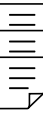


q&a

Sex, Lies & Media Tape

A Q&A With
Media Expert
Walter Brasch

By Susan Marvel Ferrer
Photograph by Paul Emberger



America is in crisis, a crisis of truth vs. image. The private lives of celebrities pass as news stories. Journalists make up stories and call it fact – and sometimes get away with it. Television reporters spend more time on hair and makeup than content. If our reporters won't tell us the truth, who will?

One Bloomsburg University journalism and mass communications professor has a lot to say about it. Media watchdog Walter Brasch, Ph.D., frequently spouts off on these topics with a potent combination of wit and bluntness. With more than 100 regional and national journalism awards to his credit, Brasch has authored 15 books, largely focusing on the blending of historical and cultural issues. His most recent, *America's Unpatriotic Acts: The Federal Government's Violation of Constitutional and Civil Rights*, tackles the Patriot Act and the rights of Americans in post-9/11 society.

His often satirical column, *Wanderings*, is published in more than 35 online zines such as *Counterpunch* and *Smirking Monkey*, as well as in numerous regional newspapers. He's been in academia for 25 years, but ask him what he does for a living, and he still replies, "I'm a journalist." He continues to write about five hard news stories per year in order to stay in touch with his profession.

HBG: In *Sex and the Single Beer Can* (love that title!), you tackle America's preoccupation with beauty and sex. Do you have a theory about why we're so obsessed?

WB: You can ask any 12- or 13-year-old. Part of it's puberty, and some of us never grow out of it. Part of it's advertising. You can't survive without the media, and they emphasize beauty and sex. Businesses tell us what we should look like, dress like, and act like; they're putting out images to sell products. Advertisers find out what a few people like and then [persuade others to imitate it.] Britney Spears wears a pair of low-slung jeans; pretty soon you're seeing girls across America wearing low-slung jeans.

HBG: Is the focus on image hurting our literacy?

WB: [Studies show that] 90 million American adults are functionally illiterate. They can fill out a job application – that's about it. We don't have to read. The MTV generation is used to short, quick shots. Films have become shorter: from two hours to 90 minutes. We've become a society based on the visual. People can't spell. We listen to reporters who aren't using Standard English. Society no longer values the written word. Students going into public relations and broadcasting don't think they have to be good writers; people going into television journalism

don't value in-depth reporting. We're afraid to do long broadcasts or stories, because TV news works on a profit margin. But I say, people will watch if [you give them a good reason].

HBG: Why do cases like the Elizabeth Smart kidnapping and Lacie Peterson murder get massive national media coverage while others receive minimal or no attention?

WB: [Tragedies involving] good-looking white kids get covered. It goes back to our own attitudes. The average reporter is a college graduate from at least a middle-class background. We lose a lot of stories because we as reporters don't see them. Thirteen-year-old black girls and their stories become invisible to us. It shows a lack of objectivity to devote all our resources and reporters to certain events, like having 1,000 reporters cover the Michael Jackson trial or a celebrity scandal. Is Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston's breakup that important? And meanwhile, what aren't we covering?

HBG: Why are we so fixated on celebrities?

WB: The media functions as escapism. Through celebrities, we live vicariously. We know we're never going to be a part of their world, but we like to see all the glamour. However, we don't see that celebrities work 16-hour days, five or six days a week, or that a musician practices 10 hours a day. And then, when a celebrity is arrested or has problems, we feel better [about our own lives]. The public doesn't know how to think critically. We've accepted what our teachers tell us, and now we're afraid to question. Do we really need to spend \$200 on a pair of sneakers? Do we really need to wear the kinds of clothes celebrities wear? Do we believe we'll be like that celebrity if we do?

HBG: Our society's obsession with celebrity and beauty seems to have infiltrated television journalism, too.

WB: It's wrong to put "television" and "journalism" in the same sentence. The network newscasts are good. Shows like *60 Minutes*, *Dateline*, and *20/20* are good. But most television news has become entertainment – not news. There's a lot of sexism in TV news; the older male anchor paired with the younger female co-anchor reinforces the "trophy wife" syndrome. Too often, people want to go into TV journalism because it's as close as they can get to being a celebrity. They worry more about their appearance than substance. Today's news shows feature fluff, which is fun, but when more time is spent on fluff [than real news], we're trivializing ourselves.

HBG: So the line is being blurred between celebrity and television news reporters?

WB: Celebrities are actors. When reporters

begin to think they're celebrities, they've lost everything they should be. When they're giving lectures and people are asking for autographs and taking their pictures, and they start making far more than the average person, they tend to lose objectivity. Of course, a number of very good TV journalists making millions of dollars haven't succumbed. But news reporters appearing in movies and on TV shows – that's a crossover that needs to be addressed. You can't serve two masters. When a reporter uses his or her renown to get a part, it's a conflict of interest.

HBG: What role do ethics play in today's media?

WB: In journalism, everyone has his or her own set of ethics. We don't have an ethical structure, as do doctors and lawyers. Almost every news organization has its own code, but nothing is binding – no state-imposed sanctions exist. Basic issues like conflict of interest are universal. But people are willing to cut corners. Someone who pads a resume [such as Jayson Blair] is likely to cut corners when getting information. Every reporter, no matter what the medium, should be required to take a series of workshops on ethics.

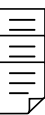
HBG: The Jayson Blair scandal left a bad taste in the collective mouth of readers. Heads rolled at CBS after they aired a forged document regarding President Bush. How can we trust the media?

WB: The case of Blair was caused by blatant arrogance and stupidity on the part of *The New York Times*. Facts weren't verified. Blair lied and damaged the reputation of our profession. Then, he got a book deal! That publishers are willing to promote this kind of thing is disgusting. Most people don't even understand why the media is so important to our society. Most don't understand the importance of freedom of information and freedom of the press. We don't teach First Amendment issues in our schools as well as we should. The founding fathers said that the press should be a watchdog of government and society. Our reporters are better than those anywhere in the world: They operate under extreme pressure, such as low wages and poor working conditions. Many errors occur because there are so few reporters and editors doing the same amount of work that used to be done by so many more.

HBG: What is your take on the failure of the press to ask the White House the hard questions lately? Is this really new?

WB: The White House press corps, although most of them will deny it, has a long history of aggressive reporting on what the president does every minute, but is passive on anything that requires in-depth reporting.

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During Watergate, the White House press not only didn't report the president's activities, but also attacked the few reporters who did. Currently, the press corps failed to investigate presidential and staff lies and half-truths to the point that both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* eventually published statements acknowledging they weren't aggressive enough in questioning and challenging the president. The press corps even refused to come to the public defense of 50-year veteran Washington correspondent Helen Thomas, one of the best ever to wield a notepad, when she was frozen out by the White House for persisting with tough questions.

HBG: Do you think that affected their coverage of the way the Bush administration planted a fraudulent reporter in press conferences?

WB: That's exactly why the White House press corps didn't give the scandal the coverage it should have generated. They are so enamored of their jobs and the inner warmth they get from access to the president and his senior advisors, as well as their own potential gain in garnering better seats in press conferences and on Air Force One that they've become part of government themselves and more willing to shun those who are independent or from the counter-culture media than the president's flunkies.

HBG: Do you believe free speech and freedom of the press are at risk?

WB: Now more than ever. As the press begins to sell out by not aggressively questioning authority – government and big business – it fails in its watchdog role, and thus democracy fails.


HBG: What are you working on now?

WB: I'm finishing a novel that spans three decades, beginning in the 1960s. It tackles social issues in America through the eyes of three [very different] people; it's vignettes of American life with connecting themes throughout. I'm also publishing a collection of *Wanderings* about the Bush administration and the suppression of dissent.

HBG: You are so critical of your own profession; are you not afraid of a backlash?

WB: Journalism is the best profession there is. I wouldn't do anything else. I love being a journalist, but I see our blemishes, and they need to be cured. The public and [those in the] media need to see what the problems are. I praise the press when they deserve praise, but somebody has to criticize from the inside. I always expect a backlash, no matter whom I'm criticizing. You're always going to get people who complain when you look into their practices. The media is thin-skinned; they think they can [put everyone else under scrutiny], but they don't like to be criticized themselves.


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