

the media

The refusal of newspapers to consider Le Monde's methods is a kind of mistrust of the public that claims management know best what readers need or want. Hollywood and TV magnates hold similar views. In the press, however, the fact is that many reporters try to editorial points between the lines of their objectivity, thus inserting surreptitiously what they should be writing candidly.

Says one ex-Newsweek man: "If you wanted to express an opinion, there was no problem. Insofar as I recall the techniques, you invented a quote and ascribed it to somebody ... made up a person if necessary. It's very devious, of course, but it's a substitute merely for doing the sensible thing which would have been to write a first-person story in the first place. Newspaper men are always finding ways to get around whatever inhibitions there are to personal journalism."

But the trouble with using a subterfuge -- however much it may clarify the point of a story -- is that it still leaves the reader wondering how objective the news story is, how responsible the reporter is, what his biases may be.

The notion still prevails among reporters that they should strive to be as objective as possible. It has a nice, clear-cut ring to it, but nobody has been able to tell them how to approach that elusive goal, much less what it really means. Most reporters and newspapers fall back on the idea that the proper solution is a kind of "balance", a presentation pro and con that lends itself to mathematical analysis: that is, always try to get the other side of the story, even just for a couple of lines.

It is a puzzle why reporters continue to insist that objectivity, or balance, is the key to the good journalistic life, but one explanation may be that it permits a kind of psychological anonymity. A reporter need not reveal what sort of person he is, uncover his biases. More important, by clinging to the myth that he is indeed being as objective as humanly possible, he can evade personal responsibility for his work; he is only a technician of the news. Advocacy, on the other hand, openly admitted, requires an exposure of self, a willingness to undergo scrutiny, and a commitment to excellence that seems very demanding.

Some reporters are thus afraid of advocacy. Those who don't feel strongly about things see no reason to take sides. Others correctly per-

ceive that they lack the competence to be advocacy reporters, that they really do not **know** their "beat". A reporter cannot express his convictions about, say, education unless he has made himself an expert on the problems of schools and the theories of learning.

It follows that the opportunity to become an advocate would cause responsive reporters to acquire the background necessary to acquit themselves creditably. The informed reporter would make himself known as competent to act in his new professional capacity, thus raising the general level of the profession. Those who saw the advocacy role as an opportunity to dispense propaganda would be exposed as soon as the public judged their work against the progress of events.

Many newspapers would maintain that they already permit reporters to become advocates -- usually on or opposite the editorial page, but occasionally in the news section. However, management inevitably insist that these contributions be identified as "columns" or "news analysis". In the absence of a systematic attempt to orient either the public or reporters to the uses of advocacy journalism, these few columns have done nothing to increase the credibility rating of the profession.

The market for objective "facts" has been saturated by TV, as newspaper managements well know. Newspapers must provide something more than a statistical expansion of the eleven o'clock news, but no amount of reform discussion will produce a new product, the conditions must change. This requires structural innovation, a radical transformation of the daily newspaper into a social participant, not a mere observer.

Neutrality is conceivably only a political vacuum and nothing is more political than a newspaper. The public knows this and withholds its belief from journals that venerate objectivity.

The key element in journalism, as in all writing and all art, is risk, sometimes personal risk. Newspapers will never be "ready" for the major changes, for a role in the events around them, until reporters and editors are willing to stick their necks out.