

On My Mind
1/29/99

In an unsigned article - as they all are - *The Economist*, a rather staid British magazine, worries about how news is presented today. "News is moving away from foreign affairs towards domestic concerns; away from politics towards human interest stories; away from issues to people," the article notes, and adds that to some, this amounts to a "dumbing down that panders to inanity, prurience and prejudice."

If that's true, it would be something to worry about, *The Economist* says, because "People learn about how they are governed from what they read in the newspapers and what they see on the television news. Unless voters know something about how they are governed, they cannot have an intelligent opinion about it. And without intelligent opinions about government, you cannot have a healthy democracy."

Interestingly enough, *The Economist* sees a bright side to the shift away from stories about government, foreign news, political issues. Now stories are about companies - a legitimate shift that reflects the shift from public sector to private sector emphases in society. The lack of foreign news, the article suggests, is "a measure of world peace" and "rich-world insularity." Political news is being replaced by "news you can use" - how to influence one's local school, how to determine whether the local school is performing well, how to obtain a new cancer drug.

For those who want more news, it is readily available through the Internet as well as in specialized newsletters and magazines, claims the article.

With typical British humor, the article ends, "...remember that "dumb" is not necessarily stupid, and news that entertains may also be news that informs. And if all else fails, we need hardly add, there's always *The Economist*."

That may all very well be true - and satisfactory - on the larger scale. But when it's a question of smaller communities - where there are no specialized newsletters or magazines, and only limited Internet information and commentary on local issues, local newsmakers, local events - the content of the local mass media becomes much more important. If it is not accurate, objective, complete, it makes it that much more difficult for voters to form intelligent opinions. And as *The Economist* put it, "without intelligent opinions about government, you cannot have a healthy democracy."

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While on the subject of the press, it's interesting to note the announcement in today's *Variety* that it will begin publishing a *Guam Variety* on a regular basis. It's tempting to theorize that the *PDN* gave up including CNMI news in its pages to give the *Guam Variety* a bigger market. People on Guam, no longer able to keep up with CNMI events through the *PDN*, would have to buy the *Guam Variety*. And for people on

Saipan, instead of buying only the <I>PDN</I> to read of CNMI events, they now have to buy the <I>Variety</I>.

It's also interesting to note that while the <I>Variety</I> is expanding to publish a Guam edition, at the same time it is, in effect, contracting by canceling its publication <I>Island Variety</I>. While eclectic at best, <I>Island Variety</I> did offer insights, information and entertainment - all of it relevant to the CNMI, and all of it accomplished with polished and professional style. I, too, would hope, as said its staff in its closing issues, that it will revive.

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Speaking of the importance of what people read in the newspapers, how galling that the CNMI continues to get such bad press from all quarters, from the "parachute journalists" - as the <I>Variety's</I> Mar-Vic Munar describes those reporters who fly in, spend a few days and leave, thinking they've seen and heard it all - to the syndicated news wires that glibly repeat and widely broadcast, with no attempt at corroboration, the exaggerated allegations found in a recently filed law suit.

No one nowadays denies that abuses existed - and may still exist in some places. But that 50,000 guest workers are forced to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and threatened with abuse if they refuse to work unpaid overtime? Or that all guest workers live in guarded barracks enclosed by barbed wire with their only access to drinking water that which they buy for themselves?

It doesn't take all that much effort to come closer to the truth. As just one example, everyone on island has to buy his or her own drinking water, simply because the water supplied through the island's water system is too high in mineral content to be safely used as drinking water.

A drive around the island will reveal that not all barracks are enclosed in barbed wire. In fact, week-ends and evenings see many garment workers shopping, socializing, exploring their neighborhood.

It's still factory work, it's still barracks living, it's still poorly paid. But slave labor? Hardly!

Yet valiant attempts by government, by the Garment Manufacturers Association, to set the record straight, to point out the errors, the misconceptions, the exaggerations, have born little fruit. As a result readers of the newspapers - particularly on the mainland - receive only a biased view of the situation.

Despite the positive slant cast by <I>The Economist</I>, in this case it isn't a question of coverage per se so much as it is a case of biased coverage, lazy reporting, and the public's seeming preference for the sensational.

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I am reminded of the question about whether a noise is made if a tree falls in a forest, and there is no one to hear it. Physics students will answer that the impact of a tree hitting the ground generates waves of sound which, even if not heard by human ears, will be heard by all the critters of the forest.

What if a letter to the editor is sent, but it doesn't get printed, so no one gets to read it? Admittedly, the analogy may not be all that appropriate. Would a literature student say that at least the editors who decided not to print it did read it?

In any case, I wrote one and e-mailed it to the two local papers two days ago. Neither paper has printed it - at least not this week.

It's not so much pride of authorship - though admittedly that does play at least a small part - as it is a sense of frustration. I felt I had something worth saying to others, - I still do! - but I can't get it out there for people to read.

Granted, this column provides an alternative - but unfortunately, it has a much smaller readership. And, in all likelihood, repeating the contents of that letter here would be to preach to the already converted. Nevertheless, at the risk of generating an over-long column, and rather than spending time trying to condense it, I've decided to re-print it in its entirety. I promise not to do this sort of thing very often.

My letter had to do with the aftermath of the Covenant 902 talks. Initial stories in the press of the talks' outcome were, I felt, negative and misleading, focussing on the possibility of the CNMI's filing suit against the federal government, on federal attempts to "take over" alleged CNMI prerogatives, on the lack of the Department of Interior's understanding of the CNMI. Since that had not been my sense at the conclusion of the talks, I attempted to refute at least some of the stories, as follows:

Having also attended the press conference at the close of last week's 902 sessions, having also heard the closing comments by the participants (and having also received the press releases prepared by both sides), I am more than a little puzzled at what the press has reported about what took place, and its significance.

In the first place, it should be made clear that the federal government is perfectly within its rights in proposing to "take over" immigration and minimum wage control in the CNMI. Contrary to what some legislative leaders seem to believe, Covenant Sections 503(a) and 503(c) state that while Federal laws governing minimum wage and immigration do not currently apply to the CNMI, they could apply in the future "in the manner and to the extent made applicable ...by the Congress by law...."

And since it is the Clinton administration's bill that is currently under consideration by the U.S. Congress, it is entirely appropriate for the executive branch to propose changes to that bill, as Clinton's representative to the 902 talks, Ed Cohen, has said he will recommend to the President.

In the second place, it should also be made clear that the "transition" from local control to federal control is being proposed as taking place over a ten-to-eleven year period, not tomorrow, or next month, or even next year. Many many things can, and will, change over that period. The players will change in the White House, the Congress, the Department of Interior, and in the respective CNMI counterparts; economic circumstances are bound to change; political interests and alliances will change - even the role of garment factories is expected to undergo significant change over that time period.

Though it is always well to be prepared, it is impossible to know whether today's defenses will be effective, or even desirable, tomorrow. One can plan for alternate scenarios, for contingencies, but it would be premature to take definitive action, to make assumptions about the future, and to jump to conclusions about things that are not yet known.

In the third place, it makes absolutely no sense to talk of protests, refusals to comply, or law suits when no one has any idea of exactly what it is that is being protested and objected to. Cohen clearly stated that based on what he had learned during his visit, he would be proposing changes to the bill now before the U.S. Congress. Since he has just left, there is no way anyone can know what those changes will be. Surely it would be more prudent to wait and see?

In the fourth place, it is extremely naive to have assumed that four days of talks - after more than four years of non-communication - would be enough to change the point of view or the position of either the CNMI or the federal government. There was a lot of new information provided to both parties that each must now assess, absorb, and rationalize. In addition, there is the element of "face" - neither party should have been expected to capitulate, to yield instantly or automatically, to the other's position. Resolving differences takes considerable more time, more negotiation than this session provided.

What I heard at the conclusion of the 902 talks, from members of both parties, was on a much more positive note than what has been reported since. Participants expressed relief and satisfaction with the free, frank and friendly exchange of information - facilitated by the closed door sessions, it should be noted; optimism because they felt the talks had been productive; and a sense of pride and accomplishment that the talks had ended on amicable terms, rather than in the confrontational mode.

Could it be that the reason press accounts differed so much - reporting on the negative, the confrontational - was due to the belief that bad news sells better than good news?

