

Bill Kurtis – “Do Your Job”

Keynote Address to the Society of Professional Journalists
Chicago, Illinois -- August 25, 2006

Broadcast journalist [Bill Kurtis](#) delivered a keynote address to the annual convention of the Society of Professional Journalists at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Chicago on Friday, Aug. 25, 2006. Here is a text of Kurtis' speech, supplied by Kurtis and copyedited by Bill Densmore of the [Media Giraffe Project](#). ([Kurtis Wikipedia entry](#)).

Thomas Jefferson wrote those words in [a letter to William Green Mumford](#), 1799:

"To preserve the freedom of the human mind and freedom of the press, every spirit should be ready to devote itself to martyrdom; for as long as we may think as we will and speak as we think, the condition of man will proceed in improvement."

When Thomas Jefferson was president he did not like what was being printed about him in his second term. He clamped down on the press just like Adams did. But, in his heart and his intellectual core he was an advocate for freedom of the press and truly believed what he wrote to Mumford.

I had a close friend, Bob Wussler, who was assigned by CBS to leave his position at CBS News where he had overseen production of Walter Cronkite's space broadcasts, to become general manager of WBBM-TV here in Chicago. He introduced the mini-cam and electronic journalism to local news. We moved our anchor desk to the newsroom and adopted an advertising slogan, "It Isn't Pretty But It's Real." My co-anchor was Walter Jacobson and we began a 10-year period of local news production, which Bob Wussler predicted would one day be called the Golden Days.

I have since referred to it many times as that. We lived in a newspaper town and dedicated ourselves to climb out of the television habit of reading the newspaper to find the news. We strove to break our own stories. I formed an investigative unit. Walter prepared a perspective every night. And we set forth to practice our trade -- because we loved it. Walter developed a network of sources within the city government and reported on the biggest political machine in the country from the inside out.

I think I started the practice of sending local reporters abroad to cover stories -- based on the premise that we are indeed a melting pot of ethnic groups who are interested in what's happening in THEIR mother country. And if we tell the story right, the rest of us will be interested too, and better informed. It was also because I had spent three years as a CBS correspondent on the West Coast and I needed to travel.

Agent Orange and the power of images

In 1975, I went to Vietnam two weeks before Saigon fell to cover Chicago's Catholic contributions helping refugees. I filed five stories for Chicago. In 1976, I traced the money going from Chicago Irish to the IRA supporters in Belfast. In 1977, it was Africa.

In 1978, I stayed at home long enough to break the Agent Orange story from my investigative unit, an hour-long show that aired only once on WBBM-TV, at 10:30 p.m. -- after the news. But truth has a way of lighting fires you don't expect. This story about a defoliant being sprayed on the jungles of Southeast Asia to take away enemy cover suddenly became important because, for the first time, we realized it was falling on our own troops -- who were now complaining about symptoms that couldn't be explained medically.

The New Yorker magazine had been telling the story of the defoliant for several years -- but it wasn't until we in television produced pictures of possible after effects on our own military that something was done. I had received a list of 12 men who were exposed to Agent Orange and who had symptoms. So I began interviewing them, knowing that if it was true it could have worldwide consequences. In one of the interviews I was talking to a sergeant and his family on a couch, when his little boy came in and stood by his father. The camera tilted down to zoom in on a deformed finger dangling on a piece of skin.

We would later play the documentary for a committee in the House of Representatives and when the camera tilted down on that little boy's finger, a hush went across the room and the mood of non-belief of the story changed. The Veterans Administration responded with massive promises. Congress eventually initiated a \$100-million study which found there were more soft-tissue cancers among Vietnam vets than then general population.

The New Yorker had worked for years on the story but it was the power of the picture that ignited action.

Learning the purpose of journalism

In 1980, I traveled to Iran, where U.S. Embassy personnel were being held hostage. And that same year, back to Vietnam, we were invited by the Vietnamese to study Agent Orange over there. On that trip, I also discovered what had happened to the children of American veterans who had been left behind when we pulled out of Saigon so fast. They were in the streets. Mothers were unable to get jobs -- because of their association with American servicemen. Their children looked Vietnamese but they had American faces.

I wrote a cover story for the *New York Times Magazine*. A Congressman saw it and got legislation passed to allow the children an expedited entry to America. And I discovered the purpose of journalism: To communicate problems to intelligent people who can solve those problems.

In 1982, we analyzed the techniques television reporters were using, and coined the phrase "ambush reporting" which caused even Mike Wallace to cease and desist.

All these stories were from a local television station -- because we had dedicated ourselves to news. With it came high ratings, good careers and eventually I went back to the CBS network to anchor a morning news show with Diane Sawyer.

Over that 10-year period of time, I saw our form of communication change from 16mm film to videotape to live satellite broadcasts -- and the demands on reporters changed too. Gone were the long deadlines that gave foreign correspondents time to sip a few gin and tonics before they filed a story. Soon, they were covering brush fire wars abroad like they would City Hall at home. The skills which had been required only on the floors of political

conventions were now used all over the world. You had to be able to tell a story in your own words, on camera.

Today, a larger pool of young people has entered the business. They are more able and trained than ever before, and serving the biggest spectrum of communication media ever imagined -- with a tsunami of information cresting over us every day.

Why then, don't we feel better informed? One of the reasons is the newscast itself -- the kind of news being presented and the style.

News as a fast-food diet

In my old age, I have become an entrepreneur, not just with my own production company for documentaries but [raising natural beef cattle](#), an alternative to what many people are [objecting to](#) in our food supply. They object to food that is short on nutrition, loaded with sugars and salts and fats and packaged very attractively. It's easy to mindlessly consume. And when you've finished it, you want more -- lots more. Some people call it fast food. Others call it an "addictive additives syndrome". The more you are fed, the more your palate adapts to the high fat, sugars and salts and rejects the leaner, time-consuming, slow-to-chew product. Only highly sugarcoated, fatty, salty images are now appealing and sought after -- so the marketplace thinks that's all the public wants and churns out more.

No let's apply that model to the news business. We have lots of information presented by highly talented reporters and producers. But when we examine a newscast it often looks like our over-processed food supply. The sugars are 'celebrity gossip stories' . . . the salts . . . are 'crime stories' producing lots of heat . . . the fats are 'tabloidesque stories' packaged very attractively . . . mindless and easy to consume. When the news is finished -- and this can also happened with newspaper reading -- you think you've been informed. But the nutrition is gone.

The influence of advertising

Why is this happening? Because television news lives within an advertising medium, it has an insatiable appetite for viewers who are 18 to 34. As a good sales manager might reason, aren't we justified in giving those viewers what they want to see too? The temptation is to give those viewers a product that is intended for an audience we assume is largely uninterested in news. They might watch a good loud fight or shouting match. A shock show. So we find the cable and broadcast networks, and local stations all scrambling to have as much visual stimulation on the screen as a video game -- lots of music, lots of young celebrities and screaming headlines.

The result is a tectonic shift felt throughout the entire industry. If you are doing it by the 'old' book you are on the endangered list, like Nightline. We're in the grip of a trend in television called reality television. News is the ultimate reality show. But reality programs are now watched as if they are news -- and not the highly manipulated contrivances that they are. To use again the food analogy, they are bloated with additives such as provoked and phony confrontations and situations. Again, these seductive additives numb the senses and create a desire for all programs (even the ones called NEWS) to provide these testosterone rushes--with high quotients of drama over content.

The argument goes: What's the problem? We have new technology, let's use it. We have new graphics capabilities, why not put it on the screen?

Of course we should use them, as long as we don't pass the gimmicks off for news and substance.

Embedded reporters – the new observation portal?

When U.S. troops approached Baghdad in tanks, the Defense Department granted a “wonderful” concession. Hundreds of reporters wanted to be there. So the Department of Defense implemented the policy of embedding reporters with the troops, with certain limitations – things like no reporting of locations. What could be wrong with that, some thought? Reporters, able to view action alongside soldiers? We would later learn it was a very myopic view of war, a view through an observation portal. Mind you, we'll take it if offered. But we'd also like to photograph wounded and dead coming home from war. It will get out, as the [photographs of Abu Ghraib](#) did, smuggled out by individual soldiers. If things are going badly, that will get out too. The White House recognized the usefulness of trying to hide the true face of war by controlling the images of the conflict.”

Sometimes, we're forced into what is called 'secondary viewing' to get the real story. The communist world learned about it when they began getting television programs from the West. In Berlin they could see the shows broadcast over the wall. The camera may have been on Starsky and Hutch, but in the background they saw the streets of Los Angeles -- and realized the people in the West were living at standards a lot different than they were. Those images contributed to the fall of Communism.

As a viewer, actually used that technique watching a report by Anderson Cooper on CNN. He was covering a [Hezbollah](#)-staged news event where the Hezbollah escorted the CNN camera teams into bombed-out apartments of Beirut. Anderson was on camera in the new style of reporting where the reporter is always on camera -- but over his shoulder I actually got some real information. It was the first time I realized that Hezbollah fighters lived in those apartments that had been targeted. Is Israel justified in bombing the civilian areas? No . . . but that's where the Hezbollah was.

News media and the law

In years past, the law had respected the media as protected by the First Amendment. But in recent years something changed. The normal adversarial relationship has escalated into all out war. Reporters have been thrown in jail to reveal their sources. In several cases, investigations into reporter's actions were initiated as the reporters began to ask questions.

Usually censorship comes after a story is written. But AP deputy Washington bureau chief [John Solomon](#) told [John Nichols](#) for the Nation, the Justice Dept. secretly [subpoenaed his home telephone records](#). This indicating, [Solomon said in an interview](#), that they were actually trying to stop the publication of a story that he was working on and trying to find out whom he was talking to, to cut off the flow of information.

It's a tactic of intimidation – a threat to make us think twice about reporting a story and raising the price of the consequences if it's an unpopular story. “Taking the heat” has always come with the territory. But legal action is different. And using the threat of legal action is more insidious. It has an unforgiving edge that chills you to the bone. It has happened in large part because of the threat of terrorism, a general fear that some argue justifies the lifting of basic American rights in the name of protecting the country.

But isn't it American rights that protect the country? Weren't wars fought to protect those rights that make us different from tyrannical governments? When the fear level is high enough, so is support for the blank check to do anything necessary to protect us.

There is now a very effective campaign going on to convince the American public that the media is not reporting what's really happening in Iraq, namely, the good side of the story, the many positive things we've done. The charge is that the media, for some reason, chooses to focus on the negative, like sectarian violence and U.S. casualties.

Now, let's be fair. In the beginning I mentioned "selection of stories" to pander to an age group preferred by advertising agencies. So, watching a school being built in Baghdad probably isn't the most interesting thing in the world. But am I living in a time warp? I see 150 people killed in a couple days from suicide bombs. I saw footage of snipers on rooftops firing into crowds. Are our colleagues withholding on us? Are editors "selecting out" the positive stories that might enforce the resolve of the American people? Of course not. We don't have a motive. We don't have a political agenda. Second, it's damn hard to get to the story to tell it. Never, have journalist's lives been more in danger.

What's also in danger is journalism -- from without and within. The problem can be expressed in numbers. When I covered the [Charles Manson](#) murder case [in 1971], there were 12 reporters in the courtroom. [O.J. Simpson's trial](#) [in 1995] had 3,000 reporters and technicians and trucks that shut down the street outside. We've grown until we're hard to handle. We've brought a lot of this on ourselves. It's confusing to argue against government policies to curtail the press when we're doing the same to ourselves by eliminating substantive stories -- in order to get another celebrity on the air.

What's necessary is to forge a definition of who we are, what we do, what we want to be? And through meetings like this, renew our vows -- often. We are reporters. We are [written into the Constitution](#). Our nation's founding fathers wanted to guarantee there would be an adversary of the government to tell the voters about conduct the politicians want to hide. They knew the government would be hostile to the press -- and that was before we had 24-hour cable news. We were invited to the party by the hosts who planned it.

The magic of truth

We are observers who diligently seek out all sides of a story to see it from different angles just as the sun illuminates a diamond's cuts. We are motivated by truth, knowing there is magic in it. We are defenders of these rights, because we're the first to see the challenges to them. We are sons of Jefferson, who even under political fire, said:

"To preserve the freedom of the human mind and freedom of the press, every spirit should be ready to devote itself to martyrdom; for as long as we may think as we will and speak as we think, the condition of man will proceed in improvement."

You aren't here to report on [Tom Cruise's baby](#), you're here to reflect the actions of government that might otherwise be hidden, and how our lives are affected by the times in which we live. You are reporters. You are written into the Constitution. You have an obligation. And in many ways, you are the lifeline between an American way of life, principals and values -- and a kind of government that doesn't resemble America at all.

Do your job.