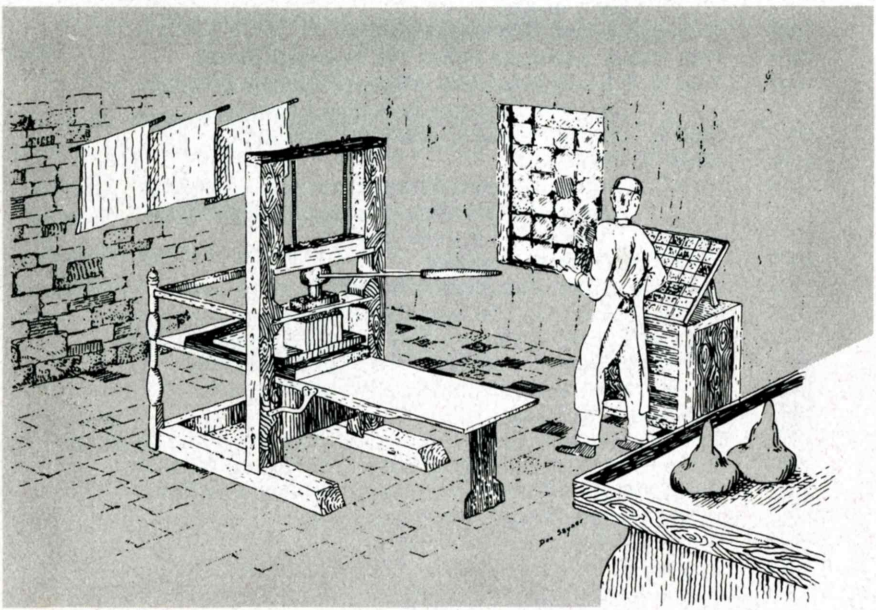
THE JOHN PETER AND ANNA CATHERINE ZENGER AWARD

FOR FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AND THE PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO KNOW

1995 Ben H. Bagdikian



Tucson, Arizona
May 1, 1996

"Not Just Another Business"

by

Ben H. Bagdikian

THE JOHN PETER ZENGER AWARD - 1995

THE ZENGER AWARD WINNERS

1995	Ben H. Bagdikian, Author/Media Critic
1994	Investigative Reporters & Editors
1993	Jane E. Kirtley, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
1992	Helen Thomas, United Press International
1991	Peter Arnett, Cable News Network
1990	Terry A. Anderson, The Associated Press
1989	Robert C. Maynard, The Oakland Tribune
1988	Jean H. Otto, Editorial Page Editor, The Rocky Mountain News
1987	Eugene L. Roberts, Jr., Executive Editor, The Philadelphia Inquirer
1986	John R. Finnegan, Editor, St. Paul (Minn.) Pioneer Press and Dispatch
1985	Thomas Winship, The Boston Globe
1984	Tom Wicker, Associate Editor, The New York Times
1982	Fred W. Friendly, Edward R. Murrow Professor Emeritus, Columbia Graduate School of Journalism
1981	Paul S. Cousley, Publisher, Alton (Ill.) Telegraph
1980	Walter Cronkite, CBS
1979	Jack C. Landau, Executive Director, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
1978	Robert H. Estabrook, Lakeville Journal
1977	Robert W. Greene, Newsday
1976	Donald F. Bolles, The Arizona Republic
1975	Seymour M. Hersh, The New York Times
1974	Thomas E. Gish, Editor and Publisher, The Mountain Eagle
1973	Katharine Graham, Publisher, The Washington Post
1972	Dan Hicks Jr., Editor, Monroe County Democrat
1971	The New York Times
1970	Erwin D. Canham, Editor-in-Chief, The Christian Science Monitor
1969	J. Edward Murray, Managing Editor, The Arizona Republic
1968	Wes Gallagher, General Manager, The Associated Press
1967	John S. Knight, Knight Newspapers, Inc.
1966	Arthur Krock, The New York Times
1965	Eugene C. Pulliam, Publisher, The Arizona Republic and Phoenix Gazette
1964	John Netherland Heiskell, Publisher, Arkansas Gazette
1963	James B. Reston, Chief Washington Bureau, The New York Times
1962	John H. Colburn, Managing Editor, Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch
1961	Clark R. Mollenhoff, Washington, Cowles Publications
1960	Virgil M. Newton Jr., Managing Editor, Tampa (Fla.) Tribune
1959	Herbert Brucker, Editor, Hartford Courant
1958	James R. Wiggins, Vice president, Executive Editor of the Washington (D.C.) Post and Times Herald
1956	James S. Pope, Executive Editor, Louisville Courier Journal
1955	Basil L. Walters, Executive Editor, Chicago Daily News and Knight Newspapers
1954	E. Palmer Hoyt, Editor and Publisher, The Denver Post

Not Just Another Business

BEN H. BAGDIKIAN

I feel honored and flattered to receive the John Peter and Anna Catherine Zenger Award. The Zenger name is an honorable one in the struggle for freedom of the press, and the fact that the award is voted by 400 editors is particularly gratifying. Being honored by one's peers has a special quality. I thank you and I thank them.

I have been a reporter and editor for 40 years. Being allowed to do your best as a reporter has always struck perhaps me as the ideal life. With all my complaints over the years, if I were 21, I would do it all over again.

But I do worry about future ability of journalists to function at their best, about modern survival of the spirit of the Zengers. So because I have worn not only the hat of a reporter but also the hair shirt of a critic, I would like to use this occasion to worry out loud.

Properly done, journalism provides the information and ideas the public most needs to know if it is to understand their communities and cast informed votes. Journalism at its best takes that mission seriously. But today there are worrisome pressures.

Our country's news staffs are becoming less visible islands in the widening ocean of their parent firms. More of these firms are very large, multinational corporations that are distant, geographically and psychologically, from the newsrooms they own and from the communities they serve. More owners do not come from news-oriented companies but from large global operations in other industries like chemicals, nuclear reactors, Hollywood studios, and real estate.

All owners of the news are not the same. Some are serious about integrity of the news but there is a strong counter-trend that feels that news, despite its high profitability, should be as inexpensive as possible, and avoid troublesome issues and reporting in depth.

At stake are the 1,500 local staffs of American daily papers that are the basic source of political and economic information for the country. These staffs remain the major source of systematic coverage of their city councils, school boards, zoning boards and daily local events. On the whole, I think local reporting does a better job of covering their local communities than national reporting does for the country as a whole.

National news has always been in danger of being detached from the realities of the country because it lives behind that great echo chamber inside the Washington Beltway.

Commercial television can do a vivid, magnificent job when it wants to. But in recent years it has seldom wanted to. Television is haunted by the viewer's finger poised over the channel button. So everything is kept as short and melodramatic as possible. Local television news, with insufficient exceptions, is a nightly tour of the emergency rooms and police blotters. The rule too often is "if it bleeds, it leads."

National network news is more sophisticated and serious, but it, too, is haunted by the channel button. After the three major networks were taken over by new corporate owners in the 1980's, public affairs documentaries disappeared. Foreign staffs were cut in half. We began to see hideous creatures like "infotainment" that is neither good information nor talented entertainment, and "tabloid journalism" that is a self-canceling phrase. Nevertheless, most Americans get their news from commercial television and over the years its news staffs have been pressured to have happy talk in between the crimes and accident.

There is some good news. Public television is much better but it is deliberately underfunded by Congress and is always fighting for its life. We need non-political adequate funding for public broadcasting, through a small fixed tax on all receiving equipment, the way it is done by the best democratic public networks in the world, England's BBC and Japan's NHK.

National Public Radio is a saving grace. But it also is forever in danger of going broke. Alternative non-commercial radio and weekly papers give voice to a much wider spectrum of ideas, most of which are absent on commercial stations and standard dailies. We can be thankful for these alternatives.

In my years as a journalist and later as a teacher of journalists, I have seen real and encouraging changes, like the young people who come into journalism. This last generation of young journalists have been some of the country's brightest students, and in my experience most of them want to do serious work.

World War II and a few wars later, we're a different country with a different population. We need more complex news reported by more serious and skilled reporters. And we are getting those young reporters. That' s the good news.

The bad news is that too much of our industry does not put a high value on those reporters and on the serious needs of their audience. Well-

educated young journalists who have been trained and have served internships find themselves looking for jobs in highly profitable news organizations that offer scandalously low wages. The last time I checked, average starting salaries of reporters was 28th out of 30 starting salaries among college graduates trained for a particular discipline or occupation. Big city and unionized salaries in newspapers and television staffs are better, but those are not found in the average community.

Most journalists are not independent editors, printers and entrepreneurs, as were the Zengers. They are hired hands. And periodically we learn of retaliation against good journalists precisely because they have done ethical competent reporting, or did a legitimate news story helpful to the average person but that offended a major advertiser.

But perhaps we can take hope from a hopeful and somewhat strange phenomenon.

The only thing that gives reporters and editors any standing different from assembly line workers in a garment factory is not in the law. The First Amendment of the Constitution says that Congress may make no law abridging freedom of the press. But for the individual journalist who works in the standard media, there is a problem that was not so big in the time of the Zengers.

We no longer live in villages where an individual can hand-set type on a sheet of paper to be posted in the local tavern or tacked onto a tree on the village green where it will be seen by everyone in town. Instead, today most Americans live in large urban communities. We still have the First Amendment, but in practical terms that means that if we have a message for the whole community we have a guaranteed constitutional right to start our own $100,000,000 metropolitan daily.

It is analogous to Anatole France's aphorism, "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal bread."

Yet there is something else important that is not in media law or the literal words of the Constitution, but that makes a difference because the First Amendment has created an expectation in most of the public.

The law does not prevent a paper or broadcaster from lying or distorting or deliberately misleading the public. But something in our history and in our historic heroes of journalism has given the

American public the expectation that it is wrong for the standard news to mislead them. For that we can thank the values and histories of the past in our traditional heroes in American journalism, like the Zengers, Thomas Paine, Horace Greeley, William Allen White, Lincoln Steffens, and Edward R. Murrow—plus histories of our anti-heroes like the original Hearst.

This expectation, vague but real, also comes from the feeling that more and more of our news outlets are either monopolies or close to it, and because news lies at the heart of a democracy of informed voters, the abuse of that power is an abuse of democracy.

Central to this public understanding is the realization that though news is a business, the news is not just another business.

As a practical matter, vague, unwritten public assumptions have granted special privileges to individual journalists in our society.

For example, those expectations give American reporters extraordinary access to those with power. It gives reporters permission to go places ordinary citizens cannot or will not go. For some reason, most public servants and even some private corporations feel reluctant to refuse to answer questions from newspeople. No main body of journalists elsewhere in the world has that degree of the special role of the journalist.

Those unwritten public assumptions are an indirect inheritance of the First Amendment whose creation depended on the pre-Revolutionary experiences of people like the Zengers. And it is worth repeating what many of you already know about the Zengers.

As you know, Zenger was a poor immigrant who became a printer in New York in 1733 and tangled with a character named Bill Cosby. This was not any known ancestor of our present-day comedian, but His Majesty's Royal Governor, The Honorable William Cosby, Esquire. Governor Cosby couldn't get decisions he demanded from the state Supreme Court so he kicked out the Chief Justice in favor of an obedient crony. Zenger's paper took up the cause of the deposed Chief Justice and his political party.

Zenger had a lot of fun with the Governor's appointees. When Governor Cosby named a new sheriff notorious for his pomposity and flamboyant uniforms, Zenger printed an ad for a lost monkey whose clothes were remarkably like those worn by the new sheriff. But Zenger was also serious. He reported high-handed acts of the Governor side-by-side with classical essays on tyranny.

The Governor arrested Zenger for "seditious libel." Zenger re-

fused to make bail and remained in jail for nine months. But like most journalists, he couldn't stop writing. Speaking to his wife, Catherine, and friends, he dictated items for his paper through the opening in his prison, through what he called, "The Hole in the Door." He informed his readers:

"I hope for the future by the Liberty of Speaking . . . through the Hole of the Door of the Prison, to entertain you with my Weekly Journal as formerly and am your obliged Humble Servant."

When a powerful lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, took up his case and tried to argue that Zenger had only spoken the truth. But the judge stopped him, saying, "You cannot be admitted . . to give the truth of a libel in evidence." So Hamilton turned to the jury and said, in effect, that it was up to them. He told the jury that this was, quote:

"Not the cause of the poor printer, not of New York alone, No! It is the best cause. It is the cause of liberty . . . . of exposing and opposing arbitrary power and speaking and writing Truth."

The jury found Zenger not guilty. It was the classic argument of truth as a defense and the right of a jury to decide what is true. It took many years before those principles became a practical defense. But they remained alive in memory and eventually in the Constitution. While Zenger was in prison and after his death, his wife, Catherine, became the second woman publisher in America.

We have inherited Zenger's idea of the Hole in the Door. Today it is not so much a conduit out of prison, but that unwritten assumption by the public that the standard news should reflect reality without narrow, self-serving suppression or distortion. But that Hole in the Door, based as it is solely on a public expectation, depends on public trust in the news. And during the last 20 years, surveys show public confidence in the news has been declining.

I think a major reason for the growing suspicion of the news comes in part from seeing TV images of reporters and camera people charging like sharks around some news celebrity and yelling mostly vapid questions. It comes partly standard news that seldom puts emphasis and repetition of news that deals with the real economic problems of the average family. The real income of the average family has been falling for 20 years. Unemployment and underemployment and poverty is rising. That is not what we hear being argued in the national dialogue nor do we see it much explored in our standard news. What is in the news every single day is consid-

erable information on the stock market, even though 80 percent of Americans do not own stocks or bonds.

We need the stock market reports but we need even more the news that most affects the central concerns of most of our population.

This is not a new problem. Most news proprietors have always had to be reminded that the only thing that gives them special public privileges beyond other businesses is that news is not just another business. And that it is the only part of their enterprise that distinguishes them from all other competing businesses.

Radio and television have staffs capable of telling their huge audiences about the news that affects the serious concerns of that audience. But radio and television have temptations that print journalists do not. They depend on how the journalists sounds of looks. That is inevitable, but it seems to have come close to obliterating the central reason radio and TV should sound clear and be unoffensive to see in favor of journalists as celebrities with skilled hairdressers, sitting in sets designed by interior decorators.

This is not asking the impossible. Good journalism can pay without being a beauty contest. Edward R. Murrow was our greatest broadcast journalist and made CBS a lot of money, but the only times I ever saw him in person, he seemed to have a worse barber than I had.

I have always thought that it was a blessing to print reporting that no one cares what the reporter looks like. I may be prejudiced because I have an unfortunate ability not to look like Paul Newman, but I think that becoming a celebrity is one of the worst things that can happen to a good reporter. Celebrities begin to have a stake in drawing attention to themselves. But journalists should be the observers, not the observed.

That tradition of the Murrows and the historic heroes of print journalists must be renewed in every generation. But today, when I read about CBS and ABC censoring themselves because they were threatened not by a Royal Governor, but by, of all things, a tobacco company, I wonder what has happened to Zenger's Hole in the Door.

In modern times maintaining professional and ethical standards in the news places a powerful obligation on the firms that own the news. It also depends on journalists themselves, on reporters, editors, and newscasters to fight for integrity of the news. It can be

risky. I have always found it hard to tell someone else to risk his or her job by standing up for principle because I don't have to feed that someone else's family or pay that someone else's rent.

But we sometimes underestimate the power of persuasion within a newsroom. If journalists find themselves in a news organization that respects integrity of the news, they should thank their stars and work hard to keep it that way. If they do not, they should not underestimate the possibility of doing their homework and making a solid, civil case for why specific stories, are important to their communities. Few editors are totally immune to that. It does not always work, which is why I tell new journalists to use some portion of every paycheck to create a "Go To Hell Fund."

I think that for the most part, most of our contemporary journalists know and accept their obligations. They know that they work in a big business, but that news is not just another business. The reinforcement of that public expectation has to come mainly from journalists themselves—just as it always has in our history.

I think journalists in America need a unified voice on issues of professional ethics and integrity. They have useful journals, like the Columbia and American Journalism Reviews and other smaller ones, that are good, therapeutic voices for the news, but seen mostly by journalists. We have adversarial media watchers.

We have the Newspaper Guild as a union, which tries to protect salaries and working conditions, which God knows we need, but like most unions it has to struggle to stay alive in the face of new laws and labor boards that favor management and high-powered law firms available to help newspapers break their unions.

Finally, we have the Society of Professional Journalists. It is not a union but a society specifically concerned with professional standards and unity. I would like to see the Society of Professional Journalists, which now encompasses only a small minority, to grow to include a majority of our more than 75,000 professional journalists in print and broadcast newsrooms. Through the Society, all our journalists, local and national, in print and in electronics, could become a voice for protecting ethical performance. It could monitor managerial moves against reportorial integrity. The American Association of University Professors monitors academic freedom of faculties on campuses. In that same way, the SPJ could become a powerful voice to do for journalistic professional standards what the AAUP does for the academic freedom of university faculties.

Today journalists' Hole in the Door depends on maintaining public expectation that news is not just another business, that reporting and writing the news is not just a keyboard exercise, that the personalities in the news mean nothing if their news fails its public duty. It is all that keeps us from being merely stenographers.

Sometimes we have internal arguments on whether journalism is a profession or a trade or just another occupation. The answer is not important, though the best journalism is most likely to come out of a sense of professional responsibility. It will come out of the constant reminder that the quality of our democracy depends in a profound way on the quality of our daily news. That was true 263 years ago when John Peter Zenger went to prison and his wife Catherine put out the paper, and it is as true today as it was 208 years ago when James Madison said:

". . . a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both."