Books

Mixed-up Media

Letters to a Young Journalist, by Samuel G. Freedman. (Basic Books, 184 Pages, $22.95)

By
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The post-Watergate construct of the journalist-as-celebrity has been harmful both to journalism and to the public it purports to serve. All too many journalists have given in to one of two temptations: to become opinion-mongers in the hopes of making it on the talking-head circuit; or to shade, cheat, and lie their way to success, somehow hoping that they, unlike so many of their humiliated forebears, won't get caught.

The public has reacted by rewarding the news media with some of the lowest approval ratings this side of Capitol Hill. Even when journalists do manage to produce important work, it's become all too easy to dismiss it as just another example of partisan politics, as flawed as the alleged bias that informs it.

Earlier this year, for instance, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were awarded Pulitzer Prizes for exposing, respectively, the Bush administration's no-warrant wiretapping program and the CIA's secret prisons in Eastern Europe. Such journalism would once have been hailed. Today, pundits like the former secretary of education William Bennett demand that the reporters and editors who were responsible be jailed. And Bennett is hardly alone. President Bush called the Times' reporting "a shameful act." Polls suggest that a majority of Americans agree.

Samuel G. Freedman's fine new book, *Letters to a Young Journalist,* is a useful antidote to the corrosive expectations of fame and fortune that have come to afflict the Fourth Estate. If enough aspiring reporters read it, and take it to heart, it may begin to improve public attitudes about journalism as well.

Freedman, an author, *New York Times* columnist, and professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, has divided this small book into four parts: temperament, reporting, writing, and career. His idea of journalism is exalted ("anyone who doesn't enter journalism believing it is a moral enterprise might as well move straight on to speculating in foreign currency or manufacturing Agent Orange"); of the journalist, modest.

This is as it should be. A reporter for a community weekly who accurately informs her neighbors about a change in the property-tax rate is performing a service every bit as vital as that of a White House reporter who shouts questions at the president's press secretary. (Or perhaps more important, given the redundancy of the latter.) Freedman's journalist is the opposite of a celebrity: a curious, humble, driven professional who puts the story first, and who is determined to get it straight and tell it as simply as she can.

Freedman offers some excellent examples about the limits of passive, on-the-one-hand/on-the-other-hand objectivity (a bizarre decision by C-SPAN to pair a Holocaust historian with a Holocaust denier) and pack journalism (Howard Dean's three-month roller-coaster ride in late 2003 and early '04 in which he was portrayed as unelectable to a shoo-in to just plain nutty). His description of the journalist's writing process — "conceptualization, reporting, outlining, rereporting, drafting, and revision" — is so sensible and succinct that I'm going to stick it on my wall for my next writing project.

If I have a bone to pick with Freedman, it's that he misses the opportunity to show how the old-fashioned values he espouses are relevant in a media environment that is changing by the day. Instead, he writes of these values within the context of a framework that is rapidly disappearing. He has little to say about the Internet, and nothing positive. For example, he writes, "You're going to hear all about the failings of journalism from bloggers and media critics who've never left their computers long enough to cover a fire or a city council meeting." And in the course of criticizing CBS News for basing its flawed 60 Minutes report about George W. Bush's National Guard service on "a forged document" (perhaps), he does not mention the key role played by bloggers in exposing that document's suspicious provenance — some of whom, truth be told, have never covered a fire or a city council meeting.

Media thinkers such as Jay Rosen have observed that technology is transforming journalism from a one-way mode of communication into an ongoing conversation. Is

there room for traditional reporting in this emerging paradigm? I hope so. I would have liked to see what Freedman thinks, especially since the “young journalist” to whom his book is addressed will be spending most of her career trying to figure it out.

Still, there’s no question that the young journalist’s task, before anything else, is to master the basics of reporting and writing, and to do so with a sense of fairness, empathy, and a genuine desire to tell the whole story. “You must shape reality without misshaping it,” Freedman writes. That’s as good a description of journalism as I have seen.

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