

# Experts Or Phrase Makers?

By Joan Konner

**I**N A SINGLE week recently I was called by six different news organizations and asked to comment on a variety of matters relating to press issues: one radio station, one television network, a wire service, two newspapers and one journalism student from a different university. The subjects were: the demise of the Los Angeles Herald Examiner; television reenactments, docudramas and simulations; the Janet Malcolm-Joseph McGinniss affair (still) and campaign commercials. It was not an unusual week.

Ever since I became dean of the Journalism School in September, 1988, everyone, it seems, wants my opinion on everything. This comes as a jolt to someone who grew up in a time when no one listened to children, became an adult when no one listened to women, and then entered this business where people don't listen to anyone except their boss if they want to get ahead.

By the time I became a boss and people started listening to me, I knew only too well what people thought of their bosses, so I never took my own opinions too seriously.

I did write editorials and columns early in my professional life, but as soon as I realized that I had more opinions than knowledge, I defected to the wider world of reporting. Now, it appears, as a dean, I must go into the opinion business and know something about everything, at least in journalism and sometimes the rest of the world as well.

There are the "easy" questions such as: What do you think of the news media's coverage of economics? The self-examining ones: What do you think of reporters' accepting large sums of money for public speaking, especially when they are paid by a group or a business on which they report? The desperate deadline ones: Do you know any good anecdotes about media couples who commute? And the answers had better be immediate, colorful and short. Even print has soundbites.

Many, of course, concern the News Flap of the Week: for a while, the Malcolm-McGinniss debate; more recently, the charge that CBS News broadcast faked scenes in its Afghanistan coverage from 1983 to 1987; and, of course, the question of the season concerning simulation, reenactments and dramatizations on programs produced by news departments. I have trouble calling them news shows.

Some people, of course, know absolutely everything not only in their field but out of it. They are the Experts, known in the trade as "usual suspects," whose names and faces crop up everywhere with a snappy quote on anything. Moreover, they've learned to deliver their opinions as succinctly as the bleat of a sheep. No trouble getting a soundbite there, and the suspect can then claim a monthly lode of publicity clips that looks like the backlog in my weekend reading pile.

I like to help reporters. I've always been willing to play my part in perpetrating facts. Always was, even before I was a blip on the radar screen of opinion. At times, through my work, I knew as much about something as anyone, and I was called on for "expert" comment.

I have had this notion of a common interest among reporters in getting a story right. Now that I'm so frequently asked, however, I'm beginning to question that notion. I don't trust any expert, even myself, in a 10-second soundbite, and I often don't recognize my quotes, even when they are accurate.

Take the television reenactment frenzy.

Last summer, before the evidence was in, I took a temperate view of the use of dramatic techniques in journalism. In an interview on National Public

Radio I said that done with caution, taste, skill and care, dramatic reenactments can be a useful tool in public affairs productions. I make a distinction between public affairs and news.

The very day of the NPR broadcast, ABC

News committed the worst possible case of TV simulation. In its evening news program, it showed the passing of a briefcase to illustrate an alleged espionage plot involving diplomat Felix Bloch. You can't call it a reenactment when it is not certain the act itself occurred.

A few weeks later we were subject to an invasion of the news snatchers on NBC News' "Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" and CBS News' "Saturday Night with Connie Chung," which featured reenactments of nonfiction stories. The shows had the outward appearance of news programs, with highly groomed anchors on elaborate (in these cases inexplicable) sets, but the soul of news, reality, was missing. These shocks to journalistic sensibility collectively provoked an absolutist quote from me last week in the Wall Street Journal: "Drama . . . has no place on a network news broadcast . . . Never." Side-by-side there's a seeming contradiction between my NPR and Journal statements, but I still hold both opinions — accepting the judicious use of dramatic techniques in some public affairs productions but rejecting them for news. Unfortunately, that's not snappy, short or simple.

The use of quotes and comments from experts is a useful reporting convention. Of course, I'll always help my colleagues to get the story right, and if I can't, suggest someone more knowledgeable who might. But I am beginning to feel like a news object, a call girl for a TV clip or a quote on anything, a collaborator in the making of McPinions.

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