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## The End of Admiration The Media and The Loss of Heroes

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**P**eter Gibbon is a research associate at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. The author of numerous articles in such publications as *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*, he is currently at work on a book about the disappearance of public heroes in American society.



Dr. Gibbon holds degrees from Harvard, Case-Western Reserve University, and Columbia University Teachers College. A longtime teacher and administrator, he has done extensive research on the educational systems of Japan, China, and Germany, and for ten years he served as headmaster of the Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York. ▲

*Peter Gibbon notes that journalists have often encouraged cynicism and celebrity worship at the expense of idealism and heroism, but he suggests that their influence can be more harmful in the era of "instant communication."*

*Dr. Gibbon's remarks were delivered at "The Fourth Estate: A History of Journalism," a seminar hosted by Hillsdale College's Center for Constructive Alternatives and Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism.*

**I** travel around the country talking to Americans about the loss of public heroes. I point out that New York City's Hall of Fame for Great Americans attracts only a few thousand visitors each year, while Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame draws over one million.

I describe a 25-foot stained glass window in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine—dedicated in the 1920s to four athletes who exemplified good character and sportsmanship—and I offer a quick list of titles of contemporary books on sports: *Shark Attack*, on the short and bitter career of college coaches; *Meat on the Hoof*, about the mercenary world of professional football; *Personal Fouls*, on the mistreatment of college athletes; *The Courts of Babylon*, on the venality of the women's professional tennis circuit; and *Public Heroes, Private Felons*, on college athletes who break the law.

I contrast two westerns: *High Noon*, which won four Academy Awards in 1959, and *Unforgiven*, which was voted "Best Picture" in 1992. The hero of *High Noon*, Will Kane, is a U.S. marshal. The hero of *Unforgiven*, Will Munny, is a reformed killer and alcoholic reduced to pig farming.

I mention that our best-selling postage stamps feature Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe and that

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our most popular TV show was, until it left the air recently, *Seinfeld*.

I remind my audiences that Thomas Jefferson is now thought of as the president with the slave mistress and Mozart as the careless genius who liked to talk dirty.

I add that a recent biography of Mother Teresa is titled *The Missionary Position*.

I offer some reasons for the disappearance of public heroes. Athletes have given up on being team players and role models. Popular culture is often irrelevant, sometimes deviant. Revisionist historians present an unforgiving, skewed picture of the past. Biographers are increasingly hostile toward their subjects. Social scientists stridently assert that human beings are not autonomous but are conditioned by genes and environment.

Hovering in the background are secularism, which suggests that human beings are self-sufficient and do not need God, and modernism—a complex artistic and literary movement that repudiates structure, form, and conventional values.

Finally, in an age of instant communication, in which there is little time for reflection, accuracy, balance or integrity—the media creates the impression that sleaze is everywhere, that nothing is sacred, that no one is noble, and that there are no heroes.

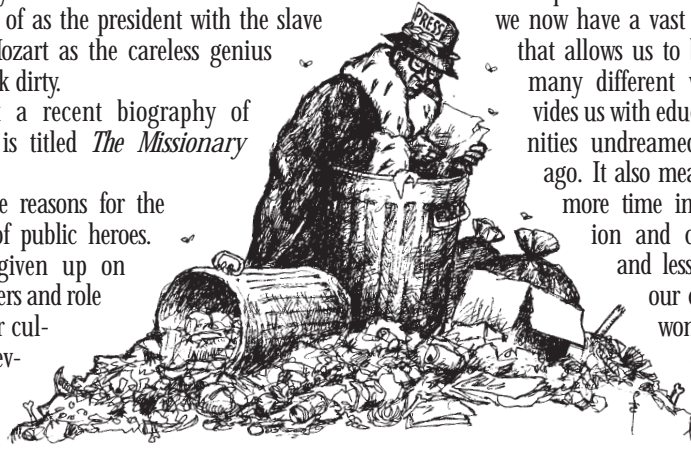
## Nothing to Admire

Radio, television, and computers offer news with such speed that newspaper and magazine circulation has plummeted, and readers have smaller vocabularies. I recently wrote an op-ed piece syndicated in several newspapers. My title, “*Nil Admirari*,” which means “nothing to admire,” came from the Roman lyric poet Horace. None of the newspapers used the title, and one editor reminded me that newspaper stories are now aimed at a sixth-grade reading level.

In the Age of Information, the image reigns. There are 81 television sets for every 100 Americans. In the typical household, the television is on six hours a day. Television has become our chief source of local and national news, and broadcast journalists have become more prominent and more powerful than columnists. There used to be three channels. Now, there are over one hundred. When we weary of television channels,

we can turn to countless radio stations, videotapes, and web pages.

This explosion of information means we now have a vast menu of choices that allows us to be transported to many different worlds and provides us with educational opportunities undreamed of thirty years ago. It also means that we spend more time in front of television and computer screens and less time reading to our children. It is no wonder that our children have shorter attention spans and smaller vocabularies.



## A Wired World

Along with this vast menu of choices is the absence of gatekeepers. As parents, we need to realize that there are dangers that come with too many choices and too few guides. We need to remind ourselves that their well-being depends not only on nutrition, sunlight, and exercise; on friendship, work, and love; but also on *how they see the world*. Subtly and powerfully, the media helps shape their world view.

The media has a liberal bias, but its *central* bias is toward bad news. Accidents, crimes, conflict, and scandal are interesting. Normality is boring. The prevalence of bad news and the power of the image encourage children—and us—to overestimate the chance of an accident, the risk of disease, the rate of violence, the frequency of marital infidelity. The average policeman, for example, never fires a gun in action, and most Americans are monogamous.

In a wired world with no restraint, the media can misinform us. It can also make us suspicious, fearful, and cynical. It can lead us to lose faith in our nation, repudiate our past, question our leaders, and cease to believe in progress.

We know the worst about everyone instantly. Over and over again, we see clips of George Bush vomiting, Dan Quayle misspelling “potato,” Gerald Ford tripping. No longer do we want our child to grow up and become president. We harbor dark suspicions about the personal conduct of scoutmasters, priests, and coaches. We think army sergeants harass their subordinates. We have trouble calling any public figure a hero. A wired world becomes a world without heroes, a world of *nil admirari*, with no one to admire.

Americans tell pollsters the country is in moral and spiritual decline. In the midst of peace and prosperity, with equality increasing and health improving, we are sour. With our military powerful and our culture ascendant, pessimism prevails.

## Crusaders or Rogues?

Should we blame journalists? It is certainly tempting. Just as we blame teachers for the poor performance of students, so we can blame reporters for the nation's

malaise. But just as teachers are not responsible for poverty and disintegrating families, journalists are not responsible for satellites, fiber optic cables, transistors, and microprocessors—the inventions that make possible instant information. Journalists did not cause the sexual revolution. They did not invent celebrity worship or gossip. Nor did they create leaders who misbehave and let us down.

At the same time, in the world of *nil admirari*, journalists are not innocent, and they know it. Roger Rosenblatt, a veteran of the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Life*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, says, "My trade of journalism is sodden these days with practitioners who seem incapable of admiring others or anything." In his memoir, former presidential press secretary and ABC News senior editor Pierre Salinger writes, "No reporter can be famous unless they have brought someone down." And *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik comments, "The reporter used to gain status by dining with his subjects; now he gains status by dining on them."

Journalists can be also be greedy. Eager for money, some reporters accept handsome speaking fees from organizations they are supposed to be covering. Some are dishonest, making up quotations, even inventing stories. No longer content with anonymity, many reporters seek celebrity, roaming the talk shows and becoming masters of the sound bite. They write autobiographies and give interviews to other journalists.

Just as our president is enamored of Hollywood, so are our journalists. Larry King recently spent a full hour interviewing singer Madonna. *Sixty Minutes* devoted much of a show to "bad boy" actor Sean Penn. Actors, supermodels, and musicians are no longer just entertainers. They are

treated like philosopher-kings, telling us how to live. In a recent interview, actress Sharon Stone, star of *Basic Instinct*, advises parents to make condoms available to their teenagers.

Aggressive and anxious for ratings, television news shows feature hosts and guests who come armed with hardened opinions. Many are quick to judge and prone to offer easy solutions for complex problems. "Talking heads" argue, yell, interrupt, and rarely make concessions.

But in the world of *nil admirari*, journalists are now reviled more often than revered. In the 1980s, muckraker Steven Brill skewered lawyers. In his new magazine, *Brill's Content*, he

lambastes journalists. In *Right in the Old Gazoo*, former Wyoming Senator Alan Simpson accuses journalists of becoming "lazy, complacent, sloppy, self-serving, self-aggrandizing, cynical and arrogant beyond belief." In *Breaking the News*, writer James Fallows comments that while movies once portrayed journalists as crusaders, they are now portrayed as rogues "more loathsome than . . . lawyers, politicians, and business moguls."

How much of this is new?

Since the founding of America, reporters have been harsh critics of public figures. George Washington did not like reading in pamphlets that the essence of his education had been "gambling, reveling, horse racing and horse whipping." Thomas Jefferson did not relish the label "effeminate." Abraham Lincoln did not appreciate being portrayed by cartoonists as a baboon.

Throughout our history, reporters have also received harsh criticism. Just after the Civil War, abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe claimed the press had become so vicious that no respectable American man would ever again run for president. In 1870, the British critic and poet Matthew Arnold toured America and concluded, "If one were searching for the best means . . . to kill in a whole nation . . . the feeling for what is elevated, one could not do better than take the American newspaper." At the turn of the century, novelist Henry James condemned what he called the "impudence [and] the shamelessness of the newspaper and the interviewer." In the early decades of the 20th century, "yellow journalism," "muckraking," and "debunking" became household words to describe newspaper stories that exaggerated and

distorted events to make them more sensational.

Nor is the media's fascination with celebrities new. When silent screen idol Rudolph Valentino and educational reformer Charles William Eliot died within a day of each other in 1926, high-minded Americans complained that the press devoted too many columns to a celebrity and too few to a hero of education. Between 1925 and 1947, millions of Americans listened to Walter Winchell's radio program, *The Lucky Strike Hour*, and read his column in the *New York Mirror*. Winchell hung out at the Stork Club, collecting gossip about celebrities and politicians from tipsters. He urged all newspaper offices to post these words on their walls: "Talk of virtue and your readers will become bored. Hint of gossip and you will secure perfect attention."

In short, media critics have always called reporters cynical. Reporters have always collected gossip and featured celebrities. And high-minded Americans have always warned that journalists could lower the nation's moral tone.

## An Empire of Information

From the outset, thoughtful critics conceded that journalists had an obligation to inform and expose. But those same critics were afraid that reporters would eliminate privacy and slander leaders; that by repeating gossip and emphasizing crime and corruption, newspapers would coarsen citizens; and that journalists would become more influential than ministers, novelists, professors, and politicians. They were right.

Journalists *have* become more powerful than ministers, novelists, professors, and politicians. They preside over an empire of information unimaginable to our ancestors—an empire that reaches small villages in India and can change governments in China; an empire characterized by staggering choice, variety, and technological sophistication.

An empire of information ruled by the modern media *has* eliminated privacy. With recorders and cameras, reporters freely enter dugouts, locker rooms, board rooms, hotel rooms. There are neither secrets nor taboos. Some listen in on private telephone conversations and sift through garbage for incriminating documents.

Early critics were also right to worry that journalists could contribute to a decline in taste and judgment, could destroy the feeling for the elevated, could eliminate appetite for the admirable. The

empire they have created is slick, quick, hard-hitting, entertaining, and inescapable. It makes us more knowledgeable, but it also leaves us overwhelmed, convinced that the world is a sleazy place, and mistrustful of authority and institutions. It all but extinguishes our belief in heroism.

## Hope for the Future

Are there reasons to be hopeful about the future of America and the future of the media? I believe there are. Intent on exposing our faults, we forget what we do well.

America is much better and healthier than the country portrayed in the media and in pessimistic opinion polls. The American people are basically hardworking, idealistic, compassionate, and religious.

American journalism is still biased, but it is slowly becoming more balanced. We have the *Washington Times* as well as the *Washington Post*, *U.S. News & World Report* as well as *Newsweek*, *National Review* as well as the *Nation*, the *Wall Street Journal* as well as the *New York Times*. We have prominent conservative and liberal commentators.

In the late 1990s, newspaper and television journalists have become more self-critical. Some recognize the need to become less cynical, less greedy, less celebrity oriented, less combative; and a few recognize the need to report the normal and the good rather than only the sensational and the deviant.

Reporters, editors, and publishers are influential, but they are not all-powerful. In America, the consumer is king. We choose our sources of information just as we purchase cars and potato chips. When CNN interrupted its coverage of the Lorena Bobbitt trial to report on the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the number of angry callers caused the network's switchboard to crash. Reporters could be more courageous and less concerned with profits, but American citizens could be more high-minded.

In the Age of Information, journalists and citizens face the same challenges. We need to study the past so as not to become arrogant, to remember the good so as not to become cynical, and to recognize America's strengths so as not to dwell on her weaknesses. We need to be honest and realistic without losing our capacity for admiration—and to be able to embrace complexity without losing our faith in the heroic.

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# Editors Wanted: Inquire Within

*Daniel James Sundahl  
Professor of English  
Director, American Studies  
Program  
Hillsdale College*

**D**aniel Sundahl has taught English at Hillsdale College for sixteen years. Since 1992, he has also chaired the Hillsdale College Program in American Studies. He has published numerous articles, book reviews, and poems in such periodicals as *Commonweal*, *First Things*, *Image*, and the *University Bookman*. Two books of poems are in their second printing and a third collection is being readied for publication.



Dr. Sundahl holds degrees from Gustavus Adolphus College, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Utah. ▲

**A** recent nationally syndicated cartoon in one of the country's largest daily newspapers portrays a young woman walking by the front window of a newspaper office. She does a double-take as she reads the "Help Wanted" sign in the front window: "EDITOR'S WANTED: ENQUIRE WITHIN."

The cartoon is laughable, but it is also painfully accurate. Quality journalism and high standards are all too rare these days. Rather than raise the level of public debate, it seems that journalists have provided a steady diet of sensationalism for "enquiring" minds.

In October, Hillsdale College responded by establishing the Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism. The College believes a fundamental change is needed in media practices.

Understand please, that it is common these days for journalists to advise aspiring writers not to major in journalism. Hillsdale agrees, but goes one step farther. We believe journalists need a broad-based preparation not only in the traditional liberal arts but in the traditional ethics that have served our nation so well for the past 200 years.

The mission statement of the program reflects our philosophy:

"The Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism is devoted to the restoration of ethical, high-minded journalism standards and to the reformation of our cultural, political, and social practices. Through academic challenge and practical application, the program seeks to educate students to become defenders of our American heritage and the legacy of first principles intended by our Founding Fathers."

## How It Works

**T**he program has three components. The academic component consists of four courses emphasizing the history of American and international journalism.

Students who complete the academic component will be educated in the history of the media, will be knowledgeable about the major figures in their profession, and will be aware of—on philosophical, moral, and practical levels—the most important issues and themes that relate to the news and the makers of the news.

The practicum component consists of two hands-on practical writing courses during which students learn the fundamentals of good writing and reporting.

The internship component consists of active involvement in the day-to-day life of a newspaper or a magazine.

There are 24 total semester hours in the program, which is open to all students enrolled at Hillsdale College.

## A Unique Program

**W**hat is unique about the Dow Journalism Program? First, there are few academic programs that emphasize not only the history of the media but also the role it has played in the realm of public debate and in our country's history. Second, the program is neither a major nor a minor. Instead, it is a course concentration that a student adds

# "The Fourth Estate": *The CCA Presents A History of Journalism*



◀ Along with President Roche, members of the Dow family were on hand to help launch the new Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism.



▲ San Diego Union Tribune columnist Joseph Perkins argued that the media has shaped our views on race.



▲ Weekly Standard founding editor Fred Barnes discussed the growing impact of conservative journalists.

to his or her selection of a traditional liberal arts major. Third, through the practicum and internship, students gain the hands-on training needed to become competent journalists.

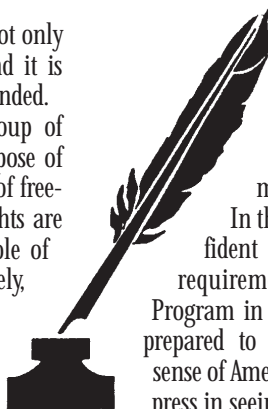
Thus the Dow Journalism Program is not only an innovation but also an alternative. And it is what our country's enterprising leaders intended.

During America's earliest years, a group of brilliant minds came together for the purpose of examining and institutionalizing the idea of freedom. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights are the Founding Fathers' testament to the role of freedom in modern civilization. Appropriately, they believed a free press was vital for a creative society and was one of its chief protectors. If freedom were to prevail, it would be through an informed public's knowledge of the issues.

The important question in the latter years of the 20th century is whether today's journalists are patiently and humbly preserving our liberty or abusing it.

Journalists are educators with an ethical responsibility to the community. They contribute to the standards of civilized conduct. They help determine and influence public beliefs.

In this context, we at Hillsdale are confident that the students who fulfill the requirements of the Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism will be best prepared to revitalize the Founding Fathers' sense of America's mission and the role of a free press in seeing that mission become a reality.▲





◀ *Arizona State University Professor Marianne Jennings spoke about the evolution—and devolution—of journalistic ethics.*



▲ *National Journalism Center founder Stan Evans gave students valuable advice about surviving in the modern newsroom.*



◀ *Former Reader's Digest Executive Editor Ken Tomlinson addressed "Journalism and the War of Ideas."*

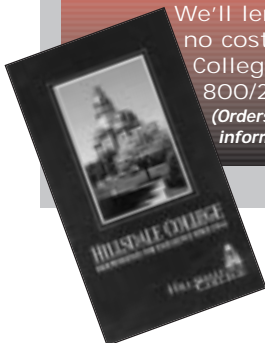
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# To Restore and Reform

Hillsdale College Proudly Announces the Establishment of  
The Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism

A major American newspaper offers to pay over \$10 million even though no lawsuit has been filed. Why? Because a reporter based a story on over 2,000 stolen e-mails. A Pulitzer Prize finalist resigns after admitting that she fabricated quotations. A magazine writer is fired after admitting that he made up material in 27 of 41 articles. A television network issues an apology, fires several staffers, and reprimands another for excluding important evidence. Is it any wonder that phrases like "Media's Battered Credibility," "A Journalistic Felony in a Class by itself," and "Dark Cloud Looms over U.S. Journ-alism" have appeared in recent headlines?



Herbert H. Dow II

Designed to combat abuses such as these, the Herbert H. Dow II Program in American Journalism was created with a leadership gift from the Herbert H. and Barbara C. Dow Foundation. The mission statement documents the program's dedication to "the restoration of ethical, high-minded journalism standards and the reformation of our cultural, political and social practices." Like Hillsdale College itself, the program "seeks to educate students to become defenders of traditional values, passing on to posterity the blessings of our American heritage and the legacy of first principles intended by our Founding Fathers."

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