

## Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

### Journalists' rights, and what's right

*Despite a top-draw speakers list, the biggest crowd at the journalists' conference came to debate Geraldo and friends.*

Every year, the American Society of Newspaper Editors convention attracts one of the most impressive lists of speakers of any of the hundreds of confabs held in the nation's capital.

This time, the more than 1,100 registrants were treated to President Bush, Vice President Quayle, Secretary of State Baker, Israeli Prime Minister Shamir, Soviet Ambassador Dubinin, U.S. Drug Czar Bennett, Colombian President Barco, Senate Majority Leader Mitchell, Democratic Party chairman Brown, and corporate raider Icahn, to name just a few crammed into the three-day schedule.

With such a program, including gala receptions sponsored by both the *Washington Post*, at the Corcoran Art Gallery, and *Washington Times*, and an invitation to a Ford's Theater show, compliments of the Gannett Company, lesser speakers like scientist Carl Sagan were barely able to pull 100 to hear them.

But despite the top-draw speakers, the session that enjoyed the biggest draw was the roundtable debate that featured such dubious figures as Morton Downey, Jr., Phil Donahue, and Geraldo Rivera—the most notorious “tabloid-style” TV personalities.

The title of the session was, “Who Is a Journalist? Talk Show Sensationalism.” Moderated by Fred Friendly of the Columbia University Seminars on Media and Society, the subject was whether or not the foul-mouthed, sensationalist antics of Downey, Donahue, Rivera, et al., and the screamer-headline format of such as the *New York Daily News*, is, in fact, journalism, or merely entertainment pandering to the lowest common denomina-

tor.

Included on the panel were Don Hewitt, executive producer of CBS's “60 Minutes,” which is considered the grandfather of the “tabloid TV” phenomenon, TV critic Tom Shales of the *Washington Post*, Robert Pittman of Quantum Media, which helped get Downey's show off the ground, Jack Nelson of the *Los Angeles Times*, F. Gilman Spencer, editor of the *New York Daily News*, Stanley Hubbard of Hubbard Broadcasting in Minnesota, Geneva Overholser, editor of the *Des Moines Register*, Iowa, and Larry King, a talk show host on Mutual Radio and the Cable News Network.

The free-wheeling debate, televised on the local Public Broadcasting station later that night, itself had much of the trappings of a typical Mort Downey show.

Part of the reason was that legitimate heat was being generated by some of the participants, who became emotional in their contempt for what they called the “pandering” that passes for news in tabloid newspapers and TV.

This was not a topic of idle amusement for anyone at the conference, because newspaper publishers continue to face a drop in revenues, due largely to greater competition from other media sources, especially with the advent of cable TV. The newspaper business, which has already undergone an incredible shrinkage in the last 30 years, continues to hang by its fingernails.

In fact, what's happened to the nation's newspapers since the 1950s rivals in volume the current collapse of the savings and loan system. Large U.S. cities which used to boast four, five, or even six daily papers are now

lucky if they have two, and especially lucky if those two are not owned by the same corporate giant.

Not only are daily newspapers facing virtual extinction as an American institution, except for those which are owned by one of the huge chains like Knight-Ridder or Gannett, but, increasingly, radio and TV stations are also surviving only by virtue of being bought out by a major newspaper or newspaper chain.

Where does this leave “news”? For some, it means having to compete for the advertising dollar and attention of the public by becoming more and more outrageous.

This was the argument of Donahue, for example, in the roundtable debate. He justified showing up on his show wearing a dress in one episode, for example, on grounds that it created interest, and that once you have the attention of an audience, then you can sneak in more important issues onto your show.

Others argued that Donahue made a fool of himself by resorting to such a tactic, hurting his credibility.

Rivera countered, “What we are experiencing is the democratization of news” that is permitting issues which are ignored by traditional news sources to now get covered.

Hubbard got into a shouting match with Rivera, insisting it is all being done not in the name of democracy, but only for money. Mind you, he thought that was just fine.

Those most upset by the overall trend represented by the “tabloid” phenomenon were Overholser, who said it was “pandering,” Shales, and King.

Moderator Fred Friendly at one point invoked a remark by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who said, “The problem with journalists is they don't distinguish between what are their rights and what is right.”