAR AND FAVOR IN THE NEWSROOM'S success will be the extent to which it contributes to public understanding of the need for such a movement.

