GENERAL SEMANTICS AND THE ETHICS AGENDA: New Challenges for the News Media

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Abstract

News media have come under fire recently for numerous ethical lapses, including their coverage of the OJ Simpson trial and other celebrated sex crime cases, their insensitivity in handling racial and ethnic issues, their sensationalizing and fictionalizing some news events, etc. Print and broadcast media have been faulted for blurring the lines between objective, factual news and various kinds of propaganda (editorializing, public relations and advertising, a.k.a. infomercials), and entertainment (talk radio and new types of reality-based programming, a.k.a. infotainment).

Lessons from General Semantics can and should help inform the debate over media ethics and should benefit media practitioners and the general public. Those who are committed to ethical and excellent journalism recognize the delicate balance needed to maintain an independent and vigorous press system which remains profitable and serves the needs of an informed public. But they seldom articulate some fundamental lessons of General Semantics that would be most salient, especially objectivity and the fact/inference/value judgment problems related to consciousness of abstraction; social, political, and semantic correctness; open- and closed-mindedness; propaganda and its ramifications. In conclusion, a call for the redefinition of news as a moral rather than a craft-based enterprise is issued.

Preface

In his 1960 Association for Education in Journalism convention speech, reprinted in the General Semantics Bulletin, University of Missouri Journalism School Dean Earl English spoke eloquently of ethics, without once using the term:

> If I were attempting to rank the korzybskian formulations carrying important implications for journalism students in the order of importance, I should place the semantic constructs leading to an awareness of individual responsibility high on the list... Responsibility involves what the writer or speaker does for the reader or listener in terms of providing him with a 'picture of reality' – a picture valid enough to aid him in predicting from time to time what the future may have in store for him. (Earl English, "General Semantics in Journalism", *General Semantics Bulletin, Numbers 26 & 27*, 1960)

Dean English, who taught general semantics in journalism from the late 1940s until the 1980s, thus articulated a challenge for all of us who are committed to ethical and excellent public communication. He recognized that ethics entails both an individual and a collective enterprise; that it deals with principles of responsibility and accountability, of "owes" and "oughts" and other moral duties; that it calls for carefully articulated values and loyalties, and serious consideration of the consequences of our behavior; that it asks us to do the right things, for the right reasons.

"Doing ethics in journalism" – and doing research in or otherwise trying to understand the process of ethical and excellent journalism – strikes me as having a great deal in common with Korzybski s call for clear-headed, science- and principle-based decision-making about other aspects of human communication.

Let us explore just a few of the countless items on the general semantics and ethics agenda.

Introduction

As a child I had been told that sticks and stones may break my bones, but that names would never hurt me. Notwithstanding the many times I was egged into scuffles over that most childish of propaganda techniques, namecalling (regardless of whether I was the namecaller or the namecallee), I accepted that view on words *vis a vis* weapons. At least I did prior to taking General Semantics in Journalism, where I was exposed to observations such as Wendell Johnson's (*People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946], p. 193) that:

> After all, the way we classify, or label, an individual or a thing determines very largely how we will react toward it. When our classification, or labeling, of an individual determines, entirely and without exception, our attitudes and reaction toward that individual, our behavior is scarcely distinguishable from the behavior of Pavlov's dogs.

As the theme of the interdisciplinary conference – "Developing Sanity in Human Affairs" – suggests, there should be value in distinguishing ourselves from Pavlov's dogs. Today I would like to share some thoughts with you about ways insights from Wendell Johnson and other general semanticists can contribute to journalism's task of doing its vital and constitutionally protected tasks while remaining a human and humane – a non-Pavlovian enterprise. In no particular order of importance, the topics I'd like to consider deal with socially, politically, and semantically correct communication; with propaganda and open and closed-mindedness; and with challenges posed by such concepts as abstraction and objectivity as news media face significant challenges on myriad cultural, economic, and technological fronts.

Individually and collectively, these topics address ethics and excellence in journalism. My conclusion is a call for the redefinition of news as a moral rather than craft-based enterprise; in drawing that conclusion I maintain that principles of general semantics can – and should – lead to a type of journalism that will help develop sanity in human affairs.

On Social, Political, and Semantic Correctness *

For a poignant example of how semantics and ethics co-mingle, consider how we in the news media and everyday life describe victims of sex crimes. Meaningful insights on this subject are found in Helen Benedict's provocative *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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* Professor Black's casual use of terms such as 'concepts', 'objectivity', 'semantic', and 'correct' suggest that his approach here is more broadly "general *semantic*" than "general-semantic". (Ed.)

Benedict says many myths about women, sex, and rape are due to the gender bias of our language.

> The press habitually uses words to describe female crime victims, especially sex crime victims, that are virtually never used for men. Those words are consistently sexual, condescending, or infantilizing. For example, look at the effect of changing 'she' to 'he' on these words used by *The New York Times* to describe Jennifer Levin, victim of the 1986 'Preppy Murder' : "He was tall and beautiful; a bright, bubbly young man about to start college and pursue a career."
>
> Men are never described as hysterical, bubbly, pretty, pert, prudish, vivacious, or flirtatious, yet these are all words used to describe female victims (of sex crimes). Imagine, 'Vivacious John Harris was attacked in his home yesterday.'
>
> Male crime victims are rarely described in terms of their sexual attractiveness, while female crime victims almost always are. 'An attractive male athlete was found beaten up in an alleyway' sounds absurd...
>
> Women are often described as having been 'beaten' when men are described as 'beaten up.' The first connotes punishment, the second pure violence...
>
> The cumulative impact of sexist vocabulary may be subtle, but linguists have demonstrated that it is powerful. As Bea Bourgeois, a writer who has commented on sexism in newspapers pointed out, words are the tools we use to communicate our perceptions of each other and our world. They draw the roadmaps of the mind. (Benedict, pp. 20-21)

Words...draw the roadmaps of the mind. The suggestion is that these roadmaps inadequately and even unethically portray the territory of sex crimes, and that journalists are guilty of the misdemeanor, if not the felony, of bad mapmaking.

Consider some other areas of social, political, and semantic correctness that have appeared recently in the news. What a laboratory for linguistic and semantic study they provide; what object lessons in social sanity and unsanity they offer!

On the national level, we note two recent cases:

Three students at Santa Rosa Junior College in California who were offended by sexual comments on a computer bulletin board sued under Title IX of Civil Rights Act, which prohibits sex discrimination in schools that get federal funds. The U.S. Department of Education found that the bulletin board comment created a hostile educational environment.

The second case involved technical writing professor J. Donald Silva at the University of New Hampshire, found guilty of verbal sexual harassment for explaining what a simile was (he quoted belly dancer Little Egypt, who said belly dancing is like Jell-O on a plate with a vibrator under the plate; he also equated good writing to good sex). UNH ordered Silva to apologize and undergo counseling, but he sued; a federal court found that the university had violated his First Amendment rights.

The debate entails far more than liberal versus conservative political views; it cuts across the political spectrum and raises crucial questions about sanity in human affairs. Syndicated columnist Anthony Lewis ("Hypersensitive students need a lesson in free speech", *St. Petersburg Times,* Oct. 15, 1994, p. 20-A) said he worries that "more and more of us seem to find our sensibilities so offended by someone's words that we rush to the law to demand punishment of the speaker" rather than following Justice Louis Brandeis's advice that the right way to deal with bad speech is to answer it – the remedy is more speech, not silence; and Justice William Brennan Jr.'s statement in *New York Times v Sullivan* that Americans were committed to the view that speech should be "uninhibited, robust, and wide open."

"What ever happened to the American idea of freedom for unpleasant speech? And to our sense of the absurd?" Lewis asks. "Genuine sexual harassment is an outrage," Lewis says, adding, however, that "claims of insensitive words should not be allowed to override the First Amendment, least of all in the free atmosphere of a university."

Meanwhile, in my own state of Florida, two middle-aged white males have found themselves in serious difficulties after making racially insensitive comments. A popular journalism professor at Florida A&M, Gerald Gee, used the term "nigger mentality" in class when urging his students to shed a mentality of victimization, and a Tampa attorney, Stephen M. Crawford, wrote a letter to an out-of-state client in which he criticized a black jurist for his legal acumen. *St. Petersburg Times* columnist Bill Maxwell concluded ("Racial words and the value of redemption", *St. Petersburg Times*, Oct. 23, 1994, pp. D-1, 8) that both of the men had long and distinguished records in race relations, and should not be fired, despite the outpouring of public opinion against them.

"None of us is pure", said Maxwell, with a rare journalistic demonstration of general semantics. "All of us make mistakes – some serious enough to ruin our lives. When we judge the words of other people, we should try to be mature, wise. Redemption is essential in civilized life. But ours is becoming a society less willing to understand, less willing to forgive. We're wearing our *rights* and sensitivities on our sleeves, listening for insults in all speech and mining all written words for reasons to censor.

"We use our freedoms so recklessly and cover our individuality so fiercely that we ve become a nation of smug, intolerant, overly sensitive strangers who're unwilling to give one another a second chance." concluded Maxwell – who happens to be African-American.

A couple of weeks earlier, Maxwell had generated letters from many *St. Petersburg Times* readers by writing a column headlined "Respect the right to disagree" (September 24, 1994). He noted that if Voltaire were to say today – and if he tried to practice the principle of his statement – that "I wholly disapprove of what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it." he could "easily find himself at the killing end of a 12-gauge shotgun."

Maxwell said few Americans will defend to the death the rights of others. And, "even less nobly, few Americans have the ability to calmly listen to an opposing opinion. The nation is fast becoming a barnyard, teeming with barking, braying, clucking, growling, grunting, howling, screeching, snorting." – He implied that radio talk shows in particular are rhetorical barnyards.

Maxwell complained that important debates at all levels have "enmity so profound that reaching common ground is next to impossible...freedom of speech – America's greatest treasure – is under siege. When discussion is compromised or stifled, the potential for human understanding is lost."

A week later, the *Times* printed several letters to the editor in response to Maxwell (Oct. 1, 1994, p. 19-A). One writer agreed, saying:

> (W)e are regressing to a biased nation of workplaces and communities where the ramifications of exercising the right of free speech frighten most people into willingly accepting the status quo rather than publicly risking a proffered opinion. The reason for this reaction is the fear of retribution from close-minded recipients who prefer to bash or dismiss the opinion-giver rather than intellectually discuss and consider an alternative view. (Susan M. Weatherby)

This letter writer struck a responsive chord with me, because of her sense that closed-mindedness may be one our most serious social-psychological problems. One could argue that we need to do much more to understand the ethical ramifications of our belief systems and communications behavior if we are to establish sanity in human affairs. To do so, we turn to issues of propaganda and open- or closed-mindedness and all the values questions to which they give rise.

On propaganda and open/closed-mindedness

Jacques Ellul, whose brilliant book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* was translated into English in 1965, did much to revise the world s thinking about what propaganda is and how it works. Several provocative books on propaganda have appeared within the past few years, returning this important subject matter to the classrooms and research centers for journalists, political scientists, sociologists, and others concerned with language habits in human affairs. We would do well to acquaint ourselves with this body of knowledge, and tie it to our concerns over ethical and semantically sane public communication.

Ellul, you may recall, defined propaganda not necessarily as something a political party or religion or someone purposively creates to manipulate the helpless masses, but as something inevitable in a democratic or technological society, a sociological phenomenon built into and carried out through the mass media.

In an Ellulian vein, J. Fred MacDonald wrote in Ted J. Smith's 1989 book, *Propaganda: A Pluralistic Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1989):

> Mass man is educated and controlled through propaganda...The communications media through which daily he is informed whether via formal news broadcasts or through the many formats of popular entertainment frame the world to complement the historic national understanding that he has learned. Little he usually hears, sees, or reads, has not been prepared by experts committed to the system and familiar with its language. (pp. 29-30)

So our hunger for truth, half-truth, limited truth, and truth out of context gives rise to propaganda machines (a.k.a. mass media) that fulfill our appetites to know, to be informed, to be entertained, to be

persuaded. Naturally, much of the content of these propaganda machines is in direct opposition to the fundamental goals of a pluralistic society.

In a pluralistic society – the system we claim to believe in – one responsibility of the mass media is to keep the public open-minded, that is, to encourage citizens to be curious, questioning, unwilling to accept simple answers to complex situations...to be extensional. Mental freedom comes when people possess and exercise the capacity to weigh numerous sides of controversies and come to their own decisions, free of extraneous constraints.

Social psychologist Milton Rokeach, in *The Open and Closed Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1960), concluded empirically that the degree to which a person's belief system is open or closed is the extent to which the person can receive, evaluate, and act on relevant information received from the outside on its own intrinsic merits, unencumbered by irrelevant factors in the situation arising from within the person or from the outside. It follows that open minded individuals seek out mass media that challenge them to think for themselves, rather than media that offer easy answers to complex problems. The open minded media consumers seek "free" (i.e., independent and pluralistic) media because they want to remain free.

Returning to my previous point, about politically and socially correct communication, I'm inclined to conclude that the correctness movement so in vogue lately does not seem to be a movement by the open-minded who trust themselves and others to engage in truly open dialogue, but a movement by the closed-minded. (Remember, open- and closed-mindedness is a cognitive, not a political, construct.) This is not a politically popular perspective for me to be taking, I realize. But overall, the whole movement often strikes me as a case of Pavlovian conditioning – of dogmatic, closed-minded language and social behavior.

So that I m not too badly misunderstood on this point: We can be ethically and semantically sane in our communication without being politically stultified by well-intentioned dogmatism and propaganda.

Students hoping to better understand contemporary media propaganda need tools to discern the mind sets and techniques utilized by propagandists, and to understand their own semantic behaviors. This is easier said than done, however. Even journalists who fancy themselves as objective – or at least fair – in their treatment of news can fall into propagandistic patterns. As John Hohenberg has said, "The temptation is great, under the pressures of daily journalism, to leap to conclusions, to act as an advocate, to make assumptions based on previous experience, to approach a story with preconceived notions of what is likely to happen. To give way to such tendencies is to invite error, slanted copy, and libelous publications for which there is little or no defense. An open mind is the mark of the journalist; the propagandist has made up his mind in advance. (Hohenberg, *The Professional Journalist: A Guide to the Practices and Principles of the News Media* [San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1969], p. 330)

Studies of media processes and effects, general semantics, and propaganda lead me to believe propaganda can be usefully defined, and then systematically studied, in terms of the methods used, the manifest content, and the motives of the user; further, I would argue that a better (non-Pavlovian) understanding of propaganda will help us more appropriately respond to the semantic complexities of journalism.

While it may or may not emanate from individuals or institutions with demonstrably closed minds, the manifest content of propaganda contains characteristics one associates with dogmatism or closed-mindedness; while it may or may not be intended as propaganda, this type of communication seems non-creative and seems to have as its purpose the evaluative narrowing of its receivers. While creative communication accepts pluralism and displays expectations that its receivers should conduct further investigations of its observations, allegations, and conclusions, propaganda does not appear to do so. Rather, propaganda is characterized by at least the following half-dozen specific techniques:

1. A heavy or undue reliance on authority figures and spokespersons, rather than empirical validation, to establish its truths or conclusions.

2. The utilization of unverified and perhaps unverifiable abstract nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and physical representations, rather than empirical validation, to establish its truths, conclusions, or impressions.

3. A finalistic or fixed view of people, institutions, and situations, divided into broad, all-inclusive categories of in-groups (friends) and out-groups (enemies), situations to be accepted or rejected in whole.

4. A reduction of situations into readily identifiable cause and effect relationships, ignoring multiple reasons for events.

5. A time perspective characterized by an overemphasis or underemphasis on the past, present, or future as disconnected periods, rather than a demonstrated consciousness of time flow.

6. A greater emphasis on conflict than on cooperation among people, institutions, and situations.

This description of propaganda, framed by general semantics principles that are free of political or social agendas, should allow both practitioners and observers of contemporary mass media to investigate their own and their media s ethical behavior.

On Abstraction and Objectivity

Much evidence points to an increased concern by journalists and their audiences over how today's news media can produce and distribute truthful, accurate, and unbiased maps of the world out there. Maybe the O. J. Simpson saga has helped focus the debate; if so, it is only the most recent of a spate of sagas – Amy Fisher, Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding, the Menendez brothers, Michael Jackson, Princess Di and Prince Charles – sagas that have caused even the most sanguine news consumer and journalist to question the rules of the news enterprise.

Even though they didn't quote Korzybski directly, several American journalists have eloquently suggested recently that awareness of general semantics principles might save the enterprise.

• Jack Hart, senior editor for writing and staff development at the Portland *Oregonian,* wrote in *Editor & Publisher* (Oct. 1, 1994, pp. 5, 33), a piece headlined "The ladder of abstraction". In it he said:

> We journalists like to think of ourselves as down-to-earth sorts. Abstract, highfalutin' ideas are for philosophers, but we grub around in the stuff of daily life. Folks in ivory towers worry about the cosmic. We work the streets.
>
> Well...like most self-concepts, ours is laced with romance and wishful thinking. The fact is, we're not nearly as close to the pavement as we'd like to think.

His point is that most news reporting is too abstract, not specific enough. For example, he cites a lead from his paper:

> A Portland truck driver was hospitalized early Tuesday after he was seriously injured when someone threw a rock through the windshield of his truck near the St. Johns Bridge. A witness reported seeing two young men flee the area.

Hart faulted this lead as being too abstract, with too few details, with no descriptive terms. He contrasted it with a passage from John Hershey s Hiroshima, describing a group of soldiers blinded by an atomic bomb blast:

> When he had penetrated the bushes, he saw there were about 20 men, and they were all in exactly the same nightmarish state: their faces were wholly burned, their eye sockets were hollow, the fluid from their melted eyes had run down their cheeks. Their mouths were mere swollen, pus-covered wounds, which they could not bear to stretch enough to admit the spout of the teapot.

Hart said that clearly, writing produces vastly different effects depending on its levels of abstraction. But lots of journalists pay little attention to the degree of abstraction in their words. Out of habit, they stay at the same middling levels all the time, a cruise-control approach that robs their writing of both meaning and impact.

> Think about abstraction levels in terms of a ladder. The bottom rung represents the most concrete. You write at that level to describe a single person or object. Each higher rung represents some larger class containing the thing described at the bottom rung but lots of other things as well. So the chance of forming images and engaging the reader's imagination fades as you move up the ladder.

"Not that anything is inherently wrong with abstraction," Hart concluded. He said Einstein's theories work on the ladder's uppermost rungs. "They're enormously useful, of course, even if you can't actually visualize abstract notions of mass or energy." (p. 5)

●Richard Harwood, former ombudsman of the *Washington Post,* raised some important questions concerning journalists' and news audiences' consciousness of abstraction. His column (in the September 15, 1994 issue of *St. Petersburg Times*, p. 18A) was headlined "Media's easy labels do a disservice to complex reality."

> If you compulsively and religiously read the metropolitan newspapers and the news magazines, and if you also ingest the nightly television news, you will come to an uncomplicated understanding of the motives, behavior, values, and moralities of the various populations of the United States of America.

> This educational miracle is accomplished by the labeling system employed by every profitable and self-respecting news organization. Most politicians, for example, can be classified (and understood, presumably) by a couple of words: conservative, a.k.a. Republican, or liberal, a.k.a. Democrat. If we run into a conservative Democrat or a liberal Republican, it s a little more complicated. The usual solution is 'because of local circumstances' or we invent a new label: 'New Democrat', 'New Republican'.

Harwood wondered how we handle complex individuals and groups, such as 'Black' men and women who espouse family values, denounce homosexuality, adultery, abortion and premarital sex; or those who are born again, fundamentalist, total immersion Christians who vote the Democratic ticket from top to bottom. "Homophobes", "anti-abortion radicals", "Christian right-wingers", "liberals", or "conservatives"? "Their attitudes and behaviors, like the attitudes and behaviors of most Americans, don't neatly coincide with our labels."

Harwood's concluding paragraph:

> The obvious point is that labels very often don't work, that we who use them in the media may not have the slightest idea what they mean and that very often they are used by lazy or incompetent writers to simplify realities that are not subject to easy simplification. They are totally inadequate substitutes for describing and delineating the real divisions in American life.

• A few moments ago, I mentioned that *St. Petersburg Times* writer Bill Maxwell received some interesting replies to his column in which he tried to explain the dearth of rational debate.

One letter writer said Maxwell overlooked the real cause of why there is no logical debate at any level. The letter writer, Gerald Gray, shifted the debate away from political correctness into one of semantic awareness *, when he said:

> The sad fact is that the American public is no longer getting any truth from any level. Without truth about the facts involved, no logical conclusion can be established.
>
> Newspapers, television and many radio stations report the latest news on many issues, but their ideology overshadows the basic facts. On many of the latest issues before the Congress, nowhere have I seen any type of 'media' just present the pros and cons of an issue. Ideology should be in the editorials of the 'media', not in the news.
>
> Mr. Maxwell, this is why people are tuning into radio talk shows. At least with talk shows, it is possible to get more than one opinion. I might add that people are tired of others' ideology constantly being thrown at them from the 'media' when all they are looking for are the true facts about an issue.
>
> Remember the five 'W's that were taught in journalism?
>
> (Gerald Gray)

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* Loaded with Allness! (Ed.)

Is there much support for Gerald Gray's contention that "news" contains ideological bias, and that the public doesn't know where to turn for the five W's?

Recently, in many talks with civic and community groups about issues in modern mass media, I have encountered a great many befuddled and angry news consumers who say "Why don't they separate facts from opinions? Why don't they just give us the news, and let us make up our own minds – or at least save their conclusions for the editorial page, where we've always found them?"

These are only a couple of a great many examples that come to mind from even casual reading, listening, and viewing media recently. Consider some of the other items that relate to this concern over blurring media messages.

- Marvin Kalb, visiting professor of press and public policy at George Washington University and former chief diplomatic correspondent for CBS and NBC, wrote on October 10, 1994 (*St. Petersburg Times*, p. 14-A, originating with *Los Angeles Times*) that it is becoming harder to sort out real news from fluff.

Kalb asks whether Larry King is a journalist, and Ted Koppel a talk-show host, and whether there is any difference. He's not sure:

> Now, nothing is what it seems. Suddenly, after radical changes in technology and journalistic norms, there is a disturbing blurring of the line between news and entertainment, between reporting and editorializing, between fact and opinion, between 'old' and 'new' media – between Koppel and King. The result is confusion in the news room and the living room.

Kalb suggests that in this "age of television, in which image is sovereign and perception is reality," it is increasingly difficult to determine where people get their news and how they even define news. He notes the plethora of traditional news shows, call-in talk shows, electronic town meetings, faxes, 800- and 900- numbers and on-line bulletin boards, Capital Gang and Meet the Press and religion programs that mix faith with politics, an avalanche of information newspapers and tabloids, magazines and newsletters. All of them made it difficult to distinguish real from fake. " 'News' may be news, but it may also be gossip, half-truth, outlandish fiction, scandal or sensational and unsubstantiated tidbits, masquerading as 'news'."

Kalb correctly noted that "More Americans get their print 'news' from *People* magazine, the *National Enquirer* or the *Star* tabloid than they do from, say, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*". On television, according to one recent focus group, people say they get their 'news' or 'information' from such programs as *Hard Copy* and *Rescue 911* rather than the three networks' evening news shows.

Why is this problematic? Because, Kalb reminds us, the standards of journalism on pseudo-news shows and talk shows are substantially different from standards applied in traditional news media. Differences include reliance upon single rather than multiple sources, upon rumors rather than documented facts, upon stories that have been paid for rather than dug up as part of the public debate.

"Can journalism ever recover its former authority?" Kalb asks. "Perhaps," he answers, saying "it will require a monumental struggle, and the outcome is far from assured. Journalistic ethics have

crumbled, along with medical and legal ethics, as popular confidence in the major institutions of America has taken a nose dive. Meanwhile, what is needed is a new commitment to honest, old-fashioned journalism – and to courage."

Honest, old-fashioned, courageous journalism. Maybe it's high time we took a closer look at our assumptions about what makes news and why people need us to be ethical as we assemble it and deliver it to them. And let's do so according to fundamental concepts of general semantics and ethics.

On Redefining the News Enterprise

Let's revisit some of our assumptions about objective journalism and our contract with those who rely upon us to help them form reliable pictures of the world. Just what does the audience expect from us, and what do we deliver? Have we confused the audience by jumping between descriptive and prescriptive language, seemingly indifferent to our own linguistic prejudices? What are the readers, viewers, and listeners to make of our indiscriminate movement among communication functions: straight information, interpretation/ analysis, persuasion, entertainment...the blurring of traditional journalistic forms? What are they to make of our efforts to define news?

For a year and half (an eon in terms of the half-life of most issues on the news media's agenda) pundits have debated whether the O. J. Simpson story deserves the news play it has received. My conclusion: Of course it does. It meets and in many ways exceeds every one of our traditional criteria for what makes news. Laypersons, let alone freshman journalism students, know intuitively that the O. J. saga maxes out with prominent and highly charismatic individuals, skilled in using media to their own advantage; with ideological and physical conflict that is polarized in nature; with psychological and physical proximity (i.e., it deals with issues such as class and celebrity and race and sex and domestic violence with which we can identify, and it's an extremely easy story to package); with timeliness, and with suspense. Little wonder it has brought out the inherently competitive nature of the media beast.

These news traditions are not inherently flawed or immoral. They exist for a variety of justifiable reasons, not the least of which is the public's hunger for such news. But they are craft-based judgments, inherently amoral. That is, as put into practice they do not *necessarily* entail ethical principles such as justice, minimizing harm, beneficence (doing good), treating all individuals (sources, victims, news audiences, etc.) as ends in and of themselves rather than a means to an end, acting out of virtuous motives, truthtelling, etc. The latter motives may be involved in the enterprise, but they are not necessarily so, particularly if the news media are responding primarily from craft or professional concerns.

Therefore, out of unquestioned traditions, or ignorance, or indifference, or insensitivity, or prejudice, or merely out of having been coopted by the establishment or the rebels and their propaganda, journalists have severe ethical and semantic challenges when handling the complex tasks at hand.

It comes down to questions of judgment. Journalism cannot be an entirely objective enterprise, if only because abstraction is a journalist's stock in trade. To manage it ethically is to do it openly, fully aware that our maps are not the territory, that we don't publish "all the news that's fit to print", that we

cannot in good conscience declare "That's the way it is." S. I. Hayakawa, in a 1972 speech, reminded his listeners of how the abstraction process renders journalistic objectivity problematic:

> (T)he events selected for coverage (by journalists) are a matter of choice; the facts isolated are a matter of choice; the participants involved are a matter of choice; the authorities and experts cited are a matter of choice; and even this is not where selectivity stops. It continues throughout the period in which the reporter sits down at the typewriter. He selects a vocabulary; he selects connotations, implications, associations, dramatic structure, organization. (S. I. Hayakawa, "General Semantics: Where is it now?" in H. Rank (Ed.), *Language and Public Policy.* (Urbana, Il: National Council of Teachers of English), pp. 153-54.)

Bearing general semantics principles in mind should cause a journalist to be more humble and careful, more aware of the difficulty of presenting full, accurate, and truthful renderings of the news. Awareness of general semantics should put the journalist in a better position to remain independent of the propagandistic and closed-minded forces that tend to manipulate the semantic environment. Such a journalist would be alert to the distinct possibility that the very act of doing journalism entails doing some degree of harm to the status quo – to sources, to subjects, to audiences who rely upon journalism to be a "medium" that conveys truths about what is going on. But ethical and excellent journalism will minimize those temporary harms to the status quo in its quest for longer term benefits to a sane society.

In Conclusion

This weekend we have talked around the topic of ethics, concentrating more on responsibility, time-binding, on credibility and trustworthiness, on establishing and maintaining community. As we leave the tribal long house and reenter the world of changes thinging, let's keep the ethics agenda in mind.

Let's not let new media, which encourage the traditional physical community to disappear, take with them our psychic community. As we increasingly become linked electronically to an association of like-minded people scattered across the globe, let us not become self-absorbed individuals. As we produce and consume our cyberspace communications, our "zines" and other highly specialized print and electronic media, let us remember what it is that we have in common, what we owe one another by virtue of sharing space in this biosphere.

As Dean Earl English told his colleagues thirty-five years ago, and as this conference reminds us this weekend, the lessons from general semantics most assuredly contribute to the ethical task at hand.

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