Tearing down the "Wall" in American Journalism

Newspapers in the United States are among the most advertising-dependent in the western world. The visible result of this dependence is that, in contrast to the dense editorial content of La Voz del Librero, leading American newspapers consist of nearly three-quarters advertising. To combat the compromises inherent in advertising dependence, American journalists have invoked their "church/state" doctrine, the idea that just as the prerogatives of church and state are separated in U.S. legal tradition so 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?" 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' editors, 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 some newspaper editors to that of Chevron, and especially after he fired 700 employees. Some newspaper commentators began calling Willes the "cereal killer." But the local outcry became a nationwide roar when Willes said he would "get out a buzzsaw 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.

At the level of the actual political economy of American journalism, Willes' statements reflect the growing domination 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 the bounds of discussion. Despite this more far-reaching critique, the church-state debate has largely helped to legitimate state policies that allowed unregulated 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 print outlets strayed far more than others. The example set by Greeley's Tribune, nicknamed "The Great Moral Organ," 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 by fire-code laws, but the editorial elevator was left off the top floors. 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, more completely, public approval or distraction in the minds of any readers ever less relevant to reality in the world."

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 1992 survey by Pressman magazine, 92 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." 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.

For aiding the corporatization of American journalism, Squires wrote, "I can only offer the lament of a schism, I really didn't know the time I was doing." 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. 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 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.

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. 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 cross-merger style was symbolized by its shack-suit clad chairman, A. Neuharth. In addition to its flagship daily, USA Today, Gannett 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 buyouts and shift toward softer, friendlier, newsmagazine, mediocre at best. Gannett routinely earns profits from 25 to 40 percent on its newspapers, setting the new standard for all other newspaper companies are now judged.

While many family-owned "independent" newspapers are far from paragons of journalistic excellence, purchase a conglomerate usually results in a decline in quality. Conglomerate takeovers are often funded by massive borrowing. In order to service the debt, the newspaper editorial staff and expenses first. One study comparing a similar group of chain-owned and independently-owned newspapers showed that the chain-owned newspapers ran 10 percent less national news, 22 percent less local news, and in particular, much less of the expensive "...staff-written stories as opposed to syndicated news." By the early 1980s, a new "soft-news" style began spreading across the American journalistic field. Between 1979 and 1983, more than one-in five of all newspapers dramatically decreased "hard" news in favor of more personality and lifestyle features. 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.

These changes were due not only to Gannett's example, but to the expert advice of the rapidly growing profession of "newspaper consultant." Consultants began providing readership surveys to justify the changes that debt-leveraged newspapers found it financially necessary to implement with their smaller, less-experienced staff: shorter, easier-to-read stories, local features, lots of graphics, news that "can use" linking targeted consumer groups to potential advertisers. 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.

The new media managers have defended their actions by saying that marketing-oriented approaches were needed to win back readers. In the perspective of those Americans who feel they read newspapers day to day decline
from 78 to 31 between 1967 and 1991, and newspaper circulation per-household did drop by almost half between the late 1960s and late 1980s. 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, logical, and international news — among the most read sections of newspapers — 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 wrong out of a newspaper, more people will make time for it."

Thus, strategies supposedly geared to give readers what they want have helped to push them away. Far from a blueprint for failure, though, the 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. 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 some 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 an even more market-oriented local competitor, the Orange County Register. 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 ago I was working with the old professional journalists at the Los Angeles Times. During this period of intense activity, the Los Angeles Times was the most powerful newspaper in the country. The Times' coverage of major events was unparalleled in scope and depth, and its influence in shaping public opinion was immense. However, the Times' success was built on a number of factors that are now under attack by the market-oriented press.

Market-oriented model: Orange County Register

The Orange County Register is a different animal altogether. The Register is a tabloid-sized newspaper that focuses on local news and events. The Register's coverage is much more focused than the Times', and its reporting is often more sensationalist. However, the Register's readership is much smaller than the Times', and its influence in shaping public opinion is much less.

In conclusion, both the Times and the Register have their strengths and weaknesses. The Times is a powerful newspaper that has a long history of covering major events, but it is also a newspaper that is under attack by the market-oriented press. The Register, on the other hand, is a newspaper that is more focused on local news and events, but its readership is much smaller than the Times'.
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 Wolinski 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. I'd have had that, I'd have run it too probably. I don't know, there's a 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. At 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 check. The Times, 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 William's 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. 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 who 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 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 confer occasionally at work, there was certainly no socializing outside of work.

In June of 1999, Willie 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 Times, my preconceived notions of what the newsmakers of the 21st century will be, and how they will operate, are changing. As the Times editor put it, "I think the result is, they won't be as worried about the traditional, they won't be as worried about the business model..."
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 newsrooms, 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 populace."

This elite/community dichotomy has, according to the standard institutionalization 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. 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 journalistic 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 it 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 in increased cooperation between editors and advertising directors in the business section would make it "tempting to cover" only those subjects most likely to have 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 advertising 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.

"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 horse shit. 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 superior's demands, to squelch their individuality in favor of constantly thinking in terms of the media researcher notes, "the newsmen is no place for nonconformists."

Where the Times managing editor makes the occasional concession to the "reader," the Register, the reader, is king. The executive editor, Ken Baske, begins the page one meeting by appraising the previous day's paper: "I like that it was aimed at consumers" and "That was 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

Nur has the wall been much of a defense against the commercially-driven
en trivialization and sensationalism of the news. Long before the wall began
to crumble at the Los Angeles Times, the news content was even the national pres-
tage newspapers had begun suffering from the same trivialization as the rest of
the American press. From 1977 to 1997, the percentage of front-page stories
that emphasized "human interest, quality of life, the bizarre, personality and
public star" tripled in the New York Times and Los Angeles Times from just 8
percent to 25 percent. Front page scandal stories also triumphed from under 4 per-
cent to nearly 12 percent.

Given these topological 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. Loading journalists have been more
concerned about how the absence of the wall will affect the public's perception
of their credibility than 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 market-
ing model that sees the public interest as simply giving the public what it wants,
profit pressures will be able to continue unabated.

For now, many critics are concerned that at least The New York Times and
the Washington Post are still controlled by the founding families. But there
has been no public discussion of how to move beyond the beneficence of pub-
lisers to establish more far-reaching institutional reforms, such as Le Monde's
permanent organizational structure in which ownership resides in the posi-
tions of the top editors (the dominant share) and the journalists and other
employees of the newspaper. 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 pres-
sures.

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 moan as best they can. The single greatest
focus 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 Dewey/Bienenstock poll from 1995 found 70 percent of journalists
wanting to see "freedom of expression and the protection of power from govern-
ment in journalism" strongly or somewhat strongly supported by the public,
while only 27 percent saw the "free press as a public interest". Accord-
ger to a survey by the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, most
journalists want to cover "social issues" such as education, communities, and
professional development. In contrast, most non-Hispanic journalists
say the government should regulate business,
increasingly divergent since the 1970s.

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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 investments in the community will return." Unity's 1998
national conference in Seattle, which attracted some 6,000 minority journal-
ists, was billed as the "largest gathering of reporters and editors in the United
States" and was visited by many of the most prominent 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-
headed pursuit of profits. In a local article promoting the event, media schol-
ars 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.
Scarcely a single major national news organization covered the event.

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<td>American and French newspapers: Percentage of revenues from advertising</td>
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43. "Unity Coalition" to Paul DeKok, Unity President, from website of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, December 1998. "Unity Coalition" to Paul DeKok, Unity President, from website of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, December 1998. "Unity Coalition" to Paul DeKok, Unity President, from website of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, December 1998.
