

CHAPTER 1

MASS MEDIA: WHO DECIDES WHAT'S NEWS?

The summer of 1957 found Clark Schooler with a freshly-minted bachelor's degree from Williams College. He also possessed a letter of acceptance to do graduate work in political science at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Graduate school would not start until the fall, however, so Clark began searching for a summer job. Having been editor of the student newspaper when in high school, Schooler decided to "try his hand" working as a newspaper reporter.

He found a job at the *Baltimore Banner*. It was an afternoon paper. The *Banner* also was a Patriot newspaper. It belonged to a national chain of newspapers, known as the Patriot Press, which specialized in presenting news to the public in a flashy, interesting, and somewhat sensational style.

For the next seven summers, and on weekends throughout the remainder of the year, the *Banner* became Clark Schooler's principal means of economic support for getting himself through graduate school at Johns Hopkins University. But it became something more than just an additional source of money to add to Clark's all-too-meager graduate fellowship. It became the place where he learned about the city of Baltimore.

Clark met both the city's best citizens and its worst citizens. He observed the city's best neighborhoods and its worst neighborhoods. And, above all, the *Banner* was where Clark Schooler learned to write what he called "Patriotese," that fast-reading, hard-hitting, patriotic, common-person-loving style of newspaper writing for which Patriot Press newspapers were duly famous and, at the same time, infamous.

Clark Schooler was hired to be a police reporter for the *Banner*. It was his job to get in his car and cruise from one Baltimore police station to another, picking up small stories about petty crimes, such as fistfights, purse

snatches, and burglaries.

These minor crime stories were not significant in themselves, but they came in handy when it was time for the city editor to make up the next edition of the newspaper. If there was an empty space in a newspaper column about one or two-inches long, the space could easily be filled with one of these short crime stories. These minor crime stories were referred to by the nickname “shorts.”

Both the *Banner* and its big competitor, the *Baltimore Beacon*, had telephones in each of Baltimore City’s police stations. Clark Schooler dutifully kept the telephone operator at the *Banner* informed as to which police station he was inhabiting at any given moment of his working day. That way, when the city editor or an assistant city editor wanted to give Clark a special assignment or send him to cover a fast-breaking crime story, the telephone operator could track Clark down at a police station and connect him to his editors as quickly as possible.

One Saturday, Clark Schooler was working the Eastern District police station when the *Banner* telephone rang demandingly. It was Frank Railley, one of the assistant city editors. It must have been a slow news day, because Railley’s instructions to Clark were brief and to the point: “I want you to get me every ‘short’ there is in the city of Baltimore. Even if an old black man falls down and skins his knee, I want it for the paper.”

Thus did Clark Schooler begin to learn that the newspaper business in the city of Baltimore in the 1950s was racially segregated. Neither the *Banner* nor the *Beacon* routinely covered social or business news about black people. As far as the major newspapers were concerned, the black community in Baltimore, which was fully 1/3 of the city’s population, did not exist as a news source. The only way a black person could get his or her name or photograph in the paper was by committing a crime against a white person. When Assistant City Editor Railley said he would take a story about an old black man skinning his knee, he was being highly sarcastic.

Clark Schooler was surprised with himself and a little bit angry with himself. Throughout his junior high school and high school years, he had read the Baltimore newspapers virtually every day. It had never dawned on him, in all that time, that there was no news about black people, other than criminal news, in his daily newspaper. That fact became obvious to him, of course, once it was pointed out to him. But for years, he realized, he had been blissfully unaware that any favorable news about African-Americans was being carefully edited out of his hometown papers.

One day Clark was sitting in the Northwestern District police station. Northwestern was located in the center of Baltimore city’s black ghetto, a racially segregated section of the city populated only by black people. Flora

Jane Simmons, a black policewoman who handled women's and children's cases in the Northwestern District, came up to Clark and gave him what she thought was a good tip.

"We just arrested a mother and father who, for the past three years, have kept their five children locked in the basement of their house over on McMechen Street," policewoman Simmons explained. "The children have been neglected. They've never been allowed to go to school, or to go out and play with the other children in the neighborhood. One of them was actually chained to his bed for a number of months for being disobedient and trying to escape out of the basement."

Policewoman Simmons showed Clark Schooler a copy of her police report on the incident and allowed him to take all the notes he wanted. The police report included photographs of the children as they appeared when police officers liberated them from their basement prison. Armed with what he thought was a very good story, Clark raced to the *Banner* telephone in the Northwestern District station house and called his editors.

The telephone was answered by Assistant City Editor Frank Railley. In an excited voice, Clark described the incident and suggested that the *Banner* should get a photographer up to McMechen Street to try to get a photograph of the children's basement prison. Frank Railley listened quietly while Clark explained the situation. When Clark finished his animated description of the potential story, Railley said curtly:

"Are these children white or black?"

Having seen the police photographs of the children in their basement prison, Clark quietly replied: "They're black."

Frank Railley's response was pointedly derogatory. "Who cares about a bunch of dirty black kids in a basement?" The assistant city editor then hung up the phone, leaving Clark Schooler standing there with a pile of notes on a story that was never going to get in the *Baltimore Banner*.

Clark often wondered what policewoman Flora Jane Simmons must have thought when she read that afternoon's *Banner* and saw there was no coverage of a story which, if it had involved white children, would have received top local news coverage. Once again, the "message" had been delivered to an educated, talented, caring, and successful black person. Flora Jane Simmons was graphically and directly reminded that she and her people were not of interest to the white community. She and her people did not matter. The news columns of Baltimore's daily newspapers were a world that black people were not permitted to enter unless they committed a dastardly crime.

As a police reporter, Clark Schooler soon learned there were an average of three murders a week in Baltimore. But only those murders that involved

white people ever got in the newspaper. It soon became a routine part of Schooler's job to check murder reports to see if the persons involved were white or black. The murders involving white people became stories in the newspaper. The murders involving only black people were ignored.

During the summer of 1957 Clark Schooler helped to cover one of the more famous murder cases in Baltimore history. The story began when two police officers on routine patrol noticed a middle-aged man sitting on a bench in a remote section of Druid Hill Park, a large park in the city. The man was white, looked respectable, and ordinarily would not have been bothered by the police.

From a distance, however, the police officers noticed that the man had a butcher knife and was periodically placing it against his throat, as if he wanted to commit suicide but could not quite get up the courage.

The police officers, unobserved by the man, crept up behind him. Because the man apparently did not hear the police officers coming, the man was quickly overpowered, disarmed of his knife, and taken into custody. The man confessed on the spot to murdering his wife and leaving her body on the floor of the front hallway of their home.

The man was Charles Du Bois, the scion of one of the leading commercial families of Baltimore. His grandfather had founded a plumbing supply business in the 1880s that had grown into one of the largest and most profitable commercial operations in the city. Charles Du Bois was "old money." He and his wife were socially active in the country club set in Baltimore. Their home was a large mansion located in Homeland, an upper middle-class neighborhood just north of downtown Baltimore. Homeland had succeeded in resisting the urban blight and deterioration that had afflicted so many other neighborhoods in the city.

Apparently Charles Du Bois and his wife had been driving home from a dinner at the country club when they had an argument. Upon arriving in the front hall of their home, Mrs. Du Bois had turned and slapped Charles Du Bois across the face. Flying into a rage, Charles Du Bois ran into the kitchen, grabbed a butcher knife, ran back to the front hall, and brutally stabbed Mrs. Du Bois to death. The police report noted that she had more than 50 deep stab wounds in her body.

Both the *Baltimore Banner* and the *Baltimore Beacon* gave the story front page, banner headline, plenty of photographs treatment. The story had everything going for it. There was a socially prominent family, a brutal crime, and, of course, all the participants belonged to the white race. Instantly, public opinion in the city condemned Charles Du Bois and the brutal crime he had committed against his wife. The Du Bois murder quickly became the principal topic of conversation in almost every household in

Baltimore. The prevailing popular view was that Charles Du Bois was headed straight for the electric chair or a life sentence in the Maryland Penitentiary.

Clark Schooler was struck by the power which the news media in Baltimore, particularly the daily newspapers, wielded over this story. He later learned the process is called filtering the news or mediating the news. The news media does not control or make the news, but it definitely chooses the news, shapes the news, and defines the news. With three murders a week in Baltimore, every murder could not be given the front page, banner headline treatment. The news media picked out, for its readers and viewers and listeners, the murders that were important. And this murder was important because of the race, the commercial prominence, and the high social status of the people involved.

Clark Schooler thus came to see himself as a camera lens, an optical instrument through which the readers of the *Baltimore Banner* saw events in the police districts of their city. In the manner of a camera lens, Schooler limited his readers' knowledge of events, selecting for them what was important for them to read and know. As a human camera, Clark focused the attention of his readers on certain subjects and excluded their view from other, in his judgement less important, subjects.

Of course, Clark Schooler was only the first camera lens through which police news in Baltimore was filtered to the pages of the *Banner*. His city editors were a second camera lens through which the news he gathered had to be filtered. Between the two camera lenses, a lot of things happened in the police districts of Baltimore during the summer of 1957 that did not get in the newspaper.

This led to the promulgation of Schooler's First Law of the News Media: It is only important if the news media says it is important. Or, to put it in the vernacular: If it ain't in the newspapers, it didn't happen.

Clark Schooler was assigned by his city editor to cover the Charles Du Bois murder trial. Du Bois was indicted on a charge of second degree murder, which meant he was accused of killing his wife in an impulsive manner rather than a premeditated manner. He had, after all, not cunningly planned to kill his wife. He had knifed her to death spontaneously during a family argument. Testimony in court revealed that Du Bois had become angry with his wife because she was having a love affair with another man. Du Bois had killed her in a jealous rage.

A funny thing happened during the trial. The judge, who happened to live just down the street from Charles Du Bois in the Homeland neighborhood, reduced the charge from second degree murder to manslaughter. The judge took the position that Du Bois had never, in his sane moments, in-

tended to kill his wife. Her death was thus accidental. An expensive team of defense lawyers and a highly-paid defense psychiatrist helped the judge arrive at this somewhat unconventional conclusion. And a very expensive private detective convinced the judge that Mrs. Du Bois had indeed been carrying on an extramarital affair.

Charles Du Bois was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to three years in the Maryland Penitentiary. Newspaper reporters covering the trial wrote in the newspaper that he would be out on parole in just two years.

At the same time he was following the Charles Du Bois trial, Clark Schooler had his eye on another trial working its way through the Baltimore City courts. Melvin Washington had come home unexpectedly from work one afternoon and discovered his wife in bed with another man, a neighbor from across the street. A floor installer by trade, Melvin unsheathed his linoleum knife, burst into the bedroom, pulled the neighbor out of the bed, and threatened his wife with the linoleum knife.

She cursed him and slapped him across the face. Melvin then began slashing at her, in a flailing manner, with the knife. He inflicted a multitude of long cuts in her skin that were painful and bloody but definitely not fatal. On one overly energetic slash, Melvin slipped and fell, and the knife punctured the jugular vein in his wife's neck. She bled to death in just the few minutes that it took a Baltimore City ambulance to get to the scene.

Because Melvin Washington, and his wife, and the neighbor were all African-Americans, not one word of this particular murder ever got into the Baltimore newspapers. Melvin Washington was tried and convicted of second degree murder. He was represented by a court-appointed lawyer, who Clark thought did a hasty and lackluster job. No psychiatric testimony was presented by an expensive defense psychiatrist. And there was no private detective to present detailed information about Mrs. Washington's marital infidelity.

The judge did not live in Melvin Washington's neighborhood. The judge did not decide to reduce the charge to manslaughter. Melvin Washington was sentenced to 18 years in the Maryland Penitentiary. No one bothered to note that he would probably be out on parole in just 12 years.

Clark made a mental note that the white man was sentenced to three years for murdering his wife, but the black man got 18 years for essentially the same crime.

In the fall of 1957, Clark Schooler began his graduate education at Johns Hopkins University. He ended his summer job at the *Baltimore Banner*, but not completely. The newspaper published a Sunday morning edition. It carried a large amount of advertising and thus required a great deal of local news to run with the advertising. Clark Schooler was hired to

work every Saturday afternoon and evening to help gather and write all that additional local news.

Early in September of 1957, a “public opinion changing” event occurred in American politics. In the city of Little Rock, the capital of the state of Arkansas, the local school board had ordered the racial integration of Central High School, the main high school in Little Rock. But before nine black high school students, called the Little Rock Nine, could enter the previously all-white high school, a mob of segregationist whites formed outside the school building.

The white mob yelled curse words at the black students when they tried to enter the high school. The mob surrounded the automobiles bringing the black students to school, thereby threatening the black students’ physical safety. The governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, supported racial segregation and refused to order the state police or the Arkansas National Guard to protect the black students and guarantee their safety while attending Central High School.

By refusing to support the peaceful and orderly racial integration of Central High School, Governor Faubus was openly defying a recent decision of the United States Supreme Court. In 1954, the nation’s highest court had ruled, unanimously, that racial segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. In this court decision, the controversial *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the justices concluded that having racially segregated school systems implied that one race was better than the other. As a result, racially segregated schools violated the Constitution’s prescription that every citizen of the United States, black or white, receive “equal protection of the laws.”

Orval Faubus’s refusal to enforce the integration of Central High School in Little Rock presented a difficult problem to President Dwight D. Eisenhower. As president of the United States, it was Eisenhower’s job to enforce the laws of the United States. For political reasons, however, Eisenhower did not want to override Governor Faubus and enforce racial integration in Little Rock with raw U.S. Government military power. Eisenhower was aware that the vast majority of white Southerners, similar to Governor Faubus, strongly supported racial segregation. Both President Eisenhower and his political party, the Republicans, would lose support in the white South if Central High School was forcefully integrated by U.S. military forces.

As a brand-new political science graduate student, Clark Schooler was fascinated by the dilemma facing President Eisenhower. The authors of the United States Constitution, meeting in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, had created a government composed of both a national government and a number of individual state governments. This unique arrangement was

called federalism, and both the national and the state governments were viewed as sovereign (having the power to rule). The various powers of government were divided between the national and the state governments. The police power, the power to enforce laws that maintain domestic law and order, was given mainly to the states, not the national government.

President Eisenhower did the logical thing. In the early stages of the Little Rock school crisis, he tried to convince Governor Faubus to use the state police or the Arkansas National Guard to forcefully integrate Central High School. That way, the police power would have been applied at the state level rather than the national level, just as the authors of the United States Constitution intended.

But Governor Faubus refused to act. The mob of white people continued to surround Central High School each morning, thereby preventing the black students from entering the school. The situation was deteriorating rapidly, and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision clearly was not being enforced in Little Rock, Arkansas.

President Eisenhower was a former Army general. During World War Two, he had commanded all of the military forces of the United States and its allies in Europe. He knew what it was to be “in command,” and he knew how to take swift and forceful action when necessary. The situation in Little Rock in 1957 was resolved when Eisenhower ordered regular troops of the United States Army, not the Arkansas National Guard, to take over Central High and racially integrate the school by force.

The entire situation was ready-made for television news. The event was largely visual. Scenes of the white mob surrounding the school building to prevent racial integration gave way to images of U.S. Army paratroopers, bayonets fixed to their rifles, taking command of the situation. The soldiers, moving at a double-time pace, took up positions inside the school and outside on the streets and athletic fields surrounding the school. Under armed guard, the Little Rock Nine were escorted into Central High School. The Army troopers stayed close by the black students all day long to make certain they were not physically harmed in any way.

Clark Schooler was impressed with the decisiveness and thoroughness with which President Eisenhower had sent the United States Army into Little Rock. Eisenhower made it clear that he was acting as commander in chief of the military forces of the United States, a power granted to him in the United States Constitution. Eisenhower specifically stated that he wanted the troops to occupy Central High School and enforce racial integration. Lastly, Eisenhower authorized the use of as many troops and as much equipment as necessary to carry out the mission successfully.

“Thanks to Eisenhower at Little Rock,” Clark said in his graduate

seminar in American Politics one day, “we now have a script for all future racial disturbances. The courts will order the local schools to be integrated. Mobs of white southerners, often unruly and sometimes overtly violent, will protest the action. The governor, or the mayor, or the police chief, or whoever is in charge of law and order, will decline to forcefully impose racial integration on white Southerners who so clearly do not want it. In the end, one way or another, the president of the United States will have to do what Eisenhower did at Little Rock. Send in the troops and enforce racial integration at the point of a bayonet.”

Beau Stevens, a graduate student at Johns Hopkins from Albany, Georgia, immediately questioned Clark Schooler’s statement. “President Eisenhower used one part of the U.S. Constitution to violate another part,” Stevens argued. “True, as president, Eisenhower is commander in chief of the armed forces. But, under our system of federalism, the state of Arkansas has sovereign power over its own territory, particularly where police powers are concerned. The nation’s Founders, who wrote the U.S. Constitution, intended for the states to work out these kind of local police problems themselves. Eisenhower should have shown more respect for our constitutionally-mandated federalism and kept the U.S. Army out of it.”

Beau Stevens was known among his fellow graduate students as “the sane Southerner.” It was a title in which Beau actually took a great deal of pride. Unlike most white Southerners, Beau supported racial integration and saw the inevitability of an end to legalized racial segregation in the American South. But, like many educated and intelligent white Southerners, Beau had found justification in the United States Constitution for the individual states, rather than the national government in Washington, D.C., to be the appropriate governmental units to end racial segregation in the United States.

“President Eisenhower should have read the *Brown* ruling more carefully,” Beau continued, getting ever more committed to his position. “The Supreme Court said that racial integration in public schools should proceed with ‘all deliberate speed.’ Eisenhower could have argued that it was too soon to integrate Central High School in Little Rock. He could have slowed the process down. He could have argued the court’s words ‘all deliberate speed’ did not mean ‘right now.’ That way he could have given Governor Faubus and the people in Little Rock more time to work things out.”

At that moment, Candy Kaufmann, a graduate student from New York city and a party activist in the Democratic Party, decided to join the academic fray. “I think President Eisenhower was too slow in acting at Little Rock,” Candy opined. “He let hours and days go by during which the black students trying to integrate Central High School were terrorized and intimi-

dated and belittled by the white mob. At times, the black students were in physical danger of being roughed up or even killed in some accidental fashion by all those crazed white Southerners. President Eisenhower did not act dynamically or forcefully at Little Rock. He acted only after Governor Faubus, by refusing to enforce law and order at the state level, left Eisenhower no choice but to act. President Eisenhower sent in the troops because he had to, not because he wanted to.”

The professor guiding the seminar was Michael Middleton, a recognized national expert on United States voting behavior. Professor Middleton joined Clark Schooler in defending Eisenhower’s actions at Little Rock. “It’s true this is a federal state,” Middleton pontificated, “with powers divided between a national government in Washington and a number of individual state governments. But what about the supremacy clause of the Constitution. It states very specifically: ‘The Constitution and laws of the United States shall be the supreme law of the land.’ Doesn’t that take away completely Governor Faubus’s right to defy the Supreme Court decision calling for racial integration of the public schools?”

Beau Stevens refused to back down, even in the face of Professor Middleton and the supremacy clause of the United States Constitution. “The Constitution calls for both national rights and states’ rights,” Stevens argued. “The Founders did not intend to create an all-powerful national government in Washington, D.C. They wanted some of the powers reserved to the states, particularly the police power. By sending U.S. troops into Arkansas, President Eisenhower upset the more or less even balance between the national and state governments that the Founders had in mind.”

Professor Middleton felt constrained to further defend President Eisenhower’s record on the issue of states’ rights. “Eisenhower has been very careful,” Middleton noted, “to only enforce racial integration where he clearly has the Constitutional power to do so. He racially integrated the United States Government bureaucracy with all the U.S. Government jobs because, as president, he is the executive head of the government. He integrated restaurants and snack bars in Washington, D.C., because the nation’s capital is run by the national government and not by the states. He appointed the first black person to the White House staff because that clearly is his appointment to make. Eisenhower has been careful to act only in those areas where national law gives him the power and authority to act.”

Middleton summed up his argument as forcefully as he could. “Eisenhower sent the troops into Little Rock because, in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Supreme Court made it national law that public schools have to be racially integrated. And President Eisenhower interpreted the phrase ‘all deliberate speed’ to mean sooner rather than later.”

A true as well as sane Southerner, Beau Stevens continued to argue his point. "This was the first use of U.S. troops against the South since the Civil War," Stevens blurted out. "The United States Government militarily invaded one of its constituent sovereign states and imposed a law that the vast majority of Arkansas citizens strongly oppose. It was too much. It was a gross abuse of national government power."

"That it may have been," Clark Schooler chimed in, "but it accomplished something I believe is very important. Black people in America now know that, in the end, the American president will come to the aid of blacks and enforce school integration in the South. President Eisenhower has put the full power of the U.S. presidency behind the school integration movement. That is going to embolden American blacks in their quest for more equal treatment throughout the entire southern United States."

The graduate seminar ended, as most graduate seminars do, with nothing finally decided. But that day's discussions had confirmed in Clark Schooler's mind his favorite rule for analyzing human behavior: Judge people and politicians by their behavior, not by what they say or what others say about them. As far as Clark was concerned, Beau Stevens, Candy Kaufmann, and Professor Middleton could argue all day about President Eisenhower's motives at Little Rock and what other people were writing and saying about Eisenhower at Little Rock. To Clark, the important thing was that President Eisenhower had taken the appropriate action. All the palaver about motives and intentions and true feelings was just wasted time. "Judge people by how they act, not by what they say, or by what others say about them," was a rule of human behavior that Clark Schooler relied on constantly.

After President Eisenhower sent U.S. soldiers into Little Rock, Clark Schooler detected a new attitude on race relations on the part of his city editors at the *Baltimore Banner*. There was somewhat more willingness to pay attention to black people, particularly if those black people were aggressively picketing and demonstrating for African-American civil rights.

The impact of Little Rock was clarified for Clark at a subsequent graduate political science seminar at Johns Hopkins University. George Gallup, the famous public opinion pollster, was the guest lecturer at the seminar. "It is events," Gallup said, "that have more effect on public opinion than any other factor. Depressions. Wars. Important scientific discoveries. It is these kind of concrete events that create major shifts in public opinion. The millions of press releases ground out by the legions of public relations personnel have very little effect on public opinion when compared to real events."¹

Little Rock had been a graphic national event, Clark realized, that

began changing public opinion throughout the eastern and western United States. Little Rock even had changed, ever so slightly, the opinions of his city editors. The result was the promulgation, in Clark Schooler's mind, of Schooler's Second Law of the News Media: Events, not press conferences and press releases, are the major determinants of public opinion.

In The Interim

The news media are as influential in the 2000s as in the 1950s and 1960s. But there have been some changes. The three major television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, no longer dominate the news as they did in Clark Schooler's time. The rise of alternate news sources, such as cable television and internet web sites, provide a wider variety of means for politicians and political pundits to put their ideas before the American people.

Daily newspapers are still important sources of information for the public, but circulation and readership are generally holding steady or declining. Daily newspapers remain the main interpreters of state and local government news for those who are interested in the state and local political scene.

The news media continue to be the major filters that decide what news is presented to the public. As a key link between the public and government, the news media are sometimes referred to as a Fourth Branch of Government.

The unfavorable treatment of minority groups that Clark Schooler found in the Baltimore newspapers in the 1950s and 1960s is long gone. In the 2000s, with inexpensive desk top publishing and near-instantaneous e-mail communication, almost any new political idea or emerging political cause can find its way into some form of print.

But other aspects of American society continue to harbor racial prejudice. Police departments have been accused of racial profiling, stopping and checking higher proportions of African-American and Hispanic persons and looking for signs of criminal activity. Sadly, some forms of racial discrimination, often very subtle forms, are still evident in American life.

NOTES

1. Recollection of the author, George Gallup, guest speaker, graduate course in American Politics, Johns Hopkins University, c. 1958.