

Inside Jewish Journalism

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AT THE HEART of what it is that any credible journalist does is listening to things otherwise unsaid and to reveal things that might otherwise be kept secret. How does this work, when what is at stake are family secrets and, in this instance, the news about one's own Jewish people? This challenge is addressed in several articles. Other essays turn to very new matters: the interplay between reporting and blogging, the influence of new technology on the future of communications, and, in still more general terms, what it is that technology can do to connect and also disconnect people from one another. This issue is published to coincide with the annual meeting of the American Jewish Press Association.

Participatory Journalism

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

CONSIDER THE DEMOGRAPHICS. Fewer people are reading print newspapers, and readers of the Jewish press are aging. While the mainstream press is consolidated in a few corporate hands, there is an explosion of what is variously known as grassroots or citizen or participatory journalism: people are not only reading the news, but also writing, editing, and publishing it in an unprecedented range of media. How are Jews participating in this movement?

The Working Group on Jews, Media, and Religion at the Center for Religion and Media, New York University, has been studying just such emergent cultural phenomena. Given our concern with what Jews *are* doing, rather than with what they *should* be doing, we are interested in developing a research agenda for studying such media practices, which we view as social practices. These practices give rise to distinctive forms of community, as well as to media specific generational divides: younger technologically savvy Jews are increasingly drawn to digital media for their news, while their parents continue to rely on print media.

Whereas it has long been assumed that strong ties are the key to Jewish continuity, social software activates a broad range of weak ties that have value in their own right.

Judging by three recent studies of American Jewry — *American Jewish Identity Survey* (Graduate Center of the City of New York and Center for Cultural Judaism, 2001), *OMG! How Generation Y Is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era* (Reboot, 2005), and *Assessing the Impact of Culture and the Arts on Jewish Identity Building* (UJA-Federation of New York, in progress) — young Jewish adults, particularly those who are not connected to the organized Jewish community, are of particular concern to the sponsors of these studies.

Attention to the media practices of this born-digital generation reveals a tectonic shift in the ways that Jewish youth and young adults relate to one another and understand themselves. Their comfort with what has been called “social software” (blogs, bookmarking tools, wiki-server software that allows anyone to add and edit web content, whether for a wikipedia [encyclopedia] or most recently wikinews), is central to their involvement in participatory journalism, which offers not only alternatives to mainstream news media — whether print or broadcast — but also alternative modes of community. A large proportion of this extremely diverse generation prefers the many-to-many mode of communication over the one-to-many (or broadcast) mode, a preference that is consistent with their attraction to informal kinds of association over formal affiliations with Jewish organizations. Whereas it has long been assumed that strong ties (family, close friends, local community) are the key

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to Jewish continuity, social software activates a broad range of weak ties that have value in their own right (see the work of sociologist Mark Granovetter) and that expand the possibilities for converting weak ties into strong ones. Based on consent, rather than descent, communities of interest, affinity, and practice are multiple and distributed. Proximity is a function of the intensity of communication, not physical closeness. In sum, the notion of social software points to the primacy of connection — networked, self-organizing, peer-to-peer, bottom-up — in the production and circulation of content and the preference for collaborative and processual ways of working, even when a “cool” site is underwritten by the Jewish establishment.

What does journalism produced in this mode look like? For Jay Rosen (“What’s Radical About the Weblog Form in Journalism,” http://www.lifewithalacrity.com/2004/10/tracing_the_evo.html), weblog journalism is volunteeristic, rather than commercial, participatory, scalable (from a very few readers to thousands of them), information flows from the public to the press, rather than the other way around, and for these and other reasons weblog journalism is a more democratic medium. For example, Steven I. Weiss’s *CampusJ*, which celebrates these principles, aims to combine “old standards and new practices” in its coverage of Jewish campus news.

Such blogs are not about creating new ways to deliver traditional journalism, though that certainly happens, as can be seen from the online presence of print media. Rather, they are about new journalistic practices for both professionals and amateurs, whether reporters, editors, or publish-

ers. This can be seen in The Jewish Bloggers Webring. This webring, “for everyone who considers themselves Jewish,” includes 493 active members, with 30 awaiting approval, as of this writing. Like blogs more generally, many of the Jewish blogs disaggregate news coverage from various sources and, consistent with the blogger’s particular point of view, reaggregate, recontextualize, and recirculate that coverage in ways that are designed to encourage comment. What emerges is a recombinant Jewish newssphere, viral in its spread and unprecedented in its vastness, heterogeneity, and interactivity.

Many of these Jewish blogs report in the first person from the front lines of daily life: the mundane world of an American suburban teenager, the loneliness of being the sole Jew in a Midwestern town, the frustrations of a *baal tshuvah*, the otherwise hidden conflicts within a Hasidic enclave, the struggles of the newly converted, the anxieties of a new *oleh*. For example, a group of Israeli settlers recently created www.YeshaSpeaksOut.org in order to speak directly to the world about “what life in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza is really like for the Jews who have chosen to settle there.” They want to counteract the mainstream press, which has labeled them “obstacles to peace.”

Whether or not the kind of journalism that arises from such media practices is really journalism is of less concern than what the media practices themselves tell us about the Jewish life they shape. Where life is news, the source to cultivate is oneself. The intensity of self-reflection and public expression in the Jewish newsspace — and the dazzling diversity of Jewish life in the making that can be witnessed there — is, in its way, making history. 

Discussion Guide

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences in a sacred conversation provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. Is an independent Jewish press important to American Jewish life?
2. Should the Jewish press air “dirty laundry” or does this compromise the position of Jews in America? Do Jewish journalists owe a greater allegiance to their communities or to pursuing their craft?
3. Does the Jewish injunction against *lashon hara*, evil speech, or gossip, serve as a shield to protect the bad behavior within our community? Does this injunction preclude the Jewish media from exposing questionable behavior?

Blogging, Journalism, and the Future of the Jewish Press

Dan Sieradski, a Dorot Fellow in Israel, is Founding Editor of Jewschool.com (a Jewish 'fringe' weblog), director of The Open Source Judaism Project (founded by *Nothing Sacred* author Douglas Rushkoff), and founder of the multilingual hip-hop collective Corner Prophets. He is currently a yeshiva student living in Jerusalem. Rob Eshman is Editor-in-Chief of the *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles* (www.jewishjournal.com). Rob, who has worked as a journalist in the U.S. and Israel, lives in Venice, CA with his wife Rabbi Naomi Levy and their two children. Rob and Dan's recent correspondence focuses on the nature of blogging, new journalism, and the future of the Jewish press.

Dear Rob,

Bloggers play an interesting role in the Jewish world, but it's hard to argue whether or not it's an important one. For disparate Jewish communities, blogs provide a meeting hall where anyone with the chutzpah to get up and make him or herself heard can engage in conversation with the wider Jewish community. Could you imagine what the Jewish world would be like if the Amoraim and Tannaim were blogging the Mishnah and Gemara? What shape might rabbinic Judaism have taken if the Babylonians and Yerushalmis had been keeping blogs simultaneously with the wider Jewish community chiming in? On today's blogs everything is open to discussion, and nothing is out of bounds. Further, like talmudic debate, these conversations are very democratic in nature; everyone is welcome to participate in the discussion and bring some degree of insight to the table. On my site, Jewschool, for example, we engage in conversations about Israel that run the gamut of opinions from Chomsky to Kahane. People raise concerns from a very secular humanistic place and from a fundamental Torah-rooted place. It's not always productive, but it's always incredibly educational and thus valuable.

Blogging can put pressure on major news outlets to pick up stories that might otherwise fall beneath the radar. And whistle blowing seems to be rapidly becoming the norm; a number of sites are devoted specifically to calling out Jewish institutions and leaders on issues that the mainstream Jewish press would otherwise ignore for reasons of allegiance or, frankly, good taste. In a recent conversation, my friend Steven I. Weiss (who was the founding publisher of *Protocols*, an early and now defunct jBlog, and the creator of *CampusJ*, a new Jewish student blog site) said, "There are too many examples to count where it very much

seemed like Jewish publications were taking scoops off blogs without giving credit, but it's hard to point to a story that blogs were covering that made a traditional Jewish publication sit up and take notice." Steven did point to one story that came to light because of significant coverage on Jewish blogs — Rabbi Michael Ozair, a sex offender who attempted to cover up his tracks by changing his name to Michael Ezra.

Dan

Blogging is emblematic of the glorious anarchistic nature of the Internet.

Dear Dan,

It's very hard to talk about bloggers in general, as the frequency, quality, and quantity from blogger to blogger and from week to week vary so much. Substitute the word blogger for the word "typer" and you understand the dilemma.

So, to cut to the chase, good blogging is a boon to Jewish journalism, as it is to journalism in general. It adds insight, fresh voices, almost unlimited quality content, leads, scoops, and competition to a profession that could always use more of the above. It provides a very low barrier to entry into the Jewish community, which too often limits access to people who are not financially, religiously, or politically acceptable. Most blogs riff on journalism done elsewhere, and only a handful of them actually make or break news.

Bad blogging can be entertaining, but it's ultimately just widely-distributed doodling. People quickly learn not to take it seriously; the blogger usually moves on to other things, like a job; blogs often have a short half-life.

The key for us fuddy-duddy print Jewish journalists is to figure out how to

incorporate the best of blogging into our pages — the freshness, interactivity, fearlessness. At the same time, there's no reason to be enamored of the worst parts of it: the *lashon hara*; sloppy writing, editing, and sourcing; the snide, predictable anger of sexually frustrated young Jewish men with sharp minds and no one with whom to share their ideas.

Rob

Dear Rob:

It's easy to diminish the value of blogging. It's something a lot of journalists seem to be doing these days because of the threat blogs pose to the profession of journalism. Bloggers endanger the stability of old media. People don't read the papers anymore; they read 'metafilters' like Google News and weblogs that harvest and recontextualize news stories to identify biases and misinformation. Blogs have changed the way people both perceive of the media and the manner in which they digest it. This may not necessarily mean providing coverage in the same manner that a news outlet may, but it does mean offering a new paradigm in news presentation — and that's not something to be taken for granted.

Thus, when you make remarks about "distributed doodling" and a "short half-life," whatever glimmer of truth there may be to this, you're joining this same chorus of naysayers. And I have to wonder what sort of stake you have in making such remarks. You say you want to co-opt the best of what blogs have to offer. I say your days are numbered. The European Situationists referred to this practice as recuperation, which the free, open-source encyclopedia, Wikipedia, defines as "the process by which radical ideas and images are commodified and incorporated within the 'safe' confines of 'spectacular' society." At a recent meeting of newspaper executives, Rupert Murdoch remarked that consumers want "control over the media, instead of being controlled by it." In the face of blogging's advent, Murdoch recommends that newspapers begin incorporating blogs into their websites in order to maintain readership. But you see, blogging is emblematic of the glorious anarchistic nature of the Internet. As a distributed media model, with millions of hands working at once, it does what

centralized media outlets can never do: Tell the whole story. And so I'd argue that rather than the old media co-opting the tricks of the new media, the new media will co-opt the old media's tricks and start taking its journalism more seriously — picking up the phone, conducting interviews, and checking facts for itself. And when that becomes the norm, you guys are finished.

Dan

Dear Dan:

Nah, old media never die, they just become new media. We're not in the printing business; we're in the information distribution business. Whether we distribute information via stone tablets, paper, or fiber optic cables doesn't really matter.

As new news delivery systems replace old ones, the key is to find systems that offer high quality content and a sustainable economic model. There are something like eight million bloggers in the U.S. alone, and I can't imagine you're saying that each is as worthy as the next. Some are superb, some blow, and most of them — even the superb ones — are still trying to figure out how to get paid for their work.

Technological advances will soon make blogging seem quaint. The new new Internet will be able to instantly transmit huge files (30 percent of worldwide Internet traffic now operates by BitTorrent, a high-capacity file transfer system), so why blog when you can just talk into a camera and interact in real time with a guy watching you on his cell phone in Shanghai? Let's call it blabbing, not blogging. It will kill off you and your kind faster than you can say newsprint. Every blogger is his own Tom Friedman. Every blabber will be his own Geraldo. Mind you, the journalistic skills of news gathering, fact-checking, story-telling, editing, source-grooming, multi-sourcing, etc. will still make some blabbers as valuable as the best bloggers, who are as valuable as the best print and broadcast journalists. Most of the essential skills don't change, and talent and hard work will still be of value, and ambition and quality will still be rewarded. It's the technology that changes, more and more rapidly, while our human needs remain the same: for news, for gossip, for connection.

Rob



DULL AND MEDIOCRE are two words often used to describe Jewish journalism. The complaint is made most repeatedly and recently in a self-published book by Luke Ford. Mr. Ford, the son of a Christian evangelist, is best known for a website that graphically chronicles the pornography industry. What standing he has as a critic of Jewish journalism is not exactly clear to me, but his book, *Yesterday's News Tomorrow*, (iUniverse, 2004) includes transcripts of interviews he conducted with the editor of *The Jewish Week* of New York, Gary Rosenblatt; with the editor of the *Forward*, J.J. Goldberg; with the editor of the *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Rob Eshman; with a professor of journalism at Columbia University, Ari Goldman; and with a few dozen other figures in the world of "Jewish journalism."

In defense of the Jewish journalists, it has to be said that much of American journalism is also dull and mediocre. And it is not only Jewish journalism that falls into the category of dull or mediocre; one of the complaints about American Jewish communal life — from religious school classes to Shabbat services — is that it is dull and mediocre.

What's more, as Jews in their second and third and fourth generations in America have integrated into the American mainstream, so have Jewish journalists and Jewish journalism. William Safire's regular interviews with Ariel Sharon for *The New York Times* op-ed page, often timed to appear on the eve of Jewish holidays, are good Jewish journalism, perhaps better than anything appearing in papers marketed exclusively to a Jewish audience. Jeffrey Goldberg's coverage in the *New Yorker* magazine of Islamic terrorists in South America and Jewish settlers in Gaza was important Jewish journalism, as is Jacob Gershman's coverage in *The New York Sun* of the furor over antisemitism in the Middle East

studies department at Columbia University. I wrote a story for the *Wall Street Journal* about shenanigans at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Critics of Jewish journalism miss the point when they fail to take into account the fertile nature of this broader field.

In that context, is there still a place and a need for a Jewish press that is aimed primarily at a Jewish audience? Some of the bulletin board and internal discussion functions once carried out by that press can now be filled by email lists. Certain communities, such as the fervently Orthodox or ardently pro-Israel, will have needs that can be filled only by specialty publications like the daily newspaper *Hamodia* or the weekly *Jewish Press* of Brooklyn. Some stories on the internal battles of Jewish organizations are of so little interest to non-Jewish readers that were it not for Jewish publications, the news of the disputes might never be put on the record. But what good is Jewish journalism for non-Orthodox, non-professional, non-semi-professional Jews?

Some Jewish philanthropists and charities who also believe Jewish journalism is valuable subsidize Jewish newspapers and wire services. Sometimes the subsidies reduce the level of liveliness, aggressiveness, and independence. (Ford's book includes what he claims is a copy of an April 7, 1997 memo from leaders of the UJA-Federation of New York to the editor of *The Jewish Week* in which lay leaders propose "one UJA-Federation cover story per month in all editions" and stipulate that the "UJA-Federation will continue to make its donor list available to *The Jewish Week* for subscriptions so long as *The Jewish Week* provides UJA-Federation with the regular 'presence' it needs.") The argument in favor of the subsidies is the claim that in their absence Jewish journalism would die or decline in quality.

Most journalists, and even many publishers, aren't in it for the money; if they were, they'd have gone into more lucrative fields. Most journalists I know are drawn to the work because they are interested in good stories. The story of the Jews and their God is one of the greatest in human history. It can't honestly be assessed as either dull or mediocre. My own faith is that some way or another it will inspire storytellers to do it justice, as it has now for thousands of years.

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**Sh'ma does not publish
in July and August.**

We'll be back in September with an issue on High Holiday liturgy and experience. In October, *Sh'ma* will focus on issues of economic and social justice.

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ARE JEWISH COMMUNITY newspapers timorous lap dogs sitting pert and pretty in a world of corruption, abuse of power, and conflicts of interest? The answer is not self-evident. Five years ago, *The Jewish Week of New York*, my former employer, courageously exposed Rabbi Baruch Lanner, a prominent Orthodox rabbi who for decades sexually harassed vulnerable young people under his charge. The article, by editor Gary Rosenblatt, was meticulously researched, filled with the kind of detail that inspires credibility and so multiply sourced as to bury Lanner under a mountain of evidence. The paper also highlighted the moral failure of prominent Orthodox leaders who closed their eyes and ears to victims when allegations of Lanner's conduct were brought to their attention — then stood its ground against a torrent of abuse and boycott threats.

With Lanner's conviction in a court of law and important reforms at the Orthodox Union (which employed Lanner), supporters of independent journalism dared hope the story would mark a breakthrough for the profession; no longer would readers be treated like children who could not be exposed to the world's harsh truths.

But five years later such expectations appear misplaced. Witness this winter and spring's revelations regarding Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff, the self-proclaimed traditionally observant Jew, owner of two Washington kosher restaurants, and crony to House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. Abramoff not only appears to have subverted congressional ethics rules by sponsoring or helping shadowy off-shore entities sponsor Delay junkets to Scotland, Russia, and the Pacific Northern Mariana Islands, but a cascade of follow-up stories also revealed that:

- Abramoff funded a yeshiva day school he headed with millions of dollars fraudulently gouged from three American Indian tribes and funneled through an Abramoff-controlled foundation purportedly devoted to "needy and deserving" inner city youth sports programs. Abramoff convinced the tribes their contributions were crucial to ensuring support from DeLay and other congressional leaders for their casino gambling interests.
- When one tribe said it had no more

money to pay Abramoff for lobbying, Abramoff came up with a plan to provide term life insurance to tribal elders, who would make the yeshiva their beneficiary. The school would then pay Abramoff's lobbying fees.

- More than \$140,000 from Abramoff's inner city youth sports foundation went to the West Bank, where it was used by a Jewish settler to mobilize against the Palestinian uprising.

None of this was broken by a Jewish media outlet — though some of it was shockingly easy to find. The expenditures of Abramoff's frequently cited Capital Athletic Foundation, for example, are publicly available. After the initial story in a February 2004 *Washington Post* about such a prominent Jewish figure, why did no Jewish outlet follow up? Was anyone reading?

Rightwing culture warrior Rabbi Daniel Lapin introduced DeLay and Abramoff when Abramoff was both board chairman of Lapin's group Toward Tradition — which decries what it terms the leading role of Jews in American cultural decadence — and a key lobbyist for liquor and gambling interests. And in 1996 the Marianas government — an Abramoff client — awarded a \$1.2 million no-bid contract to Rabbi David Lapin, Daniel Lapin's brother, to promote "ethics in government." A recent government audit was unable to determine what work David Lapin performed. *The New York Times* — not any Jewish paper — provided this Jewish story, too.

The possible reasons for such a lack of investigative curiosity are many: the old *shonkeh fur the goyim* defensive crouch is one reason that quickly comes to mind. But I suspect many Jewish news outlets simply do not approach their profession with the idea that investigative journalism is part of their brief.

Investigative journalism requires a willingness to commit staff to time-consuming research and to support them with investigative tools and financial resources. But before anything else, Jewish papers must crave credibility with a fierceness that puts first their readers' right to know about their community. Only then will they lift themselves out of their current lap dog-like status.

Larry Cohler-Esses has worked for The New York Daily News, The Jewish Week of New York and Washington Jewish Week as an investigative reporter.

Wanted: A Critical Engagement with Our Own Heritage

Samuel G. Freedman



IRVING HOWE once opined that the ideal Jewish Socialist would have attended a Talmud Torah. A fiercely secular man, Howe understood as all too few of his fellow non-believers did that Judaism was not only a religion to be rejected by modernists but a part of every Jew's intellectual patrimony. Frum or freethinking, they all had something to learn from the Exodus narrative, the prophets of social justice, the debaters of the Talmud.

Howe's formulation leaps to my mind in considering the training of Jewish journalists, and I think it applies equally well to the journalist who happens to be a Jew and to the journalist who practices the profession for a specifically Jewish venue. Among all races, religions, and ethnicities, at least in my 30 years of experience, journalism disproportionately draws the skeptics, contrarians, and social critics. We are instructed to trust only observable, documented fact — the batting average, the stock price, the vote total (well, maybe not in Florida in 2000). A famous aphorism goes, "If your mother says she loves you, check it out."

For this reason, journalism has had a difficult time grappling with religion of any sort. Belief does not submit neatly to empirical testing or eyewitness evidence. It is inchoate, ineffable, personal. Only in the last generation have even the leading news organizations found a vocabulary, and a set of knowledgeable reporters, to lift religion journalism to a level above dutifully covering Yom Kippur or Easter sermons.

Because journalists work in an occupation that had tended to distrust and discount religion and that aspires to challenge all orthodoxies, they should make the effort to become conversant with their own heritage. For those who will at some point report on religiously or ethnically Jewish issues, a baseline familiarity with Judaism is indispensable. For those who never will, the Jewish religious tradition remains essential to analyzing much of the American experience.

I suspect that the typical Jewish journalist has a greater familiarity with Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, or Albert Einstein, or at least the ideas they espoused and made part of the global conversation, than they do any

Jewish religious figure from antiquity until today. That creates an intellectual asymmetry of the sort no journalist should desire. And, by the way, Jewish journalists who do come out of religious backgrounds should make certain they study up on the intellectual giants and major themes of secular Jewishness rather than dismissing it as unimportant or corrosive.

Yet a deeper sense of Judaism, and thus of Jewish identity, cannot connote an allegiance to the Jewish people in one's journalism. A journalist remains beholden to nothing except the highest standards of the profession and no one except the citizens who consume the news. Too often, Jewish organizations and individuals expect, indeed demand, a kind of loyalty oath from Jewish journalists, and they readily hurl the epithets "self-hating Jew" or "Jewish antisemite" at those perceived to have broken the tribal covenant.

Jews have no Pope in our religion, and we should have no supreme authority in our journalism. It is not a Jewish responsibility to hide the supposed "bad news" from public view; what constitutes "bad news" is an entirely subjective concept. As a democracy, Americans believe that free information and open discussion improve a society. Only dictatorships claim the public interest is served by sanitizing the journalistic portrayal of reality. And as Jews, whether religious or secular, we have traditionally prided ourselves on disputation, debate, contention, at least when it can be conducted within the bounds of civility.

Something about being Jewish seems to make us want to be journalists. Every newsroom of my professional life has been disproportionately Jewish (and also disproportionately Irish Catholic, since they, too, are a people of words and writing). My faculty colleagues at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism include Friedman, Goldman, Shapiro, Weinreb, Lipton, Isaacs, and Wald. Those bigots who believe in a Jewish International Media Conspiracy would have a field day with us. Having the surname, though, is no longer enough. A Jewish journalist needs to develop an informed and critical engagement with *klal Yisrael*.

Samuel G. Freedman, a professor of journalism at Columbia University, is the author most recently of Who She Was: My Search for My Mother's Life (Simon & Schuster).

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LAST SPRING, I was invited to speak to a private retreat — okay, a brunch — of the board of one of the country's largest Jewish newspapers. I really wasn't there to rehash the controversies surrounding my book, *The New Rabbi*. Instead, the editor of the paper wanted me to lead a discussion about how more ambitious, passionate, and in-depth journalism about our synagogues, federations, and JCCs might actually be "good for the Jews."

When the conversation began, several people expressed concern about the detailed reporting in the book (which dramatically recreates the behind-the-scenes life of an American synagogue while also exploring my own experience of re-embracing Jewish practice after my father's death). They worried about washing a community's "dirty laundry." I pointed out that there was really very little in the book that qualified as even lightly soiled laundry and, more important, that the main characters who had cooperated fully with the project over several years of reporting were satisfied with both its journalistic and Jewish integrity. I shied away from addressing the quarrels some rabbis have with the book because I think those rabbis and I should discuss their concerns privately first — and still hope one day we will.

Jewish newspapers should have much different concerns. In many ways, they aren't controversial *enough*. They often miss the opportunity to make their local Jewish communities seem as fascinating as they really are.

I asked the board members to consider what has happened to coverage of their own professions in the media they read so voraciously: how the *The American Lawyer* revolutionized the coverage of law, and the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and several magazines helped fostered similar revolutions in the coverage of business, politics, medicine, sports, the high and low arts, bringing a depth of understanding we now just take for granted. Before these revolutions, almost all media was dominated by the kind of party-line, press-release coverage that many in our clergy and lay leadership still expect from Jewish media and still want from secular media covering Jews. And leaders in all these fields were initially outraged that the press would treat them as public figures — which they saw

as "disrespect."

It isn't disrespect. It can and should be the highest form of respect — for open communication in our cherished religious institutions. It is also, in America, the law.

Anyone employed in religious institutional life, including the clergy and elected or appointed lay leaders, is a public figure — primarily because the organizations they run or work for enjoy nonprofit status. Reporting on those organizations is how journalists help protect the public trust. And the sooner Jewish leaders understand this, and cooperate with journalists so that they can write better, fairer, more relevant stories, the sooner people will truly appreciate how hard it is to keep a house of worship open, or to fund and run a social service agency, or to support Israel, or to choose a new leader.

The problem, by the way, is much bigger than just press relations. The way many Jewish leaders address the media is a microcosm of how they approach communications inside their institutions. Journalists tend to want to know the same things as congregants, constituents, and employees. Bad communication and lack of transparency in process can lead to something far worse than substandard media coverage; they can block the flow of information and insight that is the lifeblood of any organization, making real problems worse and creating new ones.

That is *exactly* how a book about the seemingly benign process of a replacing a beloved rabbi at a large, stable congregation became a "controversial" piece of Jewish journalism. None of the people involved with the book set out to create controversy, and I greatly admired the way that all the clergy and lay leaders continued speaking openly to me after the situation became more volatile. In fact, the synagogue eventually did the same thing with its congregants; it undertook a remarkable internal inquiry over what had gone wrong (which was started months before my book came out). The leaders then read the entire frank, fascinating report at a public meeting.

The local Jewish newspaper was afraid to cover it. It is my prayer, as a journalist and a Jew, that the next time they won't be afraid.

Stephen Fried is an adjunct professor at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. His book *The New Rabbi* (Bantam) is now available in paperback, with a new chapter that updates the story.

The Ultra-Orthodox Press

Ruth Ebenstein



AT SHLOMI'S NEWSSTAND In Jerusalem's Rehavia neighborhood, a dozen Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) newspapers and magazines decorate the outside table. Strewn about are dailies, weeklies, and monthlies, newspapers and colorful glossy magazines in Hebrew, English, and Yiddish.

Welcome to the Haredi media marketplace of the 21st century. What began in late 19th-century Europe as an instrument for separation from the secular world — an alternative to the secular press — has blossomed into a growing and diversifying industry. Yossi Elituv, Deputy Editor of the popular Haredi weekly, *Mishpacha*, discusses the development of Haredi journalism and its societal role in 2005.

RUTH EBENSTEIN: What is the function of the Haredi press?

YOSSI ELITUV: The purpose of a Haredi newspaper is twofold: to provide the Haredi reader with everything he/she needs to know—and simultaneously, to protect him from all that he/she *does not* need to know. Haredi editors and publishers do not subscribe to the Western journalistic credo of objective reporting or the “right to know.” Rather, their aim is to give the Haredi reader information on what’s happening in the world, politics, technology, somewhat through their lens, to guard him or her from having to turn to *Yediot Aharonot* or the Israeli equivalent of Peter Jennings to be kept abreast of current events. Additionally, the Haredi press aims to inculcate Haredi values.

EBENSTEIN: How has Haredi journalism changed over the years?

ELITUV: In the early decades of the state, Israeli Haredi newspapers were almost exclusively political organs that served party needs alongside Haredi values. For example, the mainstream Hebrew-language daily *Ha-mod'ia* was the mouthpiece of *Agudat Yisrael*. Many Israeli Haredim hungry for news turned to non-Haredi dailies such as *Yediot Aharonot* or *Ma'ariv* on the sly and grew to identify with secular icons — Ben Gurion, the IDF, and the kibbutz movement. Over the years, the Haredi community grew and changed, with an influx of new blood. New immigrants and the *hazara b'tshuva* movement brought their respective news-reading habits and appetite for more options. In the 1980s and 1990s, changing winds yielded weekly newspapers independent of political affiliation, featuring more photos and color. Today, a Haredi reader can get almost all of the elements of a non-Haredi newspaper — book reviews, a women's magazine,

children's supplements, etc. — in a glossy Haredi publication that celebrates Haredi values and valorizes Haredi figures. In our world, that means the *kollel avrech*, the yeshiva, and the rabbis.

EBENSTEIN: Tell us more about the right not to know. How does that manifest in the press?

ELITUV: In a Haredi newspaper, censorship is a given. Communal convention mandates that the publication be scrutinized by an individual or committee before it goes to press to ensure that it is congruous with the society's religious codes. A Haredi paper never writes about suicide, AIDS, or rape, does not run photos of women, and generally avoids strong personal attacks. Personally and professionally, I agree with this approach. Why run a centerfold on an adolescent who shot ten kids and then himself? Doesn't that just encourage others to do so, for the glory? Honestly, when I read some of the newspapers in Israel, I ask myself, is this really the Promised Land?

EBENSTEIN: With that level of censorship, what kind of investigative journalism runs in the Haredi press?

ELITUV: That really depends on the newspaper. At *Mishpacha*, we've examined problems within our community: exposes on discrimination in the school system between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, youth dropping out of school, and the treatment of emotionally disabled students.

EBENSTEIN: Is this press critical for Haredim in the Diaspora, or can they turn to their communal and national Jewish newspapers as an alternative?

ELITUV: It is true that Jewish newspapers serve their respective Jewish communities.

Ruth Ebenstein is writing a doctoral dissertation at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) responses to the Shoah as depicted in the Haredi Ashkenazi press from 1950 to 1973. Ruth completed a degree in journalism at Northwestern University and an M.A. in German history at the Hebrew University. She has worked as a journalist and writer for more than 15 years.

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But for the Haredi reader, they pose an even greater threat than the secular press. When a Haredi reader picks up a secular newspaper, he/she doesn't expect Jewish messages. He knows what to anticipate. But when he/she reads a Jewish newspaper, he/she definitely expects to find Jewish values — and is bound to find something else. We encourage our

readers to shy away from these publications, and I understand that segments of the Modern Orthodox leadership do the same. Let's face it — the Jewish world comprises many stripes, streams, and colors. You cannot put all the facets and factions into one supermarket — or into one newspaper. It just doesn't work.



Christianity and the Media in America

Quentin J. Schultze

CHRISTIANITY IS a rhetorical religion grounded in proclamation. Its first great theologian, St. Augustine, was trained as a secular rhetorician before his conversion and ascendancy to bishop. This is most evident in the United States, where the Puritans and other Christian groups came not just to avoid religious persecution but also to plant the "City on the Hill" — a biblical term recited by one of the first Pilgrim ministers and championed publicly by President Ronald Reagan.

This is why so many churches and parachurch ministries use the media to reach out to the "unsaved." They pioneered mass printing and distribution in the 1830s, operated about one out of twelve radio stations already in the 1920s, launched some of the first cable and satellite TV channels, and most recently created the most popular religious Website (www.gospelcom.net) in the world, with about twelve million "hits" daily.

Currently, Christians, primarily Evangelicals and a few Roman Catholics, run about 1,200 radio stations in the U.S. These and Christian cable television channels are available in nearly all markets across the country, urging viewers and listeners to respond financially and spiritually. Before the televangelism scandals of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart in the late 1980s, over a dozen broadcast ministries elicited tens of millions of dollars annually in donations and claimed audiences in the low millions. Even without such high-profiler personalities, Christian media continue to shape religious opinions and doctrinal emphases. Religious media thereby compete for attention with local Christian leadership and national denominational authority.

But many Catholics and more mainstream Protestants criticize seemingly deceptive broadcast messages that promise new believers complete happiness, financial rewards, and physical healing. Mass-marketed faith

tends to give audiences what they want, not necessarily what they should have. This is why well-respected broadcast ministers such as Rev. Billy Graham have avoided using daily and weekly television programs, which are quite expensive.

Beyond evangelism, Christians have used more specialized media to strengthen cross-generational and cross-geographical faith communities. These include denominational newspapers and magazines, books and other educational materials, films, DVDs, private and public Websites, e-mail lists, and online video and audio streaming.

Christians generally recognize that their faith must be passed along from generation to generation. They realize that *community* is *communication* (the two words come from the same Latin root meaning "to make common"). Together with local Christian bookstores and national publishing houses, congregations form faith communities not just through worship, but also through extensive education programs and workshops, retreats, and conferences. Such events provide opportunities to purchase materials for personal and collective spiritual growth.

But Christians also face a growing politicization of their educational media. Most Christian media advance morally and politically conservative stances on public issues from abortion to federal judicial nominees and U.S. policies in the Middle East. Moreover, some Christian broadcasters are fueling such politicization. Ironically, this is causing significant rifts within denominations and congregations.

Orthodoxy, that is, true or authentic belief, is becoming oddly fashionable in many Christian circles. The key to this development seems to be two-fold: First, the desire to learn from tradition (Christian church historian Jaroslav Pelikan says *tradition* is the

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living faith of the dead, and *traditionalism* is the dead faith of the living); and second, the anonymous availability of online resources that an interested person can access without having to visit a church or theological library. I hear regularly from Christians who want to know how they can use print, electronic, and now digital media synergistically with local congregations to help interested persons and families reclaim ancient wisdom. After all, they say, our information-rich society is wisdom-poor.

My own life is a case in point. Raised Roman Catholic, during college I became a Protestant while reading about doctrine and theology. I had never really internalized the Catholic tradition to make it my own. A few years ago I discovered and traced online my Jewish roots. Moreover, I found on the com-

puterized database at the Holocaust Museum in Washington that one of my Viennese relatives was a Holocaust survivor. Using the Internet, I was able to determine that he was still alive, and last year I connected with him via e-mail. I now read the Bible through a different lens. I'm studying ancient Hebrew and later Jewish wisdom literature. I no longer use the term "Judeo-Christian" in my academic lectures and writings. Even as a Christian, I find that term disrespectful to Jews, and I struggle as the Apostle Paul did to understand both the commonalities of and distinctions between the two faiths. I don't know where this will lead. Yet I do see the mass media as gifts from God — gifts that can help all of us to share our faith humbly, build communities of shalom, and reclaim wisdom that transcends the foolishness of our age.



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The Balcony

Throughout this year, in honor of the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in America, Israeli Ruth Calderon is sharing her observations about living as an Israeli in America and her perceptions on the complexity of American Jewish identity. As she moves acrostically through the alphabet — America, Bank, Camp, eventually ending with “Zionism” — Calderon offers American Jews an opportunity to view their everyday experiences through an Israeli prism.

WORK — Work is America’s civil religion. When you ask someone, “How are you?” his or her first response concerns work. Kindergarteners work hard, complete projects, develop skills, and bring home the fruits of their effort in the forms of paper-mache, clay, feathers, and pipe-cleaners. The older ones work hard in school only to spend afternoon hours on homework. They push themselves to get into good colleges. This is their job. Parents leave for work while it is still dark and return home after nightfall. No one leaves until 5:00; they eat at their desks out of plastic containers and no one takes their “coffee breaks” in cafes. At 5:00 the secretaries leave, and the executives compete with each other for the dubious distinction of “last to leave.” Offices are oppressive — ugly with fluorescent lighting. An occasional figurine or motivational poster attempts to give the gray plastic cubicles a personal touch of home. And while we are on the subject of home, there is work to be found there too. Stay-at-home moms used to be out of the corporate rat race, but now there are special races just for them. The devoted gym attendee, the gourmet cook, and the expert minivan chauffeur are all notches on the achievement ladder; managing the overflowing portfolios of their children (piano lessons, dance classes, soccer practice) requires the skill and savvy of the highest level executive.

Keeping their bodies in shape is work, as is, oftentimes, marriage and intimacy.

XMAS — Nine-year-old Naomi saw Christmas decorations in a store for the first time and was mystified. I asked her if the decorations attracted her, and she said: like men’s fashion: it’s nice, but not for me.

YELLOW BUS — Yellow buses start to make their rounds the week before school starts; middle-aged drivers present themselves to little children at the end of the summer, saying, “My name is Jack. I will wait for you here every day. Don’t run, and always put down the garage door because of the squirrels.” These simple things restore our faith in the

goodness of the world. In addition, the style of the yellow bus looks deliberately antiquated, as if a child had drawn it. It travels slowly and difficultly, like a car from the previous century, rattling and protected by draconian laws: Woe to the driver who dares to pass the yellow bus while it is letting children off. Yellow buses belong with fire hydrants, mailboxes, and the policeman exiting the donut shop while on his beat; these are the symbols scattered along the American streets. Like motherhood and apple pie, they attempt to conceal the fear of poverty, loneliness, and insignificance just beneath the surface.

ZIONISM — After three years, having enjoyed the best delights of America while also acknowledging its challenges, I long for home — for the bright blue light, simple belonging, being immersed in Hebrew, to once again be part of the majority, for constant creative midrashim on Jewish customs, concepts, and values, which are ever-present while not intrusive. I miss seeing people without calendaring them into my palm pilot weeks in advance. I long for my memories. I crave the smaller dimensions of everything — my Vespa instead of the N.J. Transit, boutiques instead of the Gap, and knowing that America is just across the ocean.

The full text of “The Balcony” is posted on www.shma.com.

Ruth Calderon is the founder of Alma College in Tel Aviv and Alma, NY. Her book, The Market, the Home, the Heart, is being translated into English. The Balcony is translated by Marc Glickman and Kerrith Solomon.

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Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer. Ed. Derek Rubin (Schoken Books, 2005) \$25, 368 pp.

IN 1963, PHILIP ROTH took on his critics with a scathing essay responding to attacks that he had supposedly portrayed Jews in a negative light. He accused them of many things: timidity, paranoia, self-pity, but most of all, lack of imagination. People who cannot understand that to write about flawed Jews is not tantamount to betraying the tribe, he asserted, simply misunderstand the role of fiction, whose goals are not religious or anthropological. Responding to one vocal critic, he wrote, "What fiction does and what the rabbi would like it to do are two entirely different things. The concerns of fiction are not those of a statistician — or of a public-relations firm. The novelist asks himself, 'What do people think?' The PR man asks, 'What *will* people think?'"

When Roth wrote that essay, Jews were in the strange position of being a visible minority while at the same time producing novelists — Bellow, Roth, Ozick, and Malamud — who were (more or less) defining American literature as Jewish American literature. They were infusing an ethnic, post-immigration ethos into the larger literary scene. The degree to which they succeeded is acknowledged in the proliferation of ethnic literatures and the ongoing debate concerning the character of the American literary canon. While some assert that few non-white, non-male writers should be admitted to that canon, few would argue that members of the "greatest generation" of Jewish American writers do belong, and that all subsequent Jewish American writers live and produce in the shadows of their forebears.

This is nothing new, of course. All of Jewish literature, from Deuteronomy on, is a response to what has been written earlier. The Medieval commentators — Rashi, Maimonides, Nachmanides — were all conscious of the fact that they were part of an expanding tradition whose vitality depended upon the infusion of new interpretive gestures applied to ancient, even intrinsic, human situations.

So how are succeeding generations to define themselves? Should they, like Cynthia Ozick, reject the term "Jewish American writer" altogether as too parochial? Or should they

embrace it, as Erica Jong does, as a uniquely American way to define class? These are some of the questions posed in *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*, a new collection of essays by writers spanning three generations.

The collection showcases a generational shift that could not have been predicted in the 1960s. While the essays written by older writers — like Roth — wrestle with the implications of assimilation, the youngest artists have built a literary philosophy upon the notion of responding to Jewish religious and textual tradition. While older writers came into their own in the shadow of the Holocaust or an American atmosphere tinged by antisemitism, those born later in the century — especially after 1970 — no longer understand themselves in relation to these phenomena. In large part, that shift stands as proof of how far Jews, and America, have traveled.

While individually these essays are charming, astute, and often witty, certain motifs become tedious: I lost count of how many times I. B. Singer's dictum, "every writer must have an address," came up. And the notion of the Jew as outsider, while historically true, was mentioned too often, making some of the entries feel redundant.

As Derek Rubin points out in his introduction, scholars and critics have long tried to define the "Jewish American writer," and they have often roped the writers themselves into the debate, convening panels and readings, and soliciting essays. But the question they want answered is not: Who are these writers? It is: Who are we?

That writers themselves tend to be pulled into this more existential reckoning somewhat ambivalently shows just how torn they are: Jews, yes, but they each try to do what all writers do — write about the human condition. After almost half a century, we still ask our fiction writers to define us to ourselves. It is to our credit that we understand, to one degree or another, how powerful the written word is, but what we desire of our "Jewish American writers" is a heavy burden, one too heavy for any of them to carry.

Koret Book Review

The Koret Foundation — *Sh'ma* literary pages include literary essays, author interviews, and book, film, or art reviews that complement the Koret Jewish Book Awards and provide visibility and distinction to a wide range of Jewish books and authors. These pages feature an array of writers and others who bring our readers new expressions of Jewish thought, imagination, and spirit.

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Michal Lemberger received her PhD in English from UCLA. She lives in Los Angeles, where she teaches literature and works as a freelance writer and editor.

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Taube New Visions

New Visions is an opportunity to think imaginatively about issues of relevance to the Jewish community. It is generously funded by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture.

PRACTICING THE CRAFT of journalism — the pure, old-fashioned news-gathering kind — is a lonely way of life. Jewish journalism is doubly so, or tenfold. If the media seem less compelling than they should be or used to be, that's the biggest reason.

Journalists are supposed to stand apart. We are the mirror in which the community sees itself. Ideally, the reflection is a true one; for that to be so, the mirror must be still and flat. The reporter is not meant to be part of the story, but to report it straight. Bringing in your own feelings is like putting ripples in the mirror: The image may be more interesting, but it's no longer true.

No, no report is entirely objective. The reporter decides what topic to cover, what questions to ask, which facts are the most telling. Then the story must be written in an engaging manner, so as to catch the reader's attention and, yes, to sell newspapers. And yet, every added flourish shades the story. Objectivity and truth are ideals: never achieved, always to be striven for.

To be a mirror means one more thing: It is to stand apart from the crowd, facing in the opposite direction from everyone else. Editors tell reporters they're expected to be monks. By this we mean they may not be engaged in the issues they're covering. They may not join political parties, demonstrate for or against the causes they write about, throw themselves into the world they're covering.

If they do their job right, they will also find themselves removed, like monks, from the fellowship of those whose interests they share. They must cultivate and befriend their sources, the people on whose doings they report, only to betray them in the end.

For all these reasons, reporting the news is a lonely job, and reporting Jewish news is infinitely more lonely.

Here is the trap of Jewish journalism: the journalist must stand apart, disengaged from the issues, the passions and especially the community he or she covers. But what does that do to the journalist as a Jew? What is the point, the reward in being Jewish, if not the community, the beliefs, and the passions?

The loneliness isn't just existential. The Jewish community, to a greater degree than most of us realize, dislikes news reporting on

Jewish life.

It's commonplace to blame the institutions and leaders. They want to appear in a positive light in the eyes of their constituents. They expect the community's journals to tell their story as they want it told.

But the greatest pressure comes from the readers. Jews want to feel good about being Jewish. To the extent that they are engaged as Jews, they are proud of their heritage. They want to think well of the institutions that represent that heritage. They don't want Jews and Judaism held up in disrepute. And yet, making public institutions look bad is what journalists are supposed to do.

A caution: We speak of journalism and news reporting as though they were one and the same, but they are not. There are other types of journalism that are legitimate and honorable: opinion and advocacy journalism, public relations and advertising, service journalism. There are essays and blogs. None of these imposes the rigors of hard-news reporting, and some of them pay a lot more.

The plain truth, though, is that news reporting is the core of the profession. Essayists can't tell you why the space shuttle blew up or how many soldiers died in Iraq last week. Most of all, they can't tell you what really happened in City Hall. That takes reporting.

That's why there's a heroic aura to the hard-boiled gumshoe reporter, going back to Woodward and Bernstein to the battlefield correspondents of Normandy and Bull Run, and on back to the trial of John Peter Zenger.

Newspapers, since their inception, have been in the business of reporting the doings of those in power. They tell the public what their leaders are doing to them, in their name, with their tax money. They make democracy possible; without them there is no informed citizenry. That's their first job. It's why they're singled out for protection in the U.S. Constitution.

If compelling journalism seems in short supply within the Jewish community, it's mainly because the community can't decide whether it wants it. Maintaining an open debate on Jewish affairs through a robust adversarial press isn't an issue for the Jewish press alone; it raises the question of whether we are willing to take the risks and pay the prices necessary to be a community.

J.J. Goldberg is
Editor-in-Chief of the
Forward.

“We must be particularly careful with our facts,” writes Rosenblatt, hinting at the core challenge for journalists: judgment. Our struggles with *lashon hara* are rarely about truths versus falsehoods, but about which truths we can traffic in.

This year, I was commissioned by the *Boston Globe* to write a piece on the re-emergence of the term “Jewish American Princess.” Though cheeky at first glance, the stereotype has a rather serious history and has been associated with both misogyny and antisemitism. But perhaps its most dangerous feature is the connection it seems to make between Jews and money, a connection that has served as the basis for virulent Jew-hatred for centuries. In the course of my research, one interviewee would not speak on the record, arguing that some laundry simply should not be aired in mainstream (read: non-Jewish) publications. This person added that perhaps I too should be careful and rather ominously warned me to exercise caution in writing this particular piece.

I was reminded of this recently when a publishing executive whispered to me that his parents admonished him to use that classic litmus test, “Is it good for the Jews?” When I wasn’t surprised, he was. “Do people still ask that?” Indeed they do.

—Alana Newhouse

Lashon hara, evil speech, is the all-purpose shield Jewish leaders use against accountability. Even the most secular are quick to respond to a painful journalistic inquiry with an invocation against gossip.

Lashon hara is the all-purpose shield Jewish journalists use to explain why they haven’t covered a story in its depth and passion. Stories with depth and passion inevitably require the inclusion of painful personal details.

Lashon hara is the first cry of critics when an honest book about synagogue life is published (see the reaction to Stephen Fried’s *The New Rabbi*).

לא תלך רכיל בעמך לא תעמד על דם רעך אני ה'

You shall not be a gossipmonger among your people; you shall not stand aside while your fellow’s blood is shed; I am the Lord.

— Leviticus 19:16

This one biblical sentence represents the paradigm for the ethical journalist. Two phrases suggest two different lessons — a warning and an obligation.

On the one hand, we are commanded not to spread gossip because it demeans one’s neighbor, insidiously and behind his back, in ways that he cannot counter. Throughout the ages immeasurable harm and bloodshed have come about through gossip, and the journalist knows full well the power he or she has to destroy through character assassination.

But the balance of the verse warns us not to shrink from responsibility. Knowing that one’s words are powerful and can do damage does not mean we can ignore reporting on wrongdoing, but rather that we must be particularly careful with our facts and mindful that the stakes are high. If the circumstances are important enough, we are obligated to take a stand, speak out, and help correct an injustice.

The verse concludes “I am the Lord,” reminding us that if and when we can write with both accuracy and compassion, walking that thin line of advocating for a just cause without unfairly attacking innocent people, our task can take on a measure of holiness.

— Gary Rosenblatt

In short, *lashon hara* is the first refuge of scoundrels in Jewish life. It’s the first layer of defense the establishment (be it in Reform, Conservative, Orthodox or secular life) throws up against inquiries about sexual abuse in the rabbinate, for example.

There’s no beautiful ideal that can not be perverted. And while there are many times when an injunction against gossip is the moral imperative, there are about as many times when relaying damaging personal information is morally necessary.

I tend to be skeptical when Jewish leaders invoke *lashon hara* in their self-interest. And so should you.

— Luke Ford

Gary Rosenblatt, Editor and Publisher of The Jewish Week, is also Founder and Chairman of the Jewish Investigative Journalism Fund as well as Write On For Israel, an advocacy journalism program for high school students.

Alana Newhouse is Arts & Culture Editor at the Forward.

Luke Ford is the author of four books, including Yesterday’s News Tomorrow: Inside American Jewish Journalism.

Susan Weidman Schneider, author of Jewish and Female and other books, is Editor-in-Chief of Lilith, the Jewish feminist magazine now preparing to celebrate its 30th anniversary.

This text’s double injunction spells out the responsibility to evaluate a situation clearly. A journalist with knowledge of wrongdoing has to become a judge, has to weigh the evidence and examine its source; that’s no small task. In the face of credible evidence and reliable sources, why do some journalists acknowledge a victim’s suffering and others dismiss her experience?

The operative phrase in Rosenblatt’s commentary is “If the circumstances are important enough.” Who decides? Too often the harm done to women by sexual and other predation has been judged not important enough. A few years ago, *Lilith* magazine took a principled stand on an issue we felt was, indeed, sufficiently important. After careful investigation, we judged that writing about the victims of a famous rabbi’s sexual misconduct against girls and young women was more important than protecting his memory; it was more important to allow the voices of the victims to be heard than to stand with those who had consistently blinded themselves to the rabbi’s actions in the name of preventing *lashon hara*. Many speak out against gossip. Some need also to speak out for the victims.

— Susan Weidman Schneider

Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year, the practical ethics column will focus on money and power. The column is co-sponsored by Shelley and Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. The series of columns, with responses, is available on www.shma.com.

Ari L. Goldman, author of *The Search for God at Harvard*, is Professor and Dean of Students at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

I WORKED FOR *The New York Times* for 20 years and everywhere I went (in the Jewish world) people asked, "How can you work for that anti-Zionist newspaper?"

Now I work at Columbia University, and everywhere I go (in the Jewish world) people ask, "How can you work for that anti-Zionist university?"

I consider both these questions calumnies against noble American institutions but, in fact, each is born of a small truth. What is curious to me is how differently these two charges spread.

The small truth at *The New York Times* is that at one point — in the 1940s — the family controlling the paper belonged to an anti-Zionist organization called the American Council for Judaism, which opposed the settlement of Jews in what was then Palestine. Today, Jewish opponents of the *Times* use that bit of history and bolster it with passels of newspaper clippings that they maintain make a case for an anti-Zionist newspaper. (Of course, Arab opponent of the *Times* have their own passels to prove it is a pro-Zionist newspaper.) It took the *Times* decades to build a reputation that it cannot shake.

The small truth at Columbia is that a handful of Jewish students were made to feel uncomfortable by Arab professors because of their pro-Israel advocacy. A video, *Columbia Unbecoming*, which focused on the charges, besmirched the reputation of a great university virtually overnight. "Vile Words of Hate That Shame a Top University," a headline in the *Daily News* declared. An article in the *Jerusalem Post* quite laughably likened Columbia to a "miniature Gaza Strip."

There was a time when it took decades to ruin a reputation; now it can be done overnight. At the root of the change is the democratization of media. In order to get attention in the past, you had to hammer away for years or get the support of one of the major news outlets. Today that is no longer the case. Everyone with a video camera and a Website can challenge institutions, both great and small.

That is not to say that big media has disappeared. In fact, it has gotten even bigger. Disney owns ABC, Viacom owns CBS — and, of course, their news divisions. But even as these media giants grow, the videographers and bloggers are often setting the agenda. The once-powerful network TV news anchors have bitten the dust while the Internet gossipmeister Matt Drudge and the blogger Wonkette are calling the shots.

There is a variation of this phenomenon in the Jewish world as well. The debate of a decade ago about whether Jewish communities were better served by independent papers or by papers supported by a federation has subsided. Yes, the independent papers still cry foul but, in fact, the independents are a strong and growing presence, both in print and on the Web. They too set the agenda on both the local and the national level. One might well argue that the hip magazine *Heeb*, which is read by my students, has more impact than the *Forward*, which was read by my teachers.

But this evolution from big media business to small independent media outlets is not unlike our Jewish journey from one ancient Israelite community to a flourishing Diaspora. Some say that that diversity of voices has been the secret to our survival.

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