

Telling It Like It Is: Letters To The Editor Discuss Journalism Ethics in 10 American Magazines, 1962-1972-1982-1992

By Brian Thornton

Public opinion surveys and journalism trade magazines such as *Columbia Journalism Review* and *American Journalism Review* have documented abundant animosity by readers toward journalists. For example, a recent *CJR* cover story suggested many Americans regard modern journalists as “a generation of vipers.”¹ And a 1995 *AJR* article said journalists are “under siege” from angry consumers of news. Driving this point home, Andrew Kohut, director of the *Times Mirror Center for the People & The Press*, was quoted as saying many people insist the press hinders the country’s efforts to solve its problems.² The mainstream press has reported much the same story. For example, *Atlantic Monthly* ran a cover story in 1996 explaining “Why Americans Hate The Media.”³ And in the wake of the death of England’s Princess Diana there was a spate of stories saying the public was fed up with journalists who were seen as “barracudas,” “jackals,” “piranhas,” and “vultures” feeding on the misfortunes of others.⁴ Another example of public antipathy toward the press unfolded in the scandals that embroiled the Clinton presidency: President Clinton’s soaring popularity has been interpreted as a backlash against the press. In this regard, various public opinion polls assert that people see reporters as “too intrusive” and “sensationalistic” in the way they pry into the private lives of public officials.⁵

While polls and articles are valuable secondhand barometers of public opinion, a vital element is absent from these examinations: What is missing is the voice of consumers of news directly expressing their own thoughts about the reporting business and its ethics—or a lack thereof. How do readers make sense of what they read? Opinion polls force people to choose between limited options. But when given the ability to speak with their own voice, and in their own words, what do readers say? What have readers of news across the country written about journalistic ethics, for instance, and has that opinion changed over the past 30 years?

One way to tap directly into public discussion of journalism ethics is to look at the historical record of published letters to the editor. Media scholar David B. Hill argues there is a strong link between public opinion and opinions expressed in letters to the editor.⁶ Hill’s assertion may be problematic, given the possible capriciousness of editorial selection of letters for publication. Nevertheless, the historical record of published letters can provide valuable insights into the themes of public discussion of journalism and how those themes changed over time. To discover just what the themes have been over the past 30 years, and how they may have changed, this paper studies public expressions about journalism and journalistic ethics by looking at the historical record of a selection of published letters to the editor from 1962, 1972, 1982 and 1992.

To obtain a national view of public sentiment about journalism, letters to the editor published in 10 national news magazines were examined. Letters to the editor from

news magazine readers were studied because these letters come from all parts of the country. In any given issue of a national news magazine such as *Time*, letters might appear from readers from Bangor to Honolulu and nearly all points in between. As a result, magazine readers can engage in a nationwide discussion of issues rather than parochial conversations about regional issues.⁷

One driving purpose of this research is to find out how many published letters discussed journalism, what letter writers said about the press, and whether there were any recurring themes. A further goal is to discover whether public discussion about the press changed over the 30-year period. To answer these questions this research examined all the letters printed in 10 popular news magazines—a total of 15,045 letters. Out of this group, the letters that discussed journalism—3,689—were analyzed in greater detail.⁸ The purpose is to add historical context to the ongoing conversation about journalism ethics by magazine readers.

Theoretical Concept

Journalism historian Hazel Dicken-Garcia argues such study is needed because most media ethics literature lacks historical perspective.⁹ Further, the voice of the audience speaking about journalism standards in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s has been almost entirely missing from journalism history. This current research is built in part on the theoretical framework established by Dicken-Garcia. She studied journalistic standards between 1800 and 1900 by reading scores of newspaper editorials and letters to the editor in England and America. Of particular relevance is her stated desire to find out whether letters to the editor in the past have discussed such journalistic topics as telling the truth and sensationalism and whether such discussion changed over time.¹⁰ This current research takes Dicken-Garcia's questions and applies them to magazine letters to the editor published in 1962, 1972, 1982 and 1992.

Limitations

Even as this examination of published letters to the editor is undertaken, however, it must first be admitted that the historical study of such letters offers many challenges. For example, the letters do not reflect the entire public conversation about journalism that took place in the past. But as journalism historian David Nord writes, letters to the editor provide a record of at least a portion of the ongoing conversation of a community.¹¹

It is also true that letters are filtered through editor/gatekeepers, who may or may not screen out letters about the media. This study makes no assumptions about the extent of such editorial influence in the selection of letters to the editor. Rather, it focuses on published letters to the editor as historical artifacts. These letters represent what readers saw in print. Simply by being published in a magazine's pages the letters to the editor helped set the agenda for public discussion.¹² The historical record of published letters to the editor can and does reflect *some* ideas of the population at large, especially those literate enough to express their views in writing.

Nord describes letters to the editor as useful historical texts because they reveal some readers speaking directly to—and often shouting at—editors. Unlike other magazine readers who remain silent, those whose letters to the editor were published at least left a permanent and public account of their opinions of journalistic standards. Nord argues that a historical examination of letters to the editor can give us what we may need most to construct a history of readership: that is, a glimpse into the past of some readers reacting to content.¹³

Such a study can help researchers understand more about magazine readers and how those readers relate to different publications—and how that relationship may have changed over a period of years. The letter writers were and remain a literate, opinionated, and highly visible portion of the population. Published letters to the editor offer a significant view into a limited but influential world. One researcher described letters to the editor as “more than a hot readership item . . . and more than an access mechanism. It’s a regional institution, combining some of the elements of the town meeting, the rural party line, the loafers’ bench on the courthouse square and the continuing referendum.”¹⁴

Why Consider 1962, 1972, 1982 and 1992?

The time periods were initially selected for this study for several reasons. First, 1972 was chosen because it was the year the Watergate scandal began to unfold after five men were arrested June 17 for breaking into the Democratic national headquarters in Washington, D.C. Soon after that the role of the press in uncovering possible presidential wrongdoing began to be discussed throughout the country. Was the press out to get the president? Were journalists reporting news or creating it? Was all this talk of corruption just the work of biased muckrakers? It was almost impossible to avoid these kinds of questions during this presidential election year. As a result, 1972 seems a fertile time for people to have written letters to the editor and discussed journalism.

But to put 1972 findings in perspective it seemed logical to compare letters from 10 years before that—that is 1962—to see if 1972 represented an anomaly in public letter writing about journalism. Some historians and politicians suggest the public was less skeptical of the press in the '60s; a good way to test this hypothesis was to look at how many letters were published about the press in 1962 and what those letters said.

Letters to the editor printed in 1982 were then selected for comparison—to offer the perspective of a decade removed from the passion of Watergate. Would letters to the editor still reflect as much emotion about the press and its journalistic standards eight years after Richard Nixon was finally forced from office? The study set out to answer this question by looking at a year that also saw interest soar in journalistic ethics, both in academia and in the larger society. Many new books on the topic of journalistic ethics were printed during this time. Furthermore, many new college courses on the topic of journalistic ethics were added to the curriculum, and centers dedicated entirely to the study of media ethics were established.¹⁵ As a result, studying letters to the editor from 1982 seemed particularly attractive: Was all the talk about media ethics by professionals reflected in letters from consumers of news—the readers?¹⁶

Finally 1992 was selected for study as another 10-year benchmark period simply because it was once again a presidential election year. The press was once more involved in covering another scandal involving a presidential candidate—this time the Democratic contender, accused of having an adulterous affair. Journalistic ethics once again came to the forefront in this matter as many people wondered how intently—and to what extent—the press should cover the personal lives of politicians.

Literature Review

There is a small but steadily growing body of material surrounding the historical study of letters to the editor. Thematically the research about letters to the editor can be largely divided into three categories: 1) The hazards of trying to ascertain public opinion with certainty through letters to the editor; 2) Conjecture about who writes letters; and 3) Discussion of why people feel compelled to write letters to the editor.

Category one, public opinion: Schulyer Foster Jr. writes that most letters to the editor are negative or against something or somebody, be it war, the New Deal or gambling. As a result, Foster argues such negative letters can't accurately measure public opinion.¹⁷ In keeping with that argument, James Cockrum asserts that letters nearly always react to stories covered but rarely initiate discussion of new issues; this adds to the unreliability of letters as a measure of public opinion.¹⁸ That unreliability is also explored by David L. Grey and Trevor Brown, who argue that published letters in presidential elections are more likely measures of the gatekeepers' politics rather than the views of the electorate.¹⁹

Category two, writer identity: William D. Tarrant, who studied Eugene (Oregon) *Register-Guard* letter writers, hypothesizes that frequent writers are wealthier, better educated, less mobile and more religious than average citizens.²⁰ Also exploring the identity of letter writers, Sidney Forsythe's 1950 study found the average age of those who write letters to the editor was 59; he concludes that most letter writers are white, male, at least third- or fourth-generation Americans, with above-average education, holding down white-collar jobs.²¹ In contrast, Gary Vacin found in a 1965 study that letter writers come from a wide range of occupations.²² In a further examination of letter writers, Emmett Buell argues that the writers are too often dismissed as kooks, but in reality are not significantly different from the general population;²³ however, David Hill describes letter writers as mostly Republican, conservative and negative. Despite his disclaimer about the bias of most letter writers, Hill uses letters as a way to measure public sentiment about the Equal Rights Amendment.²⁴

Category three, reasons for writing: In studying why people write letters to the editor, Hal Davis and Galen Rarick argue that one of the main functions of letters to the editor is to give the irate, infuriated and irritated a place to vent.²⁵ A 1966 study of published letter-writers in Michigan, undertaken by John Klempner, offered nine reasons why people write letters to the editor: 1. To make someone see the light; 2. To promote one's self; 3. To right a wrong; 4. Having been asked; 5. Enjoyment of writing; 6. Feeling

one had to write; 7. A sense of public duty; 8. To increase self-esteem; and 9. For therapeutic benefits.²⁶ In keeping with this finding, Byron Lander argues that letters to the editor function as a safety valve, allowing readers a “catharsis to blow off steam in an unreasoned and emotional way.”²⁷ Further, additional news coverage of certain events prompts letters, as Steve Pasternak and Suraj Kapoor assert in a 1980 article. The authors write that there was a “dramatic increase” in letters to the editor in the 1970s because of increased coverage of “letter generating topics” such as abortion, Watergate, gun control and the Vietnam War.²⁸ David Pritchard and Dan Berkowitz, in a 1991 article that used a random selection of 10 newspapers, tested the hypothesis that attention to crime in letters to the editor influences subsequent front-page coverage of crime.²⁹

These authors, however, have not attempted to systematically track letters to the editor in news magazines over a 30-year period as a way to gauge some history of public discussion of journalism ethics and see if or how that may have changed.

Method

The magazines examined in this research were: *Atlantic*, *Forbes*, *Harper's*, *Life*, *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *Newsweek*, *The Progressive*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. (The magazine selection process is explained shortly.) All letters to the editor published in these 10 popular news magazines in 1962, 1972, 1982 and 1992—a total of 15,045 letters—were examined. Any letters that discussed journalism—a total of 3,689—were then analyzed in more depth.

To be labeled as a letter about journalism, a letter simply needed to discuss what a writer thought was good or bad reporting or complain or praise the news media in some way. For example, a letter that said, “We have to look at mass media as an instrument to stir and provoke society,”³⁰ was considered a letter about journalistic standards. Or if a letter suggested that, for example, “your magazine is participating in the despicable practice of our modern press community, first to build up a man to celebrity proportions and then to dump him with complete disregard for truth,”³¹ that, too, was considered a letter about journalistic standards. In sum, if a letter mentioned the news media in any way, positive or negative, it was considered part of the discussion of journalism. As a test of coder reliability, all the 1962 letters were double-coded by two researchers working independently to determine if the letters were about journalism. The results were then compared and coders agreed on all but four letters. These letters were then dropped from the study.³²

How the Magazines Were Selected

The 10 magazines studied represent a cross-section of the magazine field, ranging from the conservative business publication, *Forbes*, to the left-wing *Nation*, with mainstream magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, which each week sell 4 million and 3 million copies respectively, included. Then for a different perspective, considerably smaller and more specialized publications such as *The Progressive*, which sells only

40,000 copies a month, and *The Nation*, which sells roughly 80,000 copies a month, were also examined. More information about how each magazine was selected is explained in the accompanying footnote.³³

Coding Process

Once the letters about journalism were collected, every letter was analyzed to determine its theme. Nine thematic categories emerged as readers “constructed” journalism in their remarks, describing in their own words the functions they thought the press should serve. Thus these categories were derived from readers’ comments. The categories include truth telling, objectivity, fairness, public service, moral force, sensationalism, free press, trust, and political non-partisanship.³⁴ Each letter to the editor could be and often was coded more than once if it discussed more than one journalistic theme. Once more, coder reliability was tested by having two people code the themes of the 1962 letters—and agree on the thematic classification. A final classification was then performed on the letters with each journalism letter put into either a positive or negative column, depending on whether the overall message congratulated or attacked the press.

Findings: Dwindling Letters About Journalism

This study found that within 30 years the number of published letters to the editor discussing journalistic standards in the 10 news magazines decreased by more than 95 percent, declining from 66 percent to 3 percent. (All percentages have been rounded off.) The breakdown is as follows. In 1962 the 10 magazines published a total of 3,661 letters to the editor—and 2,445, or 66 percent, commented on journalism.³⁵ (See Table 1.) This figure declined in 1972, when a total of 3,727 letters were published but only 956 or 25 percent of the letters pertained to journalism. The decline continued in 1982, when the total of 3,943 letters contained only 170 letters about journalism— only 4 percent of the letters published that year. Finally, in 1992, journalism was the subject of 114 letters out of 3,693 letters to the editor—roughly 3 percent of the total.

Table 1: Total letters & percent related to journalism, 1962, 1972, 1982, 1992

All 10 magazines	All letters	Letters about journalism	% related to journalism
1962	3,682	2,445	66%
1972	3,727	956	25%
1982	3,943	170	4%
1992	3,693	114	3%

(All percentages throughout this article have been rounded off)

Findings: Increasing Number of Negative Letters

The reduced number of letters to the editor about journalism reflect increasingly hostile views of the press. (See Table 2 below.) Thus by 1992, 93 percent of 114 journalism letters were negative, complaining about how the press was unfair, inaccurate and biased, among other deficiencies. In contrast, only 47 percent of the 2,445 letters about journalism published in 1962 were negative.

Table 2: Negative v. positive journalism letters, **1962, 1972, 1982, 1992**

All 10 magazines	Letters about journalism	Positive letters	Negative letters
1962	2,445	1,290 (52%)	1,155 (47%)
1972	956	474 (49%)	482 (50%)
1982	170	37 (21%)	133 (78%)
1992	114	8 (7%)	106 (93%)

Findings: Shifting Themes

While the number of negative letters moved in only one direction—upward—the leading themes reflected in the letters varied widely over the decades. Table 2, for example, shows public service was the most frequently expressed theme of published letters to the editor about journalism in 1962—mentioned in 52 percent of the 1962 letters, or 1,295 letters out of 2,445 letters.

In contrast with this public service theme, objectivity was the most common theme of 1992 letters—the focus of 35 percent of the printed letters that discussed journalism, or 40 out of 114 letters. In the interests of brevity, a more detailed explanation of only the top five themes of the journalism letters—as these themes were suggested by the letters themselves—follows below.

Table 3: Themes, numbers, and percents, **1962**

Themes 1962	Themes—2,445 journalism letters	Theme %—2,445 journalism letters
Truth	810 letters	33%
Objectivity	288 letters	11%
Fairness	456 letters	18%
Public Service	1,295 letters	53%
Moral Force	58 letters	2%
Sensationalism	14 letters	.5%
Free Press	9 letters	.3%
Trust	5 letters	.2
Political Partisanship	13 letters	.5%
Privacy	0	0

(Note: One letter can and often did contain more than one theme. In this case 2,948 themes are mentioned in 2,445 letters.)

Table 4: Themes, numbers, and percents, **1972**

Themes 1972	Themes — 956 journalism letters	Theme % — 956 journalism letters
Truth	294 letters	30%
Objectivity	122 letters	12%
Fairness	66 letters	6%
Public Service	388 letters	40%
Moral Force	89 letters	9%
Sensationalism	17 letters	1%
Free Press	5 letters	.05%
Trust	0	0
Political Partisanship	2 letters	.02%

(See note for Table 3.)

Table 5: Themes, numbers and percents, **1982**

Themes 1982	Themes — 170 journalism letters	Theme % — 170 journalism letters
Truth	56 letters	33%
Objectivity	27 letters	15%
Fairness	26 letters	15%
Public Service	31 letters	18%
Moral Force	15 letters	8%
Sensationalism	13 letters	7%
Free Press	2 letters	1%
Trust	13 letters	7%
Political Partisanship	1 letter	1%

(See note for Table 3.)

Table 6: Themes, numbers and percents, **1992**

Themes 1992	Themes — 114 journalism letters	Theme % — 114 journalism letters
Truth	25 letters	22%
Objectivity	40 letters	35%
Fairness	22 letters	19%
Public Service	22 letters	19%
Moral Force	7 letters	6%
Sensationalism	10 letters	8%
Free Press	1 letter	.8%
Trust	6 letters	5%
Political Partisanship	5 letters	4%

(See note for Table 3.)

Public Service

Public service, the most frequently expressed theme in 1962 letters, was generally defined by letter writers as the willingness of a publication to “instruct, to teach us how to be good citizens and to bring beauty and intelligent reporting into our homes,”³⁶ as one

Life magazine reader wrote in 1962. Public service was further defined as journalistic excellence, provided without fear or favor and without concern for financial gain. When readers came upon stories with depth and perspective, demonstrating extreme accuracy and sparking interest, they often commented on the story's public service.

For example, Martha Poling, of Circleville, Ohio, commended *Life* in 1962 for serving its readers well and teaching them about the economy. "Millions of words have been written about what is wrong with the economy. Yet in a few memorable lines you were able to pinpoint our major problems and offer workable solutions. It is time the American people demand more such journalistic honesty and integrity."³⁷ Gloria Bond of New York City took a similar tone, commending the public service provided by *Life* magazine through its willingness to print photos by photographer Gordon Parks. "His splendid eye-catching high fashion pictures in color, not only enhanced *Life* but gave many readers a refreshing lift. The lovely Negro models prove that pulchritude is not possessed exclusively by one race. You have taught us a great lesson in race relations."³⁸

Objectivity

Each letter-to-the-editor writer defined objectivity a bit differently. But as a group, the letters about objectivity agreed that this ideal called for reporters to purge themselves of prejudices and biases. And in 1992, when objectivity was the leading theme, most letter writers complained that they rarely saw objectivity in practice. A 1992 letter summed up this point when Nashville letter writer W. Scott Benton wrote, "I am frustrated and concerned that in a time of constant media attacks against everyone and anyone, an unbiased report is rare if not impossible to find."³⁹ Another 1992 letter said male editors don't understand that "date rape is not an insignificant, foolish issue." But the letter asserted that editors encourage women reporters to write as much. "The lesson: Women journalists can go far if they adopt this attitude in their writing and attack feminism."⁴⁰

Letter writers repeatedly expressed their disappointment over a perceived lack of objectivity on many subjects in 1992, when complaints about objectivity seemed to blossom in nearly every issue of the 10 magazines studied. Here are a few examples: "It is clear you suffer from a male bias. Although I opted for breast implants, I am not a bimbo or a Stepford wife, and I resent your name-calling. With these erroneous and cruel labels you deny the essence of femininity, compassion, understanding and the capacity to nurture."⁴¹ That is what Ann Grossman of Yardley, Pennsylvania, wrote in a 1992 letter to *Newsweek*. Robert Gonsalves of Crockett, California, wrote that *Newsweek* starts with a premise and then proceeds to prove it, without studying the facts objectively: "I'm getting tired of *Newsweek*'s unprofessional preemptive strike against any conspiracy theorists. You dissuade people from investigating the evidence and thinking for themselves,"⁴² he wrote.

In addition to the previously discussed themes of public service and objectivity—the number one themes in 1962 and 1992, respectively—a total of seven other themes emerged from the letters. To keep this research brief, only three more of the most

significant themes—truth telling, fairness and moral force—are discussed in more detail below.

Truth Telling

Truth-telling letters were straightforward in their complaints about the press. An example of this clear-cut discussion is a 1982 letter in the *Progressive* that said: “Your December cover story on garbage was strewn with half-truths, marvelously misleading statements, and soft-headed analysis. It is the silliest story on resource recovery that I have seen in my five years working in resource recovery. Let me try to straighten things out.”⁴³ A letter in *Atlantic* magazine in 1972 asserted simply that a reporter for the magazine had trouble grasping basic facts—this time, geography. “Has your Mr. Manning changed the course of the Potomac? Or has he simply neglected to look at a map?” He writes (“In the City of Power,” December 1971) that “the fetid section of Virginia that George Washington chose as the site for the Federal City of the new republic is today a somewhat cosmopolitan and, in places, beautiful city.” He obviously refers to Washington. But what is now the District of Columbia was never part of Virginia; in colonial times it was in Maryland.⁴⁴

Fairness

Fairness was defined broadly by letter writers as a willingness to print many points of view about a given issue. A *New Republic* reader put the discussion of fairness this way in a 1992 letter, saying the magazine “takes the cake for publishing one of the most outright blasphemous, racist and unfair articles to date . . . If you ever bother to balance your articles with what some of the rest of us have to say . . . for once you’ll be honest journalists.”⁴⁵ Bruce Joyce of Columbia University put the discussion of fairness this way in a 1972 letter to *Harper’s*: “That you permitted the publication of an unabashed selection of wholly negative evidence [about the effects of early education] is totally unfair and hard to understand.”⁴⁶ Joyce’s comments about fairness being the willingness to print many sides of an issue were echoed some 10 years later in a letter in the same magazine. William Brady, of Little Rock, Arkansas, wrote: “I am utterly and frankly amazed that your magazine, any respectable magazine, would actually print such an unfair piece of work. One might expect such one-sided treatment from the *National Enquirer* or the like. But readers of *Harper’s* deserve better.”⁴⁷

Moral Force

The number of letters about the role of the press as a moral force was never high. But discussion of the topic was lively. Here is an example: “It is unlikely that *Time* would present a cover story on the latest trend in male physiques as it did with women in ‘The New Ideal of Beauty.’ By printing such an article *Time* acts as a moral leader and perpetuates society’s ideal that a woman’s appearance has a lot to do with her worth as a human being,” wrote Ann Kelly, of Manlius, New York.⁴⁸

Irvin Cady, of Alpena, Michigan, wrote in 1972 that *Atlantic* magazine should consider what moral lessons it was teaching when it printed article that used “vulgar

words.” The story could have been printed “in a more subtle manner and it would have been just as interesting without the so-called avant-garde phraseology; in other words, just plain smut,” Cady wrote.⁴⁹

Summary of Thematic Shifts

In sum, these findings offer strong primary evidence that the most popular themes of printed letters to the editor in the 10 magazines changed from 1962 to 1992, from a concern with public service to a concern with objectivity. Thus, in 1962 most published letters to the editor about journalism discussed how the magazines were performing a public service by shedding light on a particular problem and educating the public about a situation that needed to be rectified. The public service theme was still predominant in 1972, but the second most common refrain that year was that reporters could not get their facts straight, either as a result of carelessness or reckless indifference. The message about inaccuracies and a lack of truth became the dominant theme of the published letters in 1982. But by 1992 there was a slightly different spin: Letter writers were still angry about inaccuracies, but now 35 percent were saying that because of a variety of built-in biases and prejudices the reporters were incapable of ever discovering or telling the truth: Reporters were male-biased, or too conservative, or not ethnic enough or too anti-religious, readers said—and there was little chance that this lack of objectivity could or would ever change.

Discussion

Dicken-Garcia’s groundbreaking study of letters to the editors in the 19th century found readers in the 1800s actively engaged in many discussions of journalistic standards. Readers acting as press critics of the era began to grapple with the meaning of journalism in society, she writes, and to ask hard questions about appropriate journalistic boundaries of conduct. The research presented here establishes that this robust debate of journalistic standards or ethics declined precipitously—by 95 percent—from 1962 to 1992 in the 10 popular magazines surveyed.⁵⁰ Further, this research demonstrates that the number of letters to the editor about journalism are increasingly negative—93 percent in 1992, compared with 47 percent negative in 1962. Moreover, the themes in the letters reflect an overwhelmingly pessimistic view of the press as an institution incapable of ever being objective and telling the whole truth without bias.

Taken together, these findings present an alarmingly dark view of the press by part of the reading public.

Until now little has been known about what letters published in 20th century magazines have said about journalism, and whether the letters have increased, decreased or stayed the same over the past 30 years. In addition, there has been no record of positive versus negative comments in letters. Thus the historical record of published letters in magazines has been unexamined.

The findings of this research suggest readers may have lost interest in journalism and simply wrote less commentary on the subject—leading to a dramatic decline in the number of published letters. Critics might attack this argument by saying no one writes

letters anymore. But that assertion does not explain the average of a little more than 51,000 letters to the editor received each year at *Time* magazine⁵¹—a figure that remained largely unchanged during the study period. Further, the number of published letters in the magazines remained about the same—an average of 3,761 a year in 1962, 1972, 1982 and 1992.

Declining journalism letters seem to indicate a growing public alienation from the press. In 1992, when the number of journalism letters dropped to only 3 percent, all the writers, even press advocates, generally seem detached and mildly disappointed in their letters, expressing the notion that the press didn't get things right, but that nothing more can be expected from biased journalists. This pessimistic, cynical and detached view of the press is a far cry from the vigorous criticism one might expect to hear if readers truly believed in journalism and were concerned to find instances of failure. The reader alienation from journalism uncovered in this research may actually be more difficult for journalists to overcome—in much the same way marriage counselors say a marriage is through, not when angry words are spoken, but when there is no longer any talk at all. It is hard to repair a relationship if couples no longer even bother to try to communicate. The historical record of published magazine letters to the editor from 1962 to 1992 indicates readers may care less about journalism than they did 30 years ago. As a result, if this trend continues, the marriage between journalists and readers may be in serious trouble.

Conclusion

The research undertaken here argues for the historical importance of letters to the editor. The absence of material in journalism history books on letters to the editor and what they reflect about the public perception of journalism ethics is an oversight begging for correction. Inclusion of such material in journalism history could add texture and depth to the continuing debate over journalistic ethics and the role of the press.

In the process of looking at the historical record of letters to the editor, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of audience reaction to journalism in the past. Such knowledge can contribute to a greater awareness of how the reader-magazine relationship has changed over time. Rather than relying on secondary sources and assumptions about what magazine readers have said about journalism in history, researchers need to find the voice of the public, some of it expressed in letters to the editor, and include that in journalism's historical record.

¹ Paul Starobin, "A Generation of Vipers," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1995, 25.

² Linda Fibich, "Under Siege," *American Journalism Review*, September 1995, 16.

³ James Fallows, "Why Americans Hate The Media," *Atlantic*, February 1996, 45-73. This article was an excerpt from Fallows' book, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine Democracy* (New York: Pantheon, 1996).

⁴ Jacqueline Sharkey, "The Diana Aftermath," *American Journalism Review*, November, 1997, 19.

⁵ "What We Do Now," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1998, 25.

⁶ David B. Hill, "Letter Opinion on ERA," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45 (Fall 1981), 384-392.

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- ⁷ The national scope of magazines is explored in: Michael B. Grossman and Marth J. Kumar, *Portraying the President: The White House and the News Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).
- ⁸ Because of a disagreement between coders over thematic classification, a total of 4 letters about journalism were eliminated from the pool. Thus the working total of letters to the editor about journalism throughout the remainder of this paper is 3,685.
- ⁹ Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth Century America* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 4.
- ¹⁰ Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards*, 3.
- ¹¹ David Nord, "The Nature of Historical Research," in *Research Methods in Mass Communication* eds. Guido Stempel and Bruce Westley (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), 290.
- ¹² Numerous studies have looked at the agenda-setting process, starting with Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1972, 176-187. McCombs and Shaw have updated their work, along with co-author David Weaver, in *Communication and Democracy: Exploring the Intellectual Frontiers in Agenda-Setting Theory* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997.) Another particularly relevant discussion of agenda-setting was written by Michael Bruce MacKuen, "Social Communication and the Mass Policy Agenda," in Michael Bruce MacKuen and Steven Lane Coombs, *More Than News: Media Power in Public Affairs* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1981), 17-44.
- ¹³ Nord, "Reading the Newspaper, Strategies and Politics of Reader Response, Chicago 1912-1917," *Journal of Communication*, 45 (3), 1995, 67.
- ¹⁴ J. Clemon, "In Defense of Initials," *The Masthead* 28, 1976, 17.
- ¹⁵ Some prominent authors who published journalism ethics books in the early 1980s include Lee Thayer, *Ethics, Morality and the Media* (New York, Hastings House, 1980); Eugene Goodwin, *Groping for Ethics in Journalism* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1983); and Frank McCulloch, ed., *Drawing the Line* (Washington, D.C.: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1984). Two major continuing workshops on media ethics were also established with cooperative journalism industry-academic funding during this time as well: The AEJMC/Gannett/University of Missouri Ethics Workshop and the Poynter Institute for Media Studies Teaching Fellowship in Ethics.
- ¹⁶ Several studies have maintained that letters to the editor identify public issues and concerns. See, for example, Ernest C. Hynds, "Editorial Pages are Taking Stands, Providing Forums," *Journalism Quarterly* 53 (Autumn 1976), 532-535. Also see E. Hynds, "Editorial Page Editors Discuss Use of Letters," *Newspaper Research Journal* (Winter-Spring 1992), 124-136. See also Leila Sussmann, "Mass Political Letter Writing in America: The Growth of an Institution," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23 (Summer 1959), 207; Diane Cole, "Letters to the Editor: Who Needs 'em? We Do," *The Masthead* 44 (Fall 1992), 7; and Tamara Anne Bell, "Using Letters to Assess Public Opinion" (Master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1993).
- ¹⁷ H. Schuyler Foster, Jr., and Carl J. Friedrich, "Letters to the Editor as a Means of Measuring the Effectiveness of Propaganda," *American Political Science Review* 31 (February 1937), 71-79.
- ¹⁸ James Luther Cockrum, "A Study of Letters to the Editor Contributed to the *Dallas Morning News*" (Master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1955), 52.
- ¹⁹ David L. Grey and Trevor R. Brown, "Letters to the Editor: Hazy Reflections of Public Opinion," *Journalism Quarterly* 47 (Autumn 1970), 450-456, 471. Grey and Brown were supported in this assertion by a later study by Paula Cozort Renfro, "Bias in Selection of Letters to the Editor," *Journalism Quarterly* 56 (Winter 1979), 822-826.
- ²⁰ William D. Tarrant, "Who Writes Letters to the Editor?" *Journalism Quarterly* 34 (Fall 1957), 501-502.
- ²¹ Sidney A. Forsythe, "An Exploratory Study of Letters to the Editor and Their Contributors," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14 (Spring 1950), 143-144.
- ²² Gary L. Vacin, "A Study of Letter-Writers," *Journalism Quarterly* 42 (Summer 1965), 502.
- ²³ Emmett Buell, Jr., "Eccentrics or Gladiators? People Who Write About Politics in Letters to the Editor," *Social Science Quarterly* 56 (December 1975), 440-449.
- ²⁴ David B. Hill, "Letter Opinion on ERA," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45 (Fall 1981), 384-392.
- ²⁵ Hal Davis and Galen Rarick, "Functions of Editorials and Letters to the Editor," *Journalism Quarterly* 41 (Winter 1964), 108-109.

²⁶ John Andrew Klempner, "People Who Write In: Communication Aspects of Opinion Letter Writing" (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1966).

²⁷ Byron G. Lander, "Functions of Letters to the Editor—A Re-Examination," *Journalism Quarterly* 49 (Spring 1972), 142.

²⁸ Steve Pasternak and Suraj Kapoor, "The Letters Boom," *The Masthead* 28 (Fall 1976), 17.

²⁹ David Pritchard and Dan Berkowitz, "How Readers' Letters May Influence Editors and News Emphasis: A Content Analysis of 10 Newspapers, 1948-1978," *Journalism Quarterly* 68 (Fall 1991), 388-395.

³⁰ Michael Schaffer, Lake Bluff, Illinois, *U.S. News & World Report*, 27 Jan. 1992, 8.

³¹ Norma K. Turner, Waterviolet, Mich., *Atlantic*, February 1982, 5.

³² Limited funds were available to hire a second coder for only a portion of this research, so 1962 letters were randomly chosen for double-coding as a sample test of the reliability of the coding process. The second coder was initially told to use his own judgment and decide if a letter seemed to be about journalism, or simply a general comment on a subject.

³³ The magazines were chosen for their diverse political slants and varying circulation figures. The intent was to gather magazines from the left, right, and middle of the road and to mix large circulation publications with more esoteric, small magazines. Specifically, the selection was done this way: *Atlantic*, with a circulation of 464,709, as of 1992, has a heavy literary tradition and appeals to the upscale intelligentsia, a group that seemed likely to be willing and able to write letters to the editor; *Forbes*, with a 1992 circulation of 777,353 and a Wall Street focus, is considered right-wing, conservative, and was studied to balance the views of more liberal magazines; *Harper's*, 1992 circulation 218,219, is a literary and arts publication with liberal, wealthy readers, who are articulate and also likely to feel comfortable writing letters to the editor; *Life*, with 1.5 million subscribers as of 1992, is a general interest publication that emphasizes capturing a wide range of readers from various ends of the political spectrum; *The Nation*, with 82,788 subscribers in 1992, is a narrowly tailored, left-wing publication with more radical readers; *The New Republic*, circulation 98,252, was once considered liberal, then transformed itself in the 1980s into a "new Right" publication, but was studied here because of its extensive political reporting; *Newsweek*, with a 1992 circulation of 3.1 million, is one of the 20 best-selling magazines each year. It is aimed at a non-political, general audience of nearly all ages and interests; *The Progressive*, circulation 40,000, a left-leaning publication, was added to balance some views of the more conservative publications; *Time*, circulation 4 million, is a highly commercial mainstream magazine, usually ranked each year as one of the 10 best selling magazines. Its readers tend to be middle of the road, politically. Thus it was considered a good place to sample "average" reader discussion of journalism; and finally, *U. S. News & World Report*, with 2.2 million subscribers, is geared to older, conservative, middle-class readers. All the circulation records come from the 1992 *Audit Bureau of Circulation* reports.

³⁴ Both the categories and coding were driven by the readers' own words. For example, many letter writers repeatedly discussed truth when commenting on journalism, so that was one of the first categories initially established. Then the concept of objectivity began to occur frequently in letters, that is complaints that reporters could not transcend their own notions of right and wrong. Other themes, such as public service, moral force, and so on, then emerged. In some cases the themes were similar to those discovered by Dicken-Garcia, such as discussions of truth. But in other cases new categories had to be created, since few modern letters discussed the role of the press as a protector and advocate for the common man, a category Dicken-Garcia discovered. This current study started with an examination of 1972 letters so most categories originally emerged in that group. Letters from subsequent time frames contained similar discussions and were gradually added to the count. At all times the researcher was open to new categories, however, and gradually nine categories were created to accommodate journalistic standards mentioned by readers. When a second coder was employed, the categories were explained to the coder; that is, the second coder was told that if a letter discussed or mentioned the word truth in connection with journalism, for example, then that letter could be labelled a letter about truth-telling and so on. There was no overriding theory driving the categories. If letters repeatedly mentioned some standard for judging what was good or bad journalism, such as sensationalism, or fairness, then that concept was added to the categories. Letters often contained more than one theme and were then coded more than once. A tenth category, invasion of privacy by the press, emerged in only one letter. But since this concept was not repeated it was not considered statistically significant.

³⁵ It's important to remember that all percentages are rounded off throughout this research.

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- ³⁶ Eugenia Wallace, Valparaiso, Indiana, *Life*, 15 June 1962, 28.
- ³⁷ Martha Poling, Circleville, Ohio, *Life*, 29 June 1962, 15.
- ³⁸ Gloria Bond, New York City, *Life*, 20 July 1962, 21.
- ³⁹ W. Scott Benton, Nashville, Tennessee, *Life*, November 1992, 22.
- ⁴⁰ Joanne Jacobs, Ann Arbor, Michigan, *Nation*, 20 April 1992, 506.
- ⁴¹ Ann H. Grossman, Yardley, Pennsylvania, *Newsweek*, 10 February 1992, 14.
- ⁴² Robert Gonsalves, Crockett, California, *Newsweek* 13 January 1992, 12.
- ⁴³ Chaz Miller, Washington, D.C., *The Progressive* March 1982, 6.
- ⁴⁴ Robert McClenon, Gaithersburg, Maryland *Atlantic*, February 1972, 39.
- ⁴⁵ John McCaslin, Washington, D.C., *The New Republic* 16 March 1992, 5.
- ⁴⁶ Bruce R. Joyce, Columbia University, New York, *Harper's* September 1972, 6.
- ⁴⁷ William B. Brady, Little Rock, Arkansas, *Harper's* April 1982, 5.
- ⁴⁸ Ann Kelly, Manlius, New York, *Time* 20 September 1982, 5.
- ⁴⁹ Irvin H. Cady, Alpena, Michigan, *Atlantic*, August 1972, 24.
- ⁵⁰ One critic of an early draft of this paper requested that the editors of the 10 magazines be questioned to find out how they chose which letters to publish in 1962, 1972, 1982 and 1992 and to discover exactly how many letters were not published. This is a daunting task. For example, how many editors from 1962 are still working at the 10 magazines? And how many unpublished 1962 letters are still available? Even if all the editors could be interviewed and the reliability of their remarks determined, such work is beyond the scope of this research. The purpose here is to examine the historical record of published letters, not to study how letters are selected.
- ⁵¹ *Time* publishes an annual letter to the readers in February in which the total of all letters to the editor received during the previous year are listed. In a 1989 letter the magazine reported receiving about 51,000 letters a year and said that figure had remained steady for more than a decade. See *Time*, 20 February 1989, 12.