

A Spoiled Priesthood

Editor Erwin Knoll tells why the media don't measure up



Progressively speaking: Editor Erwin Knoll

One might think that Erwin Knoll's proudest moment as editor of *The Progressive* magazine was the controversial "H-Bomb issue" in 1979 over which the United States government sued *The Progressive* — "They made a federal case." After legal fees totaling \$250,000, the magazine finally won.

But there is another distinction Knoll values even more. "My proudest achievement," he says, "is that I have a place on Richard Nixon's 'Enemies List.'"

The list, compiled by John Dean, came out in 1973 during the Watergate hearings and included not only journalists but entertainers, business people and labor leaders — enemies of the president who were to be sin-

gled out for punishment that was never specified. Others on the list included Bill Cosby and Jane Fonda; Tom Wicker, James Reston and Flora Lewis of *The New York Times* and labor leaders Cesar Chavez and Harry Bridges. "Even Joe Namath was on the list," Knoll says. "It was amazing."

Born in Vienna, Austria, Erwin Knoll, now 53, came to the United States as a child, attended New York public schools and graduated from New York University.

His first job in journalism was on the staff of Editor & Publisher, the newspaper trade journal. From 1957 to 1963, he was employed by the *Washington Post*, serving successively as general assignment reporter, education editor, assistant world editor and

Washington editor of the *Los Angeles-Washington Post News Service*. From 1963 to 1968, he was a member of the Washington staff of the *New House National News Service*, covering the White House during the L.B.J. administration.

In 1968, Knoll joined *The Progressive* as the magazine's Washington editor. In 1973, he moved to Madison to become editor. He is proud of the fact that the indestructible *Progressive* — now with a paid circulation of 50,000 — is 77 years old and has been in the red for 76 of those years. "Financially speaking," he says.

In the early years, the deficits were made up by "Fighting Bob" La Follette himself, the first editor. After his death, his sons did the same. Since it became independent in 1946, readers have kept it going.

"But nobody says to us," Knoll insists, "Hey, look at the bottom line — you can't print that because it will cost us money." In fact, one of the joys of editing *The Progressive* is we feel it's part of our job to offend our readers. We're here not to stroke them but to provoke them. It's a poor issue of *The Progressive* that doesn't make a chunk of its readership angry."

It's not the kind of journalism they teach in the J-schools or practice in today's media. Knoll says he learned it from a "media giant" of the old days — George Seldes.

"When I was a young kid growing up in New York City, there was a wonderful weekly sheet called *In Fact*, put out by a man called George Seldes, who is still alive. *In Fact* described itself as 'An Antidote to Falsehood in the Daily Press.'

"When I first saw a copy, I thought: What does that mean? Are there that many lies in the daily press? And of course, oh yes, there were.

"In his little sheet, George Seldes was writing that cigarettes cause cancer, which was something no newspaper in America would print in the 1940s. He was telling the truth about the real danger in the arming of America during the early Cold War years, when everybody was writing that America was responding to 'the threat to our national security.'

"After George Seldes found it necessary to fold up his little paper, I.F. Stone, in the same tradition, started up his weekly and I was a charter subscriber.

"I think we here at *The Progressive* perform that same kind of function today — or at least try to — of being what Seldes called 'An Antidote to Falsehood in the Daily Press,' and none of what I'm saying is an indictment of the press or in any way an attack on it. What I'm saying is merely an

attempt to understand how the press works — and to be realistic about what it does.

"Somehow, we've all been bamboozled into thinking of the media as quasi-public institutions — like symphony orchestras or art museums — that serve the public interest.

"Some people even say that the media are at the very heart of the democratic process — that if they didn't enlighten us, we wouldn't have a democracy. I simply don't believe that. Let me illustrate with an analogy.

"When you go to the supermarket to buy your groceries for the week, you don't think of that supermarket as an institution for the advancement of human nutrition. You know what it is. It's a store. It's there to turn a buck.

"Well, in exactly the same way, when you read the paper or watch the evening news or pick up a weekly news magazine, you shouldn't think of that newscast or that publication as an institution for the advancement of human knowledge. The press doesn't exist to enlighten us. It exists to return an adequate income on the investment of its owners. It's a store. It's there to turn a buck — just like the supermarket.

"Now in a supermarket, if you shop shrewdly, if you know what you're doing and if you're lucky, it's still possible to find a few nutritious things to eat at maybe a price you can afford.

"So when you read that newspaper or that news magazine or watch that television, if you're shrewd, have enough background and if you're lucky, you can find out some things that are worth knowing. But it's always important to remember what the media are really about.

"The media sell a commodity and that commodity happens to be you: the reader, the viewer, the listener. Media sell *you* to the advertiser. Media produce a product designed to attract as many people as possible — in the right socio-economic groups — of interest to the advertisers. The media exist to sell as much space or air time as they possibly can to make as much money as they possibly can.

"So we shouldn't think that the media are somehow our allies in the struggle to understand and change the world. They're not. They're going to be allied with those who want to preserve the status quo because the media are part of the status quo. If we can appreciate that, we have a much more realistic approach to the world we live in and the life we lead.

"I think if you really tell people what's going on, you're committing a revolutionary act. And no entrepreneur who cares about making money is going to commit a revolutionary act — and it's unrealistic to expect the mass media to do that.

"Now, having said that, I also want to say that the best people I know work in journalism and none of this is intended as a criticism of them.

"I think people who work in journalism often — not always, but often — enter it with an almost missionary zeal, a fervor to change the world. My friend, Les Whitten, even calls journalism 'a spoiled priesthood' and I think, in many ways, it is.

"I'm reminded of a wonderful old jingle by the British eccentric and essayist Hilaire Belloc: 'No power on earth can bribe or twist/ the British journalist/ but seeing what the man will do/ unbribed — there's no

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occasion to.'

"I think that's true of the American cousins as well. Part of the problem here — and it's a serious problem — is the general unwillingness of the American press to criticize the American government.

"Whenever those vague, mushy words 'national security' are invoked by government, the press tends to roll over and play dead. And the truth is, almost any transgression by the government of the United States can now be successfully rationalized in terms of national security.

"After 35 — almost 40 — years of Cold War and all the conditioning to which we have been subjected, elements of unreality creep into our daily life and we don't even recognize them.

"Take the invasion of Grenada. If ever there was a comic opera episode, this was it. You could laugh yourself sick over it.

"Here was the mightiest nation in the world mounting an invasion of this tiny little comic opera island. It's a ludicrous spectacle.

"It's a Marx Brothers film — Groucho, Harpo, Chico — people could laugh at a movie like that. Yet the Pentagon handed out thousands and thousands of medals to people who partook in this 'heroic exercise.'

"Americans all over the country cheered and the president of the United States was deeply moved by this act of 'extraordinary bravery.' It's enough to make you think you've gone mad.

"Then the commentators come on and analyze that as if something serious and important has just been said, instead of saying: 'Hey, you've just heard a pretty silly statement by a pretty silly human being.'

"I remember having this argument once with Gaylord Nelson when he was still in

the Senate, and he said that as long as the Pentagon had all the experts and all the computers and all of the technological backup, the Congress could never mount an effective challenge to military policy.

"I told him that was nonsense. You didn't need any computers to figure out that the United States was engaged in a lunatic exercise in Vietnam. You didn't need a vast storehouse of experts to tell you that. You just had to think clearly about the obvious

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facts of the situation, as many millions of Americans did — without having any expertise, without having computers — and as Gaylord Nelson himself did when he opposed the Vietnam War from the beginning.

"We don't need special channels of information or access to secrets that the media don't confide to us. Sure, it's great if you're in a position to subscribe to *Le Monde* and 20 other papers around the world to check them against what's reported in the United States, but most of us are not in that position.

"However, we are in the position of just applying common sense to cut through the propaganda. Let's begin with some essential premises. For example: Telling people the truth is better than lying to them, and it's not a good idea to kill people for any reason, ever. Now, these are not sophisticated concepts, but if we begin with them, we can figure out what's going on in the world and what we want — to the extent that we have any say about it — our government to do.

"One of the problems with the mass media is that the news is presented to us every day as a series of discrete, unrelated, fragmentary reports. Nothing has anything to do with anything else. Things just happen, you know.

"A bomb goes off in Ulster in Northern Ireland and a bomb goes off in Beirut. There is fighting somewhere in Africa. There is revolution somewhere in Asia. All of these things happen every day in the news and they don't seem to make much sense because we're not backgrounded. We don't know what led to these events or how they interact or how they interconnect.

"Until 1973 and the Arab oil boycott, very few people in this country understood

to what extent developments in the Middle East affected the workings of the American economy because nobody ever wrote about that until we were confronted with the massive crisis.

"So when people read the newspapers or watch the evening news and all these seemingly unrelated fragmentary events are thrown at them — events that seem to be without cause or effect — people eventually shrug their shoulders and say, 'It's a nutty world. Who the hell can keep up with it?' And they tune out.

"A second problem is 'hit-and-run' reporting. Andy Warhol once said that everybody in America gets to be a celebrity for 15 minutes. In much the same way, every place in the world gets to be front-page news for a day or two. Then it vanishes and once again the world takes on the dimensions of a mysterious and irrational place.

"A few years ago, during the Iranian hostage crisis, every twist and turn of Iranian politics was reported in the American press because Americans were being held hostage.

"Now, people can tell you Khomeini is apparently still in charge but that's all they know because Iran is no longer news. And the same can be said for country after country after country. Which means that the next crisis will catch us by surprise because the American press doesn't serve us well.

"People are disillusioned with newspapers and I can relate to that. I got disillusioned when I was a young reporter at the *Washington Post*. It was my first job on a daily newspaper and one day the big story came in that an American U-2 spy plane had been shot down over the Soviet Union and the pilot had been captured by the Russians.

"The evening that story broke, I was riding down in the elevator with the managing editor of the *Post* and I said, 'That's one big story about the spy plane,' and he said, 'Yes, we've known about those flights for a couple of years, but we were asked not to say anything.'

"I was absolutely flabbergasted. It had never occurred to me in my youthful innocence that a newspaper like the *Washington Post* would have a big story and not say anything — that it would suppress news at the government's request.

"Then I began to understand the way things worked — that there were people at that newspaper who maintained regular liaison with the CIA, with the FBI, people who were always being told things they couldn't print and who went along with the system.

"That was something that profoundly changed my perception of journalism in America. It was something that helped persuade me that that kind of work was not the kind of work I chose to do.

"I chose this and I would not want to be anywhere else." ■

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