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Money Makes Headlines in Today's News Coverage

'A creeping indifference and a silent hollowing out.'

By Norman Solomon

American journalism has devoted massive attention to reporting on business in recent years. Overall news outlets are enthralled with efforts in our society to maximize corporate profits and personal wealth. Top executives and shrewd investors are good bets to emerge as media heroes, unless or until they appear to be headed for prison. Insatiable avarice—always pushing for more, more, more—is unlikely to cause bad press. In fact, journalists are apt to cite enthusiasm for boosting "net worth" as evidence of sturdy character.

Half a century ago, sociologist C. Wright Mills warned of "a creeping indifference and a silent hollowing out." In the United States, he observed, "money is the one unambiguous criterion of success," and behind the obvious fact that people "want money" lurked the more unsettling reality that "their very standards are pecuniary." A few years later, author Vance Packard asked a key question: "By encouraging people constantly to pursue the emblems of success, and by causing them to equate possessions with status, what are we doing to their emotions and their sense of values?"

Today that question echoes more ominously than ever. While advertising and other commercial messages keep extending their reach, news coverage routinely gives fuel to society's preoccupation with financial assets. Fixated on money and what it might bring, the news media fascination with purchasing power never stops. Mainstream news organizations have steadily shifted resources and priorities to the business of business. When PBS launched "Wall $treet Week" with Louis Rukeyser in 1970, the program was conspicuous. By the time he departed PBS this year, it was just one of dozens of national TV shows—most of them daily—devoted to the quest for high returns. After "Moneyline" premiered on CNN in 1980, cable television news grew while embracing the world of investment. In 1989, General Electric opted to dedicate much of its start-up news channel CNBC to coverage of and commentary about the stock market.

A decade later, when host Lou Dobbs left "Moneyline" in spring 1999 at the start of his two-year absence from CNN, it was the leading cable network's most profitable show. By then, broadcast networks were fervently targeting the same lucrative demographics and not only with expressly financial programs. Between the mid-1980's and the late 1990's, the main TV networks doubled the amount of airtime devoted to the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ. Regular news shows got accustomed to lavishing attention on minor business developments not because of significant economic implications for the general public, but because of decisions being made by management executives with oversight of news departments.

Some viewers, the ones with plenty of disposable income, became far more equal than others did. When CNN revamped its daytime schedule in mid-1999 to make room for three and a half hours of programs about commerce and investment, the cable giant's president, Richard Kaplan, explained: "We look at business and finance as something we have to cover on a general interest news network. It's like the cold war in the '50's. You just have to do it." And the unstated goal was not simply to attract a higher number of viewers. As The Associated Press reported last year, noting intense competition between "Moneyline" and CNBC's "Business Center" program, "The audiences are small, but affluent, so

"I think we should immediately launch this program before our rational thinking sets in."

Cartoon by Dave Carpenter. Previously printed in the March 2002 Harvard Business Review.

advertisers pay a premium to run commercials."

Many news stories now amount to little more than human interest narratives about the glories and tribulations of entrepreneurs, financiers and CEO's. At networks owned by multibillion-dollar conglomerates like General Electric, Viacom and Disney, the news divisions solemnly report every uptick or downturn of the markets. In contrast, when was the last time you heard Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, or Peter Jennings report the latest rates of on-the-job injuries or the average wait times at hospital emergency rooms? While many viewers assume that coverage reflects the considered judgment of journalistic pros, those journalists are enmeshed in a media industry dominated by corporate institutions with enough financial sway to redefine the meaning of functional professionalism.

In theory, noncommercial TV and radio outlets are insulated from the inordinate power of money. But across the country, each year, "public broadcasting" relies on hundreds of millions of dollars from corporations pleased to provide underwriting to burnish their images among upscale viewers and listeners. Whatever other benefits accrue, those firms buy some valuable PR with their de facto commercials, known euphemistically in the trade as "enhanced underwriter credits."

Along with the politically appointed board of the nonprofit Corporation for Public Broadcasting, corporate donors exert hefty influence on programs by "underwriting"—and, in some cases, literally making possible—specific shows. Private money is a big determinant of what's on "public" broadcasting. Without corporate funding for specific programs, many current shows would not exist. Public television airs the "Nightly Business Report," but viewers can search in vain for a regular show devoted to assessing the fortunes of working people. At PBS, no less than at avowedly commercial networks, the operative assumption seems to be that wealth creates all labor. Back in the 1770's, Adam Smith articulated a more progressive outlook, writing: "It was not by gold or by silver, but by labor, that all the wealth of the world was originally purchased."

Years ago, National Public Radio initiated "NPR business updates" to supplement newscasts many times each day on stations nationwide. Listeners will be disappointed if they wait for an "NPR labor update." Various public radio stations feature "Marketplace," a national daily program, and the weekly "Sound Money" show, but there is no broadcast such as "Workplace" or "Sound Labor."

Meanwhile, print outlets are loaded with money-related obsessions. Time and Newsweek have often done cover stories on the race to amass wealth that were upbeat or even ecstatic in bullish times and somber when the news is hard for investors to bear. In the quarter century since The New York Times founded its "Business Day" section, daily papers have turned more and more newsprint over to targeting the affluent readers most coveted by business advertisers. The Washington Post's daily business section went from two to 12 pages (including ads and stock tables). Around the country, the pattern has been similar, with dailies vastly enlarging their financial coverage—at the expense of other news. The "general circulation" press has become transfixed by the investor.

Along the way, these trends have transformed basic concepts of what it really means to be a journalist. "As the 1980's rocketed along, our 'readers' became 'consumers,'" recalls New York Times reporter Diana B. Henriques. "As the 1990's unfolded, those 'consumers' morphed into 'investors.' And today, some of us are speaking only to investors who also own computer modems." The quality of mainstream journalism has always suffered due to the power of big money in the form of ownership and advertising, but flawed bygone eras are apt to evoke fond nostalgia in the present day. "As our intended audience has gotten narrower, so have we," Henriques lamented in Columbia Journalism Review's last issue of 2000. "Business news today rarely sounds the sonorous chords or heart-lifting themes of great journalism. Most of it simply buzzes and squeaks, a reedy clarinet against a rhythm section of cash registers and ticker tape."

Back in 1989, business reporter David Cay Johnston, then at The Philadelphia Inquirer, told me: "The financial pages of the newspapers of this country see the world through the eyes of bankers as opposed to through the eyes of bank customers." These days, his words also apply to many other pages of newspapers—as well as to other types of media outlets. With business stories migrating so extensively across the media board, the accompanying sensibilities and priorities have drastically shifted mindsets about "news." Idolatry of high-tech magnates, from Bill Gates on down, harmonizes with a prevalent tone that presents dollar assets as a tacit measure of human value. In sharp contrast, across the mass media landscape, average workers hardly qualify as noble. Often, their very human needs come across as clunky impediments to economic progress.

Contemporary journalists are accustomed to depicting the "cost" of the work force as a barrier to wealth creation. In the midst of the last decade's great boom, on April 30, 1997, a cheery article about the latest economic news appeared under this headline on the front page of The New York Times: "Markets Surge as Labor Costs Stay in Check." (For non-affluent readers, it might as well have read, "Great News: Your Wages Aren't Going Up.") "The stock market rocketed yesterday to its greatest gain in more than five years," the Times reported. Why? Because important people were happy that wages had barely increased, and employers had not shelled out more for "benefits like health insurance and pensions." The story spotlighted the jubilant comment of a senior economist at Goldman Sachs: "There is no question this is a better labor cost report than we had anticipated." Indeed, the conditions were "better" for employers. How about employees? Well, they didn't merit any ink. The 18-paragraph article quoted a few current and former government economists without a word from workers, their representatives, or labor advocates.

Monologues of mass media keep confronting viewers, listeners and readers with a demand that is frequently implicit: "How much are you worth?" The usual response provided to us: "Not enough."

At the same time, big money tilts reporting and punditry. On major networks, we rarely hear a strong voice speaking against the outsized power of large corporations. Yet there are a few cracks in the media walls. In recent years, Time has featured several muckraking cover stories about corporate influence and power that could hardly have pleased their targets. But the essence of propaganda, as any ad exec knows, is repetition. When certain stories and themes are repeated endlessly, the odds are stacked heavily against occasional muckraking journalism reverberating inside the national media's echo chamber.

Much of journalism now routinely wields monetary yardsticks. Even the most esteemed daily newspapers often cover cultural offerings by using dollar figures as overarching benchmarks, highlighting the financial earnings of various films, plays, books, paintings, CD's and music videos. The internalization of dollars as markers for human worth and artistic achievement has insidiously skewed how we view the meaning of culture and creativity. And the deep concern that Packard voiced many years ago is rendered silent, in part by the unwillingness of most American journalists to keep his question in mind. Yet it is a question that, if asked, would surely alter the steady drumbeat of today's reporting: "By encouraging people constantly to pursue the emblems of success, and by causing them to equate possessions with status, what are we doing to their emotions and their sense of values?" ■

Norman Solomon's weekly column on media and politics is distributed to newspapers by Creators Syndicate. His latest book is "The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media: Decoding Spin and Lies in Mainstream News" (Common Courage Press).

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The Watchdog Role Business Reporters Need to Play

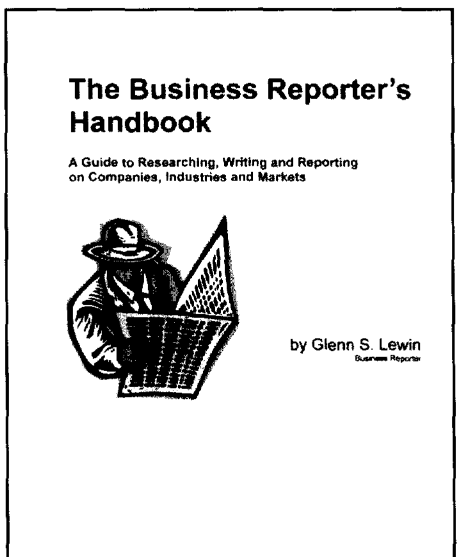
Journalists who cover business must prepare themselves for the job.

By Glenn S. Lewin

The most important role a journalist plays is that of watchdog, holding to account society's power brokers and rule-makers, those who control and influence our collective march to the future. And that's no less true for the business reporter than it is for the White House correspondent.

For too many years business coverage has taken a back seat in newsrooms, serving as journalism's "ugly stepchild." Business coverage had been a starting point for some, a temporary assignment for others, or a place to gracefully end a career. Political coverage was (and still is) perceived as sexy—charged with energy and intrigue. Business news coverage, however, was often regarded as drone work, boring to the reporter and of limited interest to the average reader. Over the past decade, however, media observers such as Howard Kurtz of The Washington Post have noted a change in attitude toward business coverage. Reporters have increasingly sought business beat assignments (in part because that's where the jobs are), and business-oriented stories are more likely to be found on the front page.

Despite this evolution in attitude, business coverage frequently lacks depth, understanding and context. A typical business report will dutifully relate a company's earnings-per-share number, but rarely challenge or even question the validity of that number, or provide to the reader the broader context in which that number resides. Furthermore, CEO's are rarely challenged as to the accuracy or veracity of their statements, and to verify claims and assertions can be difficult given the lack of access reporters often have to internal financial data.



Business executives, managers and owners are generally better educated about their world than are most of the journalists assigned to cover it. This imbalance puts reporters at a serious disadvantage and has an obviously negative impact on the depth and quality of coverage. The business pages of many papers (especially those serving smaller markets) are often little more than extensions of corporate PR departments. This constitutes nothing less than an abrogation of editorial respon-