

The creation of non-issues

by Michael Ignatieff
The Varsity

TIME / NBC / NEWSWEEK / GLOBE / HARPER'S / ESQUIRE / REALIST / NEW YORK REVIEW / CBS / STAR / CHUM / TELY / VARSITY / RAMPARTS / NEW YORK TIMES / PARIS MATCH / ATLAS / CBC / MACLEAN'S / SATURDAY NIGHT / ENCOUNTER / CANADIAN FORUM / POST / CBL / ARTS CANADA / CHFI

...We are under relentless and indiscriminate bombardment. Facts, non-facts. Opinions, counter-opinions. Analyses. Descriptions. Polemics.

Vietnam. Bihar. China. London. Mao. Parliament. Pollution. Riots. Revolution. Worry.

But we are too overwhelmed to be concerned. Every opinion is important, every crisis explosive, every problem complex. We retreat to clichés and to our own personal problems, because we cannot comprehend. We are asked to judge so often that we finally do not judge at all.

Surveys of newspaper readers show that the most popular sections of dailies are the worry columns (Ann Landers) and the crime and court stories (rape, man-bites-dog, juvenile delinquency, murder). These we can understand.

We can relate ourselves to individual acts of murder and bestiality, but not to mass murder and mass bestiality. In the deluge of crisis which our media presents, evil becomes banal. Death is only made more impersonal and distant when we see the killing in Vietnam on television. The screaming wounded Marine becomes absurd and unreal when he is flashed on the screen between unctuous commercials and Western fantasies where Marshall Dillon never dies.

The age of interface, of instantaneous sensory contact through media with men's struggle everywhere should have made the world into a global village of concern and involvement. But McLuhan's promise has not been realized.

The intensity of our bombardment by the media only increases our anxiety to withdraw, to struggle with our personal problems and to let the managers of our administrative civilization deal with the crises which they tell us are so "complex".

So media is contributing to the impending death of democracy. Mass apathy towards politics can be partly explained by the fact that individuals only see their political impotence and insignificance more clearly when the media read the dreadful roll-call of our problems.

In a world of violent crisis, it is inevitable that we should be bombarded by the media, and that this bombardment should bewilder and cow the majority. The central problem is whether the press help the managers of our civilization to make their decisions and whether the press adequately explain these decisions to the passive majority.

The managers have complex solutions to the complex crises. And the press, by its very nature, has to simplify both the problems and their solutions. Because every story has to have a lead, startling but often peripheral details of these solutions are given ridiculous emphasis.

A story about a report on solutions for

the housing crisis leads off with the idea that houses should be made out of interchangeable, plastic panels, despite the fact that this idea was a footnote in the report. Because stories have to be short and because reporters are never particularly erudite, the thoughts of a prophet of our society, such as McLuhan, are condensed and distorted. Whereas the managers of society are reading McLuhan, Galbraith and the other prophets in the original and are calling them in to influence their decisions, the press popularizes and perpetuates myths about these prophets. The press then writes about the myths, about McLuhan's incomprehensibility for example, and the public has no idea of McLuhan's real meaning, or why he is having such an influence on the technocrats.

Because the problems of society are complex, the managers are becoming secretive so that they can avoid making "public" mistakes. Press accounts and "in depth analyses" of contemporary government decisions are less and less true to the realities of the inner circles of power. Because the true motives for decision are contained in the piles of secret documents on Robert McNamara and Lyndon Johnson's bed-side tables, speculation about negotiations, escalations, bombing pauses etc. in Vietnam becomes an increasingly senseless game. We have none of the essential information.

The press has been reduced to announcing each Administration step and then trying to explain it with usually less than more accuracy. Shrewd and able men like Walter Lippman find Washington intolerable because they know that their insights are no better than Press Officer McLoskey's announcements of Lyndon Johnson's cryptic remarks at press conference.

Those who argue that the best defence against 'secret' government is an alert

and sceptical press must realize that despite the press, 'secret' government by technocrats is increasing and will continue to increase.

It was observed earlier that the press 'perpetuates myths'. Part of this process is the creation of the non-event. The 'hippy movement' was a non-event. The press discovered a tiny group in California genuinely devoted to a hippy philosophy and life-style. For those not fully integrated into our essentially conservative and cautious generation, the life-style had tremendous appeal and the press responded with an incredible barrage of publicity, which in the end effectively destroyed the movement the publicity created. (How can you continue to be a real TIME magazine hippy if you are, like the poster sellers and the singers in the Jefferson Airplane making a million dollars a year?)

The publicity brought the insincere and the gawkers and it drove the real hippies off the forest retreats and Mexico, etc. The 16 year-olds ran away from home, as they have been doing since Adam, imitated, with means as superficial as wearing beads and long hair, the media-popularized life-style, caught venereal disease, got cold come winter and returned to suburbia. Sic transit non-event. TIME did not admit in its most recent hippy fantasy that there were only 60 people at the most recent hippy ceremony in Haight-Ashbury as compared to 10,000 during the summer. The press didn't want the fantasy to die.

The Edmund Burke Society is the Varsity's own particular non-event. The tiny, unrepresentative and incoherent exists for, and therefore has been given existence by the Varsity's publicity.

The press create an event, give it meaning and then fill column after column with it, one is tempted to think, because the real events are so complex that the passive majority including the journalists don't want to face their complexity.

LOOKING AT THE PRESS

The journalism gap

The following is the text of the remarks which Phil Semas, editor of *Colligate Press Service*, made at the American Society of Newspaper Editors' conference in Washington last April.

by Phil Semas

I am sort of surprised to find that you have asked us to explain the generation gap to you. After all, you invented the generation gap. We didn't.

It was hard for you to understand all those demonstrations and hippies and things so you had to coin a phrase for it—generation gap—just as you had to coin a phrase credibility gap to avoid having to call the president a liar, which isn't a nice thing to say, even though he is one.

In other words, the generation gap exists only in your newspapers. It doesn't mean anything. It is just an attempt to explain some very severe criticism of the Establishment in terms of a split between generations.

But it's not that simple, even though you would like it to be. There are plenty of conservatives in my generation, plenty of solid-middle-of-the-road, get-ahead-in-business Babbitts. There are also plenty of good people in your generation, intelligent people who recognize the bankruptcy of American foreign policy, the evil of American racism, and

the blindness of America's conformist morality. Our generation may have a few more of the good people than yours does. But there are plenty of both kinds in both generations.

So, as I said, there is no generation gap.

But there are real differences between radicals, many of whom are young, and the Establishment, most of whom are old. You are familiar with most of the issues—the war, the draft, American racism, and so on.

But the press is an issue, too, and one of the most important, since the press has helped cause many of the evils we face today and has failed American society. Radicals recognize this. They recognize that most of your papers are little more than mouthpieces for the military-industrial complex and its puppet politicians. Look at Washington. This is a company town and it has a company press. That company press sees everything pretty much the way the government does, although it does dare to criticize minor points occasionally. But I shouldn't pick on the Washington papers. Most of yours are no better. Sadly, most of yours are worse.

Because of your failure, radicals have created their own press. Sometimes they take over college papers. Sometimes they start their own papers, which you call the underground or hippie press, but which, in fact, does the job you no longer do—the job of social criticism.

Your failure comes through most clearly in your lack of any sympathy toward groups that are working for basic changes in the society, most notably the anti-war movement and the black power movement.

For example, your coverage of the Pentagon demonstration on October 21 was almost entirely pro-Establishment. I have yet to see a fair newspaper account of that demonstration, except in the college and radical press.

Look at the columnists you buy. Not a single radical among them. In fact, they are so conservative that Barry Gold-

water decided it was no longer necessary for him to write a column. And most of them are just flacks; Joe Alsop flacks for the Pentagon, William S. White flacks for the President. But nobody flacks for the radical movement. And that's not the fault of the columnists or the syndicate. I'm sure they sell you exactly what you want to hear.

Or look at the program for this conference. Lots of Establishmentarians and conservatives—Dean Rusk, Ramsey Clark, William Bundy, Howard K. Smith, William Buckley, Richard Nixon. A few liberals—Nelson Rockefeller, Sen. Fulbright. But where are the radicals? You do have Saul Alinsky and Father Groppi. But where's Stokely Carmichael, where's Rap Brown, where's Benjamin Spock, where's Jerry Rubin, where's Dave Dellinger, where's Tom Hayden, where are Carl Davidson and Greg Calvert? These are some of them who make the movement move. But I suspect that some of these rather prominent radicals are unfamiliar to you, since you are so far out of touch with the radical movement.

I'm not knocking your program committee, who were kind enough to invite me here and feed me breakfast and lunch and let me yell at you. Like the men who sell you the columnists, I'm sure they've provided you with the speakers you want to hear.

But, you say, we can't just go off the deep end with all these wild radicals. We have to offer responsible criticism.

I learned in journalism school that the press is supposed to keep things stirred up, to watch everything the government does with a jaundiced eye, to be a critic of the society and its leaders. But you don't do that. You're too busy being responsible.

"Responsible" is one of those words you've taken and turned from a perfectly good word into a bad word. I'm so tired of your misusing it. When I was a college editor the journalism faculty and the local newspaper were always telling

me how I was supposed to be responsible. Then I came to Washington and I found the national press yammering all the time about responsible dissent. But I've finally figured out what you mean by responsible.

Being responsible means helping create a racist society which excludes black people from effective participation and then attacking them when they rebel against the oppression and refusing to quote their leaders, men like Stokely Carmichael, because he might "cause" a riot. It is your "responsibility" that causes riots.

Being responsible means that you only nip-tick at American foreign policy, but do not question the underlying assumptions of the Cold War which caused the Viet Nam war and will cause future wars. And it means that anybody who does question that philosophy will be branded by you as irresponsible. Or worse.

Being responsible means attacking students who demonstrate against recruiters for the military and war industries but not attacking those industries for corrupting our universities into service stations for the military-industrial complex.

Being responsible means urging non-violence for American blacks while you support our violence in Viet Nam.

I think the United States and the world could do with a little less of your responsibility and a little old fashioned irresponsible journalism that shakes up men in power.

In my job I have to live every day with the kind of eunuch journalism which you have created. I have to argue and cajole and fight with college newspaper editors to shake off the bonds you have placed on journalism with your so called responsibility.

I'm sorry if I have not talked about what you expected. We were supposed to discuss the generation gap. But since that doesn't exist I felt sort of free to discuss whatever I wanted. Call it the journalism gap if you want.