

because, on the road in distant states, it offers the reassurance of stale, predictable homogeneity.

Almost every product now sells itself the same way: by succumbing to its dreary stultifying corporate multinational conformity you're somehow expressing yourself as an individual, freewheeling, independent, full of attitude, living on the edge. Thus, the big record conglomerates imitate the grainy, raw graphics of small independent labels, most of which aren't independent anyway: Maverick Records is co-owned by Time Warner; if you want to start a real indie label, you should call it bland Corporate Subsidiary

Records. It is advertisers—not their products—that have given us “heroin chic”; there's nothing objectionable about Benetton clothes, only its fatuous ads of dying Aids victims and traffic accidents; there's nothing wrong with Calvin Klein underwear, only the pedophile homoerotic fantasies of his billboards.

And, so one must suppose, there's nothing wrong with a KOHLER San Raphael™ toilet—though, as a personal protest, I'd rather cross the road to the Blow Bros. portapotty than have one in the house. Contemporary advertising offers a paradox: the higher it aims, the lower it sinks. The more it departs from

the “Blast yourself free with Ease-O-Lax!” approach in favor of high-style, high-concept, urbane artistry, the more it debases everything it touches. It's hard to discern any redeeming humor or charm in the collaboration between “Michelangelo, Painter” and “Scott Seifert, Photographer”: it's about selling a toilet. And instead of the overpowering beauty of the original and the awe it inspires in devout and nonbelieving alike, all we can do is see it as a grim metaphor for the state of our adman's culture: Instead of God reaching out to give life to mankind, He is now reaching out to flush us down His celestial can. ❧



PRESS WATCH

by John Corry

No More Big Shots

Ten suggestions on how to save journalism from itself.

I am journalist, hear me roar. Some two dozen of the big-shot kind have signed a statement calling for “a period of national reflection” because they are “concerned about the direction” of their profession. They fear it is becoming filled with “opinion, infotainment and sensation.” Needless to say none of the journalists who signed the statement were responsible for any of that—who could even think such a thing about David Halberstam, Carl Bernstein, or the *New York Times*'s Bob Herbert?—but in the spirit of collegiality they will all pitch in to stop it. Howard Kurtz reported in the *Washington Post* that they “plan to forge a set of journalistic principles

at forums around the country.” Then they will issue a report. Presumably the period of national reflection will follow.

The journalists will hold the forums and forge the principles under the auspices of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. It will be paid for by the Pew Charitable Trusts, and should not be confused with the Journalism Credibility Project, which will be run by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The credibility project, as Mark Jurkowitz, the *Boston Globe* ombudsman, wrote, will attempt to “find out why people don't love and trust newspapers anymore.” The editors suspect it has something to do with credibility—hence the title of their project—although apparently they came to the suspicion only lately. “I have finally been persuaded,” said the

president of the editors' society, Sandra Mims Rowe of the (Portland) *Oregonian*, “that the issue of bias is probably real.” What persuaded her, it seems, were all the newspaper readers who said it was real.

Say now that both projects are probably harmless. Big-shot journalists want to be seen as serious—looking serious is part of their job description—and Pew, which reportedly is spending \$4.8 million on the excellence project, will be happy to oblige them. What's a big charitable foundation for if not to inspire a set of principles and a period of national reflection? The big-shot journalists and the people at Pew are very well met. It is unlikely their collaboration will produce anything new or useful, but it will offer some fine opportunities for looking deeply concerned and very serious.

The credibility project appears to be a more modest affair. For one thing, it will cost only \$1 million or so, and it will be dealing with something real: the future of American

JOHN CORRY is *The American Spectator*'s senior correspondent.

newspapers. Therefore you wish the editors well, even while knowing that already they are in trouble. By bias they mean liberal bias, although it has always pained them to say so; and they have never known what to do about it, other than to hope no one will mention it again. Typically they say liberal bias does not exist, but even if it does it is irrelevant because it has nothing to do with how the news is covered. All contrary indications are dismissed.

Thus a Freedom Forum survey last year found that 89 percent of Washington reporters and bureau chiefs voted for Bill Clinton for president in 1992, and only 7 percent backed George Bush. Moreover, only 2 percent of the reporters and bureau chiefs identified themselves as conservatives, while 91 percent said they were liberals or moderates. Similarly, a survey of 1,037 journalists by the newspaper editors themselves found that in 1996 "only 15 percent of the newsroom labeled itself conservative/Republican or leaning in that direction, down from 22 percent in 1988," the last time the editors took a comparable survey.

Conservatives said that surely this proved something. The journalistic establishment, however, closed ranks, and said it did not. As it happened, the Freedom Forum survey was released at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. But characteristically the *New York Times* did not mention it in its coverage of the meeting, and reported instead on diversity in the newsroom. Meanwhile, Everette Dennis, a senior vice president of the Freedom Forum, wrote an article—"The Myth of the Liberal Slant"—for the editors' magazine, the *American Editor*. It said:

There is no convincing evidence that journalists infect their stories—intentionally or otherwise—with their own political prejudices....The credibility of the media is not suffering because of a liberal bias; it's suffering, in large part, because of the continuing charge of bias that has gone unanswered for too long.

Actually Ev Dennis is a nice man, and the editors, most of them, anyway, are nice, and even the big-shot journalists are not all awful. But almost to a man they speak nonsense, and the idea that journalism is free

of political prejudice is absurd. When the apologists carry on about an absence of bias they are talking only about factual accuracy—not about what stories are covered, or how they are being played. The front page of the *Times* will have many stories about gay rights, lesbian rights, and threats to the environment. But for something on the right-to-life movement, say, or the most recent White House scandal, or why the Air Force might need a new fighter, you know you must look somewhere else. Things have been this way for a long while now, and there are no signs that they will change.

Nonetheless the arguments about bias will continue, and most likely they will grow. The press takes itself very seriously, and the more it is criticized the more serious about itself it becomes. It has forgotten that it is supposed only to inform and entertain, and not to determine the national agenda. It has also forgotten that not long ago journalism was considered a more or less raffish profession. Gas-baggery about high principles seldom intruded, and things worked out quite well. But everything is in flux now, and no one knows any longer what journalism is, or where it is supposed to be going. You know things are a mess when editors worry about credibility, and big-shot journalists sign dopey statements.

Presswatch, however, will try to help. Here are ten things that could be done, but almost certainly will not be done, to help clean up the mess:

1. The word "media" should be banned, or at least its use severely restricted. Larry King is media; so is *George* magazine. When the press thinks it is the press, it should just go ahead and say so. The public will sort out who's press, and who's only media. Journalists can stop having an identity crisis.

2. No print reporter should ever appear on television. The only exception would be if a reporter is promoting a book, or if he is asked to go on C-Span.

3. Any journalist who vacations on Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, or the better parts of the Hamptons must be instantly dismissed by his news organization. Fire Island or Jersey Shore vacations, however, would still be considered appropriate.

4. No print reporter should be allowed to use a tape recorder. Reporters turn them on, and then forget they are supposed to be in charge of the interview. This is why quotes in newspaper stories are boring.

5. All foundations that give money to "media" projects must immediately stop doing it. The projects never have anything to do with journalism, and are always about social issues. No good ever comes from this.

6. The word "anchor" must be dropped, and news reader used in its place. Obviously this is self-explanatory.

7. Newsrooms must allow cigarette smoking. If nothing else, smoking is traditional. But more important, it would show that journalists do not believe their own stuff about second-hand smoke. This would show they were not PC.

8. No reporter should be allowed to register by party. This would be symbolic, of course, a way of suggesting, even if not true, that the reporter is not connected to any particular group of politicians. If the newspapers editors are really concerned about credibility, they should consider this. The reporters would still be allowed to vote.

9. A journalist who takes part in a seminar, panel discussion, or conference of any kind should be subject to instant dismissal. The only exception would be for high-up editors. Taking part in those things is part of their job.

10. News organizations, especially newspapers, must stop taking surveys and asking people what they think. Everyone always says the same thing—that they distrust the press, and want it to be more relevant, and so on. Invariably this leads to the conferences and panel discussions. Many absolutely rotten ideas then arise, and sooner or later someone will try to put them into practice. Community outreach programs, for example, all began with reader surveys.

To be sure, this is only a partial list of things that could be done, and certainly there are many others—abolishing the White House Correspondents' Dinner, for example, or restricting the number of journalistic awards, or doing anything at all, in fact, to minimize self-aggrandizement. And none of this, of course, would require a period of national reflection. ❁



by Benjamin J. Stein

Watch Yourself

Sunday

I have a list I keep in my head of the ten greatest consumer inventions of the twentieth century. Not stuff like atom bombs or jet airplanes or the computer, but things that make your life far more calm. High on my list are the air conditioner and the Sony Discman. They both perform basically the same function: they blot out the outside world and allow you into your own better, quieter, or at least more private world.

Right now I am blessing the folks who invented the laser, in particular a pal of my dad named Larry Goldmuntz, because without it, there would be no disc players. Without the disc players, there would be no means for me to have peace while I fly in the last row of first class from Los Angeles to Dallas. In front of me, a man and woman are talking, drunk, nonstop, flirting, giggling, as if they had never met anyone of the other sex before. (We used to say "opposite sex" but now we know there is no opposite sex, folks, just brothers and sisters in PC Land.) They are deafeningly loud, and I can only keep my sanity by listening to the disc of "Gimme Shelter" at high volume for the whole flight, over and over again. I pity the people in first class who do not have Discmen.

I find it amazing that people in airplanes can be as rude as they are. When I think about it, being on an airplane flight is like being with a group of people with whom you have absolutely nothing in common, who may or may not have just been released from prison or from mental hospitals, who might have grown up without any manners at all, who might have

missed their dose of Prozac for the last few days, who might have just learned that they were fired, and these people—with whom you would have absolutely nothing to do in a million years—happen to be sitting within inches of your face. They can, with behavior that would seem rude to a Hutu militiaman, wreck your trip and think nothing of it.

But with the Discman, you can have some little measure of isolation and peace. God bless all the people who made it, made batteries, made laser discs, and made the Rolling Stones.

Anyway, we finally arrived at DFW. I love that airport. Night or day it's filled with beautiful girls. These days, they recognize me and giggle. I like that a lot. The DFW airport is just *jammed* with beautiful girls tonight. I wish I could have had all of them in my high school class, but most of them weren't born then.

Off to the Mansion Hotel, the best one in Dallas, to a really nice room, and then down to the bar for a snack. Foiled again. Two men were sitting at a table smoking vile cigars. God, they smell awful. How can people be allowed to smoke cigars in a public place? If they can do that, why can't they smear horse manure all over themselves and the people near them?

I walked into a nearby lounge where a lone pianist was singing "Autumn Leaves." He did a great job. There were only two couples in the room. One of them was a stunning blond woman in her twenties with a much older man who looked to me like her boss. I would have stayed just to watch her and hear the singer, but I couldn't bear the smoke.

Back in my room, I ordered English muffins, which arrived about an hour later, cold, tasteless, miserable. At the best hotel in Dallas. Wow, have times changed.

Monday

Off to a set to do a commercial for Oldsmobile. The stage is cavernous, freezing, almost empty. But the people I am working with are hard-working, friendly, intelligent, just the kind of people that we all want to work with if we can. I love working with Texas people. (The agency folks for my Clear Eyes ad are also from Dallas.)

We got everything done in no time at all, including a talk with the Oldsmobile people, who are truly working to sell that car. It's a great car, reliable, stylish, powerful, and an amazing value. So, with good ads, it should sell, sell, sell.

After the commercial, back to DFW to fly to Washington. This was a perfectly fine flight with much more civilized people. From National, I took a cab to my father's apartment, sat down, had a nice talk with him about the budget, ballet, and opera, and then went to the River Inn, and fell asleep. It was a good day.

Wednesday

Here are a few really stupid things to do in Washington, D.C.: on a boiling hot, sticky, humid day, go out for a bike ride in a long-sleeved shirt and wool pants. Then walk up a steep hill to Georgetown, sweating, panting, heart pounding, stomach churning, and feeling as if you are going to die.

I did those things this afternoon, and truly felt it would be my last day on the planet. When you have lived in L.A. for twenty-one years, you really can be taken totally by surprise by the humidity. I finally staggered into a shopping center at Wisconsin and M Street, mercifully air conditioned, and collapsed at a table next to a pizza stand. Sweat dripped off me onto the floor and formed a little pool. Kids

BENJAMIN J. STEIN is a writer, actor, economist, and lawyer living in Hollywood and Malibu.