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All the News That's Fit to Neuter



By Marty Kaplan

When the obituary for American journalism is eventually written, a milestone in the journey to its death-rattle will surely be the column that the *New York Times'* ombudsman, Clark Hoyt, wrote on Sunday.

Hoyt's job is to hold the feet of the *Times* to the flames of journalism's highest standards.

What bothered him on Sunday was that *Times* business staffers like Andrew Ross Sorkin, Gretchen Morgenson, and Floyd Norris not only report economic news under their bylines, but that they also, on some days, write opinion columns.

One example that ticked Hoyt off was Gretchen Morgenson's coverage of a House oversight hearing on credit-rating agencies like Moody's and Standard & Poor's, coupled with her column three days later on the same topic. Why, Hoyt asked, is it OK for Morgenson "to write a straight news article about the hearings and then give her personal opinion about them in a column"?

In case you've forgotten, it was those hearings that established how deeply the ratings agencies were in the tank with Wall Street's malefactors. Instead of assigning credible independent grades to securities that we now know to be toxic assets, the agencies were hopelessly compromised by the fees that the securities issuers paid them to issue ratings. Here's an e-mail exchange between two analysts at S. & P. about a deal they were examining: "Btw - that deal is ridiculous. We should not be rating it." "We rate every deal. It could be structured by cows and we would rate it." The reaction by S. & P.'s president to having his company caught red-handed? "The unfortunate and inappropriate language used in these e-mails does not reflect the core culture of the organization I am committed to leading."

It's ombudsman Clark Hoyt's distinction between "straight news" and "personal opinion" that I think captures the reason that journalism is on the skids. "Straight news" is a dinosaur - not because Fox or MSNBC has discovered that there's a market for personal opinion, but because the "straight" ideal turns out to be so misguided and dangerous.

Straight news puts the defensive blather from top executives of Moody's and Standard & Poor's on the same footing as testimony about conflict-of-interest by former officials of those firms at the hearings. Each piece of damning evidence is juxtaposed with a flack's denial. Each incriminating e-mail demonstrating the corruption of the ratings process is laid against the executives' contrary assurances of integrity and high standards. Straight news is stenography: these guys say "day"; these other guys say "night." It's up to you, dear reader, to decide whom to believe.

The trouble with this conception of journalism is that it inherently tilts the playing field in favor of liars, who are expert at gaming this system. It muzzles reporters, forbidding them from crying foul, and requiring them to treat deception with the same respect they give to truth. It equates fairness with evenhandedness, as though journalism were incompatible with judgment. "Straight news" isn't neutral. It's neutered - devoid of assessment, divorced from accountability, floating in a netherworld of pseudo-scientific objectivity that serves no one except the rascals it legitimizes.

In her opinion column about the oversight hearing, Morgenson was free to characterize the ratings agency executives' testimony with the words it deserved: hypocrisy, malarkey, smoke-and-mirrors, hogwash. Yet her newspaper's ombudsman is worried about having the same person both report the news and — in a different piece, on a different day — analyze it; he fears that it risks giving readers the impression that the paper is biased.

But what's the virtue of reporting, if it stops short of calling a blackguard a blackguard? I know the knock on analysis: it privileges one person's opinion, one set of values, in a world of many competing opinions and values. But it's ridiculous to deprive readers of reporters' critical thinking. It may be true that different people may see the same evidence differently, but that's no reason to require journalists to take stupid pills. If I don't like the way your reporters come to their conclusions, I won't read your paper or watch your network; instead, I'll find outlets whose employees' judgments strike me as warranted.

I'd rather there be many competing ways of framing and analyzing and coming to conclusions about what's happening in the world, than pretend that there's some Platonic ideal of Fairness that high-end organs like The New York Times are obliged to pursue. The problem with quality journalism isn't that the line between news and opinion is too porous; the problem is that the news lacks the courage of its reporters' and editors' convictions.

(This is my column from the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, where you can e-mail me if you'd like.)

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director