



Jay T. Harris

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## ETHICAL STEWARDSHIP OF THE NEWS

OR

### CREPUSCULAR THOUGHTS ON LISTENING TO HANDY'S "IF ONLY WE KNEW"

**G**ood afternoon. It is a pleasure and a privilege to be here again.

It was about two months ago that Tim Gleason asked me to deliver the Ruhl Lecture this year. He told me that it would be the first time anyone had the honor to deliver this prestigious address a second time.

I assumed the invitation meant I did alright when I last stood at this podium fifteen years ago or, alternatively, that I was being given an opportunity to redeem myself.

It was a welcome invitation either way.

Seriously, the invitation was a distinct honor. I have been fretting about what to say ever since I accepted it.

I decided many weeks ago what I would talk about. I knew I wanted to use this opportunity to talk about “the ethical stewardship of the news.”

But knowing what you want to say and deciding how best to say it are separate matters. And so, I’ve been fretting. I’ve been writing, fitfully; listing and sharpening my key points; noting the clearer words and first expression of ideas that helped shape my views; writing intros and drafts; and, all the while, fretting—until I read an article in the current issue of *The New Yorker* by the essayist and public intellectual Stanley Crouch. The article is a profile of the legendary jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins.

I want to pause here to say I am not one who believes that coincidences are “meant to be.” But sometimes they are tremendously important. Sometimes you have to wait and hope that the spirit will reach out and touch you or that inspiration will find its way to your door.

I have been waiting, anxiously, for weeks.

You see, the heart and spirit of what is troubling me deeply about journalism, about how a practice and an institution so important to American democracy is being neglected, abused, even desecrated by some of those who are its current stewards—that feeling has been absent from the early drafts on what I feared was going to be a far too scholarly and impersonal talk today.

But two days ago, thanks to Stanley Crouch’s article and Sonny Rollins’ words, I found my voice and the true heart of my concern; I rediscovered a metaphor and a history that can carry, I hope, the burden of what I want to say today—the burden of an argument I began to make four years ago at a speech in Washington.

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When I gave this lecture fifteen years ago, I concluded that there were four challenges newspapers would need to confront successfully in the years ahead: increasing competition, declining readership, demographic change, and the growing priority of a business

imperative in the leadership of news organizations. I said fifteen years ago that of the four I was most concerned about the rise of the business imperative.

Some newspapers, I explained, were “under the control of persons who seem to care hardly at all about the important role newspapers play in our society and our democracy.”

“These persons, and the papers they publish,” I continued, “contribute to a decline in respect for the press; they help to undermine public support for the First Amendment; and they weaken the glue that binds our communities and nation together.”

On the whole the talk was optimistic. I was an optimist by choice then regarding the future of journalism—journalism that serves the important needs of our society and our democracy.

I pointed hopefully to “newspapers and newspaper companies with the right sort of people at the helm” and said their leaders would embrace change without “compromising any of [newspapers’] most important responsibilities [or their] highest standards.”

Over the last fifteen years, my position has changed somewhat. Today, I am still an optimist. But, I’m an optimist with experience—which some say is the definition of a pessimist.

But my talk tonight will not be a reflection of my mood or outlook. Rather, I hope you will find in it a simple, clear, and thought-provoking assessment on the state and prospects of journalism, of democracy, and of the continuing “American Experiment” in self-government.

I will focus particularly on what I have learned and concluded over the last four years of study, reflection, uncertainty, anxiety and growing depression—the four years since I resigned as publisher of the *San Jose Mercury News*.

I resigned as publisher of the *Mercury News*, a newspaper that for me was a shared dream incarnate, on March 19 of 2001.

At the request of Rich Oppel, the editor of the *Austin American-Statesman* and, that year, president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, I went to Washington twenty-one days after resigning to explain my decision to resign to the annual convention of newsroom leaders.

Looking back on that address, I think it holds up pretty well. My thinking, my understanding of the key issues was correct in its inclination—but more intuitive and instinctive than informed.

In my speech to the editors I said that my path to a decision to resign began when “I woke up...about 3 a.m.” on the morning after a budget meeting with corporate executive from Knight Ridder.

“Over the next several hours, the idea came together in my mind...that resigning was the right thing to do,” I told the assembled editors of the nation’s newspapers. “I confronted the fact,” I said, “that continuing negotiation and compromise was little more than slow and silent surrender. Like many others, I had become an unacknowledged co-conspirator in something I knew not to be a good thing but didn’t know how to stop.”

Since then, with support from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, the Annenberg Trust at Sunnylands, the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, the Knight Foundation, the Kettering Foundation, and the Open Society Institute, I have been trying to better understand what precisely it was that “I knew not to be a good thing” and to figure out “how to stop” it.

Today, I want to take this opportunity to thank each of those organizations. I also want to thank the many individuals who listened to me, who challenged or encouraged me, who introduced me to new ideas and, most importantly, who did not lose faith in me and the possibility of what I might still do.

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The intellectual journey from the podium in Washington four years ago to this assembly in Eugene had as its starting place an item on the obituary page of *The New York Times* on June 29, 2001, about three months after my resignation.

The influential twentieth century philosopher Mortimer Adler had died the day before. He was ninety-eight.

“Dr. Adler,” I learned from reading the *Times* obit, “believed that the ordinary citizen had what might be called a philosophical duty to think clearly and exercise free will wisely.”

The *ordinary citizen* had a *duty* to think *clearly* and *wisely*.

If that were true, and I believed instinctively that it was, then maybe it was the case the ordinary newspaper had, perhaps even in the view of the authors of the First Amendment, a concomitant duty to provide the public with the news and information that citizens need to fulfill their duty as citizens.

On the day after he died, I started my friendship with Mortimer Adler. He introduced me to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; to the Framers of our Constitution; and to the American people of 1787, who insisted among other things on the First Amendment guarantees of free press and free speech as the price for ratifying the Constitution the Framers had written in secret in Philadelphia that year. Seeking to understand the thinking of the Framers led me to the magnificent Montesquieu, to Locke and to Hobbes, who had influenced the Framers' world and political thinking.

Adler introduced me as well to what he called a conversation across the ages—a consideration stretching over more than two millennia of what constitutes a good society and a good life, of what the rights and duties of citizens are in a republic—citizens committed to individual liberty and to the common good.

I found in the words of these thinkers and others I've studied over the last few years, and in the conversations I have had with Americans of all ages, all political persuasions, and from all walks of life, an enlightening, rejuvenating, and hopeful tonic of history, ideas, philosophy, and values.

It has been an effective antidote for me to the dark, soulless culture of consumption, self-interest, and capitalism—all now run amok—that have increasingly dominated our life, our nation, and even our world over the last thirty-five years.

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Today, as a scholar, I stand outside the enterprise of daily journalism. But as a scholar who is concerned with journalism and its role in our democracy, I pay close attention to what is going on there. And what I see worries me.

I read about, and in conversations with news leaders hear, worry that approaches desperation about declines in circulation and audiences. Fear of the internet, which looms ever larger in the information environment, is palpable. And, at least as troubling as either of those, is the despair I hear in the voices of journalists and journalists-to-be about the future for serious journalism, journalism of

consequence, journalism that has as its highest goal serving the public interest.

As someone who will always be a journalist at heart, and just as importantly as a citizen who believes it is only journalism that can provide the information and the public sense that citizenship requires, I worry most about the growing despair among journalists; because if journalists cease to believe in the higher purposes of journalism, in the essential role of journalism in our democracy, then the noble flame at the heart of the journalistic enterprise will go out, and if it does it will be difficult to start it in the future—if it can be started in the future.

In my talk four years ago to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, I talked about despair and hope. I used jazz as metaphor and analogy, and I used lines written by Stanley Crouch to make my point that day. He's the same Stanley Crouch who wrote the article on Sonny Rollins in the current issue of *The New Yorker*.

Four years ago, I told the editors that lines Crouch had written to accompany and give voice to Wynton Marsalis' composition "Premature Autopsies" were "a rejection of the debasement of jazz through commercialism."

"And," I went on to say, "I heard in it a parallel between the nobility and deeply personal nature of jazz and journalism done excellently, the threat both face from equally pernicious commercial pressures, and I hear as well a reason to be hopeful." Which brings me to Sonny Rollins.

In *The New Yorker* article, Rollins recalls when he lost faith in what he saw as the spiritual possibilities of jazz; lost the faith that had inspired him that music done excellently, his music, could help make the world a better place.

It was a faith Rollins shared with another great saxophonist, John Coltrane, with whom he shared an "intellectual kinship" and "shared spiritual concerns," according to the article Crouch wrote.

"Coltrane and I would talk about changing the world through music," Rollins told Crouch. "We thought we might get so good that our music would influence everything around us. I think he stuck to that path, but sometimes I became disconsolate about whether music could change the world. I thought about all the music that Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Art Tatum and all these people played, and how it hadn't had any effect. But now I know that

you can uplift people with your music. They can feel bad, and, if you play something, they might feel better. I have to satisfy myself with that kind of contribution.”

And I want to start there today, with Rollins’ notion of being satisfied, being at peace with the contribution that musicians and journalists can make through what they do—being satisfied, at peace, and not giving up or giving in when the higher aspirations of journalism seem out of reach.

Journalism still makes a difference. It makes differences large and small, in ways seen and unseen, in the lives of millions, the life of the nation, and the lives of communities throughout America and around the world.

Don’t lose faith in journalism.

Don’t lose faith even if you are worried that your leaders are losing faith or have lost their way.

Don’t lose faith even if you worry that no path will be found through the current confusion, no reasoned calm amidst the growing frenzy, no release from the grips of the ideology of corporatism.

Don’t lose faith, because if journalists lose faith, the light journalism shines on American life just might go out. And America needs that light; American democracy needs that light.

Each of us in journalism are the stewards in common for our generation of an instrument of democracy; for an ideal of public service through journalism—journalism that America needs today, that America will need perhaps even more in the future, and unto which America will return.

You are—we are—the stewards, the guardians, of an essential tool of self-government that has been needed, and used, and improved over all the years of our national life.

Many Americans believe and I believe that our traditional liberties and core American values are threatened in what we have come to call the post 9-11 “new normal.”

One of those liberties has been embodied for a century in a vigorous, independent, public-spirited press. One of those values is clear and honest communication between those the people elect to ad-

minister and oversee government and the people who hold the ultimate power in our republic.

The founders of this nation, not just the leaders whose names we learned in history classes but also the people who fought the War for Independence against Great Britain; the people who ratified the Constitution and insisted that it include guarantees for freedom of the press and freedom of speech; they saw a free press as a “bulwark of liberty.” A free press had helped them win their liberties, and they understood that a free press would be essential to hold on to them.

And today, a vigorous, independent press that is at least a century old is being undermined—it is being undermined by government leaders, undermined by corporate executives, undermined by skilled propagandists for various interests.

So we, journalists and citizens alike, must not lose hope, must not lose faith in the serious importance of a free press to a free people. For without this essential institution of democracy, much is put at great risk.

We must not fall prey to the tragic, hubristic assumptions of secure rights and a secure future that led to the decline of other great nations.

The late classicist Edith Hamilton opened an essay on the decline of the first great Western democracy, Athens, with these lines:

‘The kind of events that once took place will by reason of human nature take place again.’ So Thucydides wrote at the end of the Peloponnesian War and the end of the great age of Athens...The course that Athens followed can be to us not only a record of old unhappy far-off things, but a blue print of what may happen again.

To the great thinkers of Athens like Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates it was “clear common sense,” she wrote:

That the prerequisite to good government was citizens who were good men seemed to them so obvious as hardly to need to be put into words, while to expect a government to be good when dishonesty had crept in among its officials, or officials to be honorable when the voters were indifferent to their being so, was a kind of folly they did not expect from Athenians.

But while they were thinking and talking, always with Athens' great past before them, a change was going on. They could not arrest or even check it. It was something fundamental and of the utmost importance, a spiritual change, which penetrated the whole state and undermined the old foundations.

This description of a society eroding at its foundation may have a contemporary resonance to you.

And as Hamilton warned, what happened to Athens, and what happened a few centuries later to the great Roman republic, "could happen again."

National decline is possible. National decline is possible when a nation seems to be to some at the apex of its strength and power. And decline can happen silently.

Many Americans are struck—I am struck—by the lack of outrage, the lack of open criticism of pervasive corruption in government, of the destructive influence of well-financed interests in our state and national capitals, of the destructive impact of corporatism and market-values run amok on the American people and American values, of the intentional and unintentional weakening of the press as an strong, effective and independent institution of democracy.

And when I think about the eerie quiet, I am reminded of the lines Edith Hamilton chose to end that same essay on the decline of Athens: "On an Egyptian tomb when the first dynasty was falling into ruins someone inscribed the words, 'And no one is angry enough to speak out.'"

And I say here today that if one believes, as I do, that what is happening to journalism is bad for democracy—and if one cares sincerely for our democracy and isn't merely using the word as a cheap but effective rhetorical lever—then it is fair to call those who permit, cause, and/or encourage the weakening of the press anti-democratic—in effect if not intent. And this is something that, if you believe it, should be said firmly, forcefully, unequivocally, and repeatedly. To do less would be hypocritical and unpatriotic.

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I want to run the risk today of referencing and quoting smart people. I want to run the risk of putting forward ideas that are larger

than sound bytes. I will, in a public forum, run the risk of telling you about the ideas of philosophers, public intellectuals, educators, and other of that ilk.

I know doing this runs hard against the grain of our television culture—in which brevity trumps brains, clever trumps considered, and rage, sometimes feigned rage, trumps reflection.

I will do this because I think it is in the world of ideas that we may begin to better understand our predicament and, possibly, begin as a people to find a way out of the fine mess we're in.

The Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul wrote a book about ten years ago entitled *The Unconscious Civilization*. We are, he wrote, "...a civilization tightly held at this moment in the embrace of a dominant ideology: corporatism."

"The acceptance of corporatism," he continued, undermines "the legitimacy of the individual as a citizen in a democracy" and "leads to the adoration of self-interest and our denial of the public good."

That, I think, is a succinct explanation of our predicament. And Saul has more insight to offer.

He writes that our "unconscious civilization" came to accept that the point of the "received wisdoms of the second half of the twentieth century is that the very heart and soul of our 2,500 year old civilization is, apparently, economics, and from that heart flows, and continues to flow, everything else. We must therefore fling down and fling up the structures of our society as the marketplace orders. If we don't, the marketplace will do it anyway."

Saul argues that we are caught in a mass "unconsciousness so profound as to constitute stupidity."

Our sense of the ridiculousness in ourselves seems to ebb and flow but to remain dangerously weak when it comes to public affairs. And the weaker it is, the more we tend to slip into an unhealthy, unconscious form of self-contempt. Worse still, we cultivate this self-loathing in our elites. We encourage them to think of us—the citizenry—with contempt, and so to think of themselves in the same way.

There is much more in this philosopher's work, and I recommend his book to you.

But let me move on with a few more lines from *The Unconscious Civilization*.

Serious, important decisions are made not through democratic discussion or participation but through negotiation between relevant groups based upon expertise, interest, and the ability to exercise power.

To be precise: we live in a corporatist society with soft pretensions to democracy. More power is slipping every day over towards the groups. That is the meaning of the marketplace ideology and of our passive acceptance of whatever form globalization happens to take.

And Saul said frightfully at the end that “It could be argued that we are now in the midst of a *coup d’etat* in slow motion. Democracy is weakening; few people would disagree. Corporatism is strengthening; you only need to look around.”

I have drawn on Saul—more briefly than I would like, actually—because I think more Americans would benefit from considering his point of view, to set the stage for my remarks today on “the ethical stewardship of the news.”

I do so because I think something like the “unconsciousness” he says afflicts us keeps us from seeing or understanding the consequence of the practice of journalism being hostage to marketplace values in which the importance to our nation of that institution of democracy is not taken into account. The leaders of giant corporations that own most of the nation’s television and radio stations, newspapers, and so-called cable news channels will tell you they care. But if you judge them by what they do as the temporary managers, the stewards, if you will, of journalism enterprises, the evidence will, I believe, lead you to a different conclusion.

One of the great ethicists of our times, Alistair MacIntyre, argues in his book *After Virtue* that those who participate in a practice such as journalism, and certainly, for the purposes of this argument, the CEOs and other executives of the giant corporate conglomerates that own journalism enterprises can be described as effectively participating in the practice of journalism, must accept the “standards of excellence which are appropriate to” and help define the practice.

These standards of excellence, he explains, flow from “certain fea-

tures of social and moral life.”

The point here, my point which I am drawing on a renowned ethicist to make, is that if you are going to be a responsible, ethical steward of journalism, that journalism which rightfully lays claim to the respect and protection due institutions essential to our democracy, you should accept, defend, and seek to raise the “standards of excellence” which are “appropriate to” and at least “partially definitive of” the practice of journalism in the “social and moral life” of our nation and its communities.

More succinctly, let me say that there are ethical ways to run news enterprises and there are unethical ways. There are ethical decisions and unethical decisions made every day. And journalism, journalism in the public interest, will not survive if we continue to discuss important matters of social ethics as run-of-the-mill business decisions, as what corporate wants, or what the marketplace demands.

Oh, before I move on, there’s one other point that the respected ethicist Alistair MacIntyre makes in *After Virtue*.

He says that as a part of any practice, and I think this would certainly include the practice of journalism, “we have to accept...the virtues of justice, courage and honesty” as part of that practice.

Courage, he explains, is an important virtue, “because the care and concern for individuals, community, and causes which are so crucial to so much in practices requires” courage.

“If someone...cares,” he continues, “but is unwilling to risk” personal detriment, “he puts in question the genuineness of his care and concern.” And “a man who genuinely cares and has not the capacity for risking harm or danger has to define himself, both to himself and to others, as a coward.”

Let me put that last point in my own words. Courage in defense of that which is essential to the vitality and effectiveness of journalism in the public interest in our nation, journalism that supports both the democracy and its citizens, is essential to ethical stewardship of a journalistic enterprise. To do less than that which courage demands that one do is unethical and cowardly.

Now, some may say that all this talk from philosophers and ethicists sounds good, but what does it tell us about the real world in which we live and work? Isn’t it just so much pompous spouting

from big thinkers sitting in the clouds like some brooding twenty-first century Socrates?

I think not.

I think “big thinkers” sometimes get it right. I think the best minds in the country can see things clearly, and sometimes they even seem to be able to see into the future.

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Too many of the stewards of journalism today make decisions that affect the adequacy of the service provided by the press based on the demands of the marketplace or corporatist values.

We are thus presented with a journalism that places celebrity ahead of consequence; that takes complex social problems and packages them for the public as news smoothies; that has cable news networks, in their desperate competition for higher ratings, distorting the news agenda for the nation and warping our sense of what is important and what is appropriate for the public’s attention.

It is a world in which increasing numbers of people of all ages see that the picture they get of their world and what’s going on in it is frequently more clearly presented by the satirist Jon Stewart than it is by the so-called mainstream media, trapped in old journalistic paradigms that the propagandists in government, political parties, and well-financed interests manipulate like puppets.

So, I close today with a modest proposal for Americans from every walk of life, in communities across the nation, to think about.

The journalistic enterprises that serve you are businesses. That may cause them to do things that are detrimental to the public good, but it also makes them responsive, potentially, to determined, organized groups of citizens who are concerned with the adequacy of the service provided by news organizations, the adequacy of the service they provide as institutions that should, but too frequently do not, serve the needs of a self-governing people.

If the persons responsible for news organizations by virtue of their place in a business hierarchy are not ethical and responsible stewards of the news, don’t we have a responsibility as citizens to act in responsible, constructive ways to change the situation?

If a community can benefit from local “good government” and

“citizen watchdog” groups, certainly communities can benefit from vigorous local “good journalism” groups.

Who better to judge the performance of an instrument of democracy than the audience—citizens—it exists primarily to serve?

If the American public, the sovereign people, are capable of evaluating those who represent them in government, are they not also capable of judging those who are stewards of public trust and the institutions for which they are responsible?

The great twentieth century patriot and public servant wrote a few years before his death about the “American Experiment” and our generation.

The phrase “American Experiment” is constructed from what James Madison wrote in Federalist 39 about the Constitution then being considered by the American people in the debate over ratification as a “political experiment” that would test “the capacity of mankind for self-government.”

And 200 years later, John Gardner wrote these words:

The American Experiment is still in the laboratory.

We need a powerful thrust to move this nation through a rough patch, and much of that energy will have to come from the citizens themselves.

One might imagine that the straightforward path to repair the civic faith of Americans would be to make government worthy of their faith. But the plain truth is that government will not become worthy of trust until citizens take positive action to hold them to account.

I am here to say to you today that the same is true of the practice of journalism and the institutions that support it.

So those who have not succumbed to the contemporary disaffection and alienation must speak the word of life to their fellow Americans. It is not a liberal or a conservative issue. It is not Democrat versus Republican. It is a question of whether we are going to settle into a permanent state of alienated self-absorption or show the vigor and purpose that become us. We do not want it said that after a couple of great centuries we—you and me and our generation—“let the American Ex-

periment disintegrate.”

Or, that we allowed a crucial institution of our democracy—journalism—to fade away to become just another business. 

Prepared Remarks of Jay T. Harris for the Ruhl Symposium on Ethics in Journalism, University of Oregon’s School of Journalism, Eugene, Oregon, May 12, 2005.

**Jay Harris**, an industry leader in major areas of journalism over the past twenty-five years, holds the Wallis Annenberg Chair in Journalism and Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. He is also the Director of The Center for the Study of Journalism and Democracy at USC. Prior to his move to USC, Harris was the publisher and chairman at the *San Jose Mercury News* for seven years. While there, he drastically improved the paper’s quality, earning it a ranking from *The Columbia Journalism Review* as one of the top 10 newspapers in the country.

Harris began his journalism career as a reporter and editor at the *Wilmington News Journal* in Delaware. From 1975 to 1982, he was a faculty member and served as assistant dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. In 1978, he created the American Society of Newspaper Editors’ annual national census of minority employment in daily newspapers, which helped earn him a spot on the list of the 20th century’s 100 most influential black journalists.

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WELCOME NEW MEMBER

**Deborah Levi**

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.  
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.