

IF THERE IS ANYTHING VIRTUOUS, LOVELY, OR  
OF GOOD REPORT OR PRAISEWORTHY...

*Ronald Bennett—Department of Communication*

Thomas Jefferson once said, “...were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”<sup>1</sup> Jefferson’s comment underscores the importance of the First Amendment to the Constitution, the principle that allows us as Americans to enjoy the freedoms we have today.

The First Amendment states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Notice that our founding fathers mentioned religion and press—two principles I will address in this lecture—in nearly the same breath. This juxtaposition was not an accident. These inspired men recognized the importance of each and the necessity of each for a happy, fulfilled life.

The First Amendment was written because, at America’s inception, citizens demanded a guarantee of their basic freedoms. Our blueprint for personal freedom and the hallmark of an open society, the First Amendment protects freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, and petition.

Without the First Amendment, religious minorities could be openly persecuted. The government might well establish a national religion, which in turn would have made the restoration of the true Church in the latter days impossible, at least in our American society. Furthermore, without the First Amendment, protesters could be silenced. What is happening to Tibet under the repressive Chinese government could be a reality in America. The press could not criticize the government, and citizens could not mobilize for social change.

I believe in the First Amendment. A free press is a vital part of a free government and is a great blessing, something that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of students died for at the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 in Beijing, China. What we take for granted is only a distant dream for many dictatorship-led countries in the world. It distinguishes us from repressive, dictatorial countries.

In my mind, a free press in America is analogous to free agency in Heavenly Father’s plan of salvation. Both have an alternative: rather than a free press, a government can choose a government-censored, totally

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controlled press, and rather than free agency, Satan offered a plan of total control, wherein not one soul would be lost in this earthly test of mortality. I am happy that our Savior's plan for free agency prevailed. I am also happy that our founding fathers chose a free press. Of course, both free press and free agency are risky. Campus bishops can tell you of the heartbreak students feel when they use their agency to make choices contrary to the moral, wholesome choices our Heavenly Father wants us to choose. And all of us feel disappointed when the media uses the First Amendment as an excuse to promulgate impure, disgusting material.

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For example, consider the headline that ran last fall in the *Christian Science Monitor* newspaper:

This Fall's TV Season Is Rated X: Shows are diving beneath bedroom sheets as porn goes mainstream and programs try to compete for attention.<sup>2</sup>

This headline announced what many faithful members of our Church already suspected: mainstream media, never a bastion of wholesomeness or righteous example, was sinking to a new low. Gone were the days of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*. In their place, we now look forward to *Lipstick Jungle*, *Californication*, and spin-offs from *Sex in the City* such as *Cashmere Mafia* and *Big Shots*.

Could our viewing choices be much more bleak? Whatever happened to moral decency, Christian values, and the admonition of Paul, as stated in the 13th Article of Faith: "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things?"

Perhaps the prophet Isaiah had our time period in mind when he said, "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20).

As a communication instructor and current Communication Department chairman at BYU-Idaho, I, along with my associates, am expected to prepare 1,216 young people who have declared communication as their major for careers in mass media and other communication fields. I delight in this task. I teach the ideals of the First Amendment. As I look into the students' eyes each day, I see idealism, honesty, morality, spirituality, and just plain decency. I think to myself, with such wonderful young people entering mass media careers, the outlook for America's future and the safeguarding of the ideals of First Amendment are excellent. At the same time, I recognize we are releasing these upstanding, righteous young men and women into a calloused and skeptical profession that doesn't always look for the virtuous or the praiseworthy.

Thus, the question of exactly how does my scholarship inform my theology becomes timely and relevant. It is not a question I take lightly. Long before I was asked to lecture and write about this topic, I pondered its significance.

In fact, on one occasion I was able to visit for a few moments with President Henry B. Eyring, now of the First Presidency but then an apostle and former president of Ricks College. At the time, I was the faculty adviser for the *Scroll*. He had memories of dealing with the *Scroll* when he was president of Ricks College. He said some of those memories were good, but others were not. During that discussion, I asked the following question:

As a mass media instructor, I believe in and teach the ideals of the First Amendment, which ensures a free press in a free society. This concept values investigative reporting, exposes scandals, and shuns censorship. Yet I am also a good member of the Church and a strong supporter of the Honor Code and repentance. These two ideals sometimes clash. Do you have any advice on how I can be faithful to both ideals?

Elder Eyring answered after just a short pause: “No, I don’t. But I know there is a way, and if you prayerfully seek an answer to that question, it will come.”

I have tried to follow that advice. While I haven’t had any great manifestations revealed to me, I have gained two important insights. These insights not only help answer the question I posed to Elder Eyring, but also help explain how my scholarship informs my theology:

First, the relationship between the Church and the mass media is one of symbiosis and—for better or for worse—furtheres our Heavenly Father’s plan of salvation.

Second, in the realm of mass media, when the environment is the least conducive to the Spirit, the Spirit is needed most.

#### SYMBIOSIS BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE MEDIA

I would like to share a few thoughts about these insights with you here today. Let’s discuss the first point: the symbiotic relationship between the mass media and the Church.

When God deemed it necessary to test the faith of his servant Abraham, he gave him simple instructions. He said, “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Genesis 22:2).

I find the account of this incident, as related in Genesis, remarkably succinct and cryptic. In my own mind, I suspect more was said, but that detail was left out of the Biblical account we read today in the Old Testament. As you may remember, Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, took two other young men with him, and surreptitiously departed for Mount Moriah. It appears he told no one

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of the task he faced, not his wife Sarah, not the other young men, and not even Isaac. In fact, when they reached the site for the sacrifice, Isaac said, “Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering” (Genesis 22:7, 8).

Two things are obvious as we read this account. First, God was asking Abraham to pass a horrendously difficult test to prove his faith. Second, God gave explicit instructions to Abraham to keep this incident secret. One Biblical scholar suggests that God’s instructions to Abraham can be summarized in four words: *Above all, no journalists!*<sup>3</sup>

Clearly this was not to be an item for the six o’clock news. It was not to be observed by any third party. There was no Dan Rather, no Larry King Live, and no Woodward and Bernstein to investigate. No news conference was held later to explain the implications of the incident. No questions were asked. No public relations worker put spin on the event. It was a private test between Abraham and the Lord.

One gets the impression that Abraham’s adhering to the terms of secrecy was as important as his being willing to sacrifice Isaac. Both were integral components of the test.

The irony, of course, is that reporting of the incident did take place. We have all read the report in the Old Testament. We know an angel of the Lord intervened in the sacrifice, and that Abraham passed the test. We even know the reward God gave to Abraham for his faith: “I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Genesis 22:17-18).

Exactly who did the reporting and where he got the detailed information is not clear. But the faith-promoting incident is an integral part of Christianity, Judaism, and even Islam. It seems reasonable to assume, then, that just as God swore Abraham to secrecy at the time of the test, he knew that a journalist would eventually be needed to inform later generations of the incident. As with modern-day journalists, the reporter used narrative, description, and even direct quotes to tell the story.

Thus the paradox emerges: journalists and media practitioners—it is sometimes difficult to live with them but always impossible to live without them. God ordered absolute secrecy in Abraham’s mission to sacrifice Isaac, yet he was dependent on an accurate report of the event in the records of the Church.

This ironic interdependence is evident not only in the Old Testament account of Abraham but also in the New Testament and other scriptures. When Jesus cleansed the leper, Jesus immediately “charged him to tell no man” (Luke 5:14). After the miracle of feeding five thousand with

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five loaves and two fishes, Peter correctly identified Jesus as “the Christ of God.” We are told in Luke 9:21 that Jesus then “straitly charged them, and commanded them to tell no man that thing.” In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus put his finger into the ear of a deaf person, restoring his hearing, and touched his tongue, curing a speech impediment. After this miracle, he “charged them [those who witnessed the miracle] that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it” (Mark 7:36). When the Savior raised Jairus’ daughter from death, the scriptures tell us that “her parents were astonished: but he charged them that they should tell no man what was done” (Luke 8:56).

In each of these cases, someone was needed to tell the story, despite the fact that the stated or implied directive was that it should be kept secret. A reporter was needed to get the story right and present it to all humankind for their learning and edification. A logical conclusion is that such was the plan of the Lord. In fact, we are told in the Book of Mormon, “All things secret shall be revealed” (Mosiah 8:17).

In more modern days, Mormonism’s relationship with the press has been long and often painful. When the Church was founded, nearby publications wrote mocking criticisms of Joseph Smith. Even so, the notice taken by the press made Joseph Smith “a minor national figure,” according to one historian. A newspaper in Rochester, N.Y., ran a headline that said “Blasphemy” even before the Book of Mormon was published.<sup>4</sup> As the faith spread westward, the Ohio press was similarly critical. But one publication, the *Painesville Telegraph*, writing about the Book of Mormon, noted, “Time will discover in it either something of vast importance to man, or a deep laid plan to deceive man.”<sup>5</sup>

Not all of the press was unkind. Writing in the *New York Tribune*, James Gordon Bennett discounted attacks on the Church by dissenters.<sup>6</sup> The *New York Herald* also published excerpts of the Book of Abraham from the Pearl of Great Price. Bennett, especially, wrote a lot about the Mormons. He wrote in detail about Joseph Smith’s platform for the presidency. He wrote about Smith’s death by the mob after his arrest. During his life, Joseph was so grateful for the coverage that he made Bennett an honorary general of the Nauvoo Legion.

In addition to spreading the prophet Joseph’s name, for good and for evil, the press was a catalyst in defining church doctrine. Chicago editor John Wentworth requested that the prophet explain what the Mormon Church believes. This request led to the writing of The Articles of Faith by the prophet Joseph.

In the end, Joseph’s up and down relationship with the press ended his life. Nearly all members of our Church are familiar with the story of Joseph Smith being arrested and held in the jail at Carthage. They know

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about the mob members with painted faces storming the jail, killing the prophet and his brother Hyrum, wounding John Taylor, and, finally, thinking they had put an end to Mormonism. But many do not know exactly why the prophet was arrested.

In 1844, dissenters published the *Nauvoo Expositor* to criticize, mock, and threaten Joseph Smith. As the Mormons already faced an extermination order, the prophet sensed the inherent danger of such publicity and urged the City Council to destroy the press as a public nuisance. The City Council responded, ordering the town marshal to do so, and he did.

The destruction of the *Expositor* remains one of the controversial episodes in the history of the Church. Many, including Illinois Governor Thomas Ford, perceived the destruction as a violation of the First Amendment. He ordered the prophet to be arrested.

Even so, one thing is clear: the destruction of the press was the spark that lit the fuse that led ultimately to the death of Joseph Smith in 1844 and the removal of the Mormons from Illinois to Utah two years later.

The media, in this example of early church history, enabled the plan of salvation in several ways.

First, and most obviously, the media were catalysts in informing the world that the gospel had been restored through the prophet Joseph Smith. Granted, the Joseph Smith story was not always presented accurately or fairly, but truth eventually overcomes slander, lies, and inaccuracies. Without any attention from the mass media, the spreading of this latter-day restoration might have eventually happened, but the process would have been long. With the true Church and its authority missing from the earth, the true Church needed to be established sooner rather than later.

Secondly, the media was a catalyst in the martyrdom of the prophet Joseph. Many church leaders have taught that this martyrdom was necessary. Joseph F. Smith, the sixth president of the Church, taught:

What does the martyrdom [of Joseph and Hyrum Smith] teach us? The great lesson that “where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator” (Hebrews 9:16) to make it of force. Moreover, that the blood of martyrs is indeed the seed of the Church.<sup>7</sup>

Brigham Young taught:

Though [Joseph Smith] had prophesied that he would not live to be 40 years of age, yet we all cherished hopes that that would be a false prophesy, and we should keep him forever with us. We thought our faith would outreach it, but we were mistaken—he at last fell a martyr to his religion. I said it is all right; now the testimony is in full force; he has sealed it with his blood.<sup>8</sup>

Wilford Woodruff testified:

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It was required of [Joseph Smith], as the head of this dispensation, that he should seal his testimony with his blood, and go hence to the spirit world, holding the keys of this dispensation, to open up the mission that is now being performed by way of preaching the gospel to the spirits in prison.<sup>9</sup>

Our recently deceased President Hinckley, perhaps the most media-savvy president in modern history, has recognized the role that the media have played and their relationship to our growing Church. He said:

I am pleased to report that the Church is better known and better understood. Generally the media have been kind to us. They have dealt honestly with us. There are exceptions, of course, and this we regret. The old images of the past continue to be dragged forth by those who deal in sensationalism and exploitation. But television images fade almost immediately with the tremendous amount of information given. Yesterday's newspaper is soon forgotten. Meanwhile the Church goes forward on its appointed mission in the direction of its appointed destiny.<sup>10</sup>

President Hinckley is a good example of how the symbiosis between the Church and media also has a positive aspect. As the quote above indicates, he was often disappointed with the negativity of the media, but he recognized its potential good as well. He made an appearance on *60 Minutes*, a program that gained a reputation through confrontation and controversy. He also appeared on *Larry King Live*. He did so without fear, answering the tough questions directly and honestly. His pure testimony was obvious. He made the doctrines and practices of the LDS Church open to the world. He complimented the world for the goodness that their religions offered, and he invited them to learn more about his.

Mike Wallace, who did the *60 Minutes* interview, said it was President Hinckley's "candor, his willingness to entertain any question, no matter how difficult or, perhaps, embarrassing," that charmed Wallace. "He was just absolutely open with me," Wallace said. "It became quite clear that there was a great deal in the Mormon religion that I genuinely admired."<sup>11</sup>

In summary of my first insight, then, reporting and media were necessary to spread stories of faith-promoting Old and New Testament events, such as the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 and Jesus' miracles in the New Testament. And in early church history, the media, as menacing as they sometimes were, served as catalysts in the spreading of the gospel. Furthermore, the media played a significant role in the prophet Joseph Smith "sealing his testimony with his blood," a necessary part of the re-establishing of the true Church on earth in these latter days. And on the positive side, the symbiosis has allowed President Hinckley and others to enlighten and eliminate misconceptions about the Church, to improve the Church's image to America and the world.

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WHEN ATMOSPHERE IS LEAST CONDUCTIVE, THE SPIRIT IS MOST NEEDED

All of which brings me to my second insight: In the realm of mass media, when the environment is the least conducive to the Spirit, it is needed the most. Again quoting from President Hinckley in his book *Faith: The Essence of True Religion*:

I try to read two or three newspapers a day. I sometimes read the columnists. I occasionally listen to commentators on television and radio. The writers are brilliant. They are men of incisive language, scintillating in expression. They are masters of the written word. But for the most part I find their attitude is negative. Regardless of whom they write about, they seem to look for failings and weaknesses. They are constantly criticizing, seldom praising.<sup>12</sup>

An implication of this statement is that while the First Amendment and free press in America produce talented, capable writers and commentators, America's newspaper writers and broadcasters work in a negative environment with a systemic problem. The industry is lacking in ethics and moral decency. Many of its practitioners lack integrity and Christian values.

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If you haven't noticed the negativity President Hinckley was referring to, consider the recent treatment Mitt Romney, a presidential candidate and member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, received from some members of the media.

First, there was the incident when the *New York Times Magazine* reporter elicited the question "Don't Mormons...believe that Jesus and the Devil are brothers?" from another presidential candidate, Mike Huckabee.<sup>13</sup> While Huckabee maintained it was an innocent question, to Mormons, Huckabee's eyebrow-raising question represented not only a gross distortion of our Church's beliefs but also a carefully calculated move by a Christian politician who surely knew better. Yet, the comment drew a media feeding frenzy; very few even considered whether printing the comment was fair or reasonable.

Another example came in the Republican debates when NBC's Brian Williams asked Governor Romney: "Governor, we've got an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll coming out in the morning that says, among a lot of other things, 44 percent of respondents say a Mormon president would have a difficult time uniting the country." The question seemed provocative in nature. One wondered if Williams would have asked the question of Hillary Clinton, "44 percent of the respondents say a woman would have a difficult time..." or of Barack Obama, "44 percent of the respondents say a black man would have a difficult time..." Furthermore, a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll in January, that showed that 45

percent of Americans have concerns about an evangelical Christian as president, was downplayed by the media.<sup>14</sup>

And lest we think that media negativity is restricted to just members of the LDS Church, remember that highly experienced candidates like Duncan Hunter, Chris Dodd, Joe Biden, and Bill Richardson were labeled “bottom-tier” by the media before a single vote was cast. Yet a freshman senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, with one year of experience, was inserted into the “top-tier” and proclaimed a worthy opponent of Hillary Clinton.

Other examples of media negativity and inappropriate action abound. During the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, when the Olympic Center was bombed, the media labeled security guard Richard Jewell as the lone bomber. He carried this stigma with him until he died of natural causes in August of 2007, despite Eric Robert Rudolph confessing to the crime in April 2005. In other instances, the media hurt the lives of honorable people through innuendo, half-truths, and unfair and unbalanced stories. Almost anyone who reads newspapers or watches TV news regularly can cite instances of such negative treatment.

Such negativity and callous indifference to harming reputations and irreparably damaging lives is alarming in itself, but the systemic problem runs even deeper. A growing number of media practitioners, particularly younger ones, are ignoring a more basic journalistic principle and gospel principle. That principle is truth.

Jesus told his apostles in John 14:6: “I am the way, the *truth*, and the life,” placing truth in an eternal perspective. We are exhorted in John 8:32 to “know the *truth*, and the *truth* shall set you free.” We also learn in Psalms 117:2 that the “*truth* of the Lord endureth forever.” Furthermore, in answer to Pilate’s query, “Art thou a king?” the Savior said, “To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the *truth*. Every one that is of the *truth* heareth my voice” (John 18:37).

We get further insights into the nature of truth in the Doctrine and Covenants. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36 tells us “the glory of God is intelligence, or...light and *truth*” (emphasis added in each case of italic print). There are hundreds of references to truth in the scriptures. Clearly it is a keystone to Christian belief, or nearly any other religious belief for that matter.

Yet there is a disturbing trend among members of the media to ignore this important principle. To exemplify this problem, I offer the stories of three promising young journalists who had problems telling the truth.

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### *Janet Cooke*

In 1980, a journalist for the *Washington Post*, Janet Cooke, wrote a gripping profile of the life of an eight-year-old heroin addict, entitled “Jimmy’s World,” a heart-wrenching story of a young black boy.<sup>15</sup>

The story engendered much sympathy among readers. They pressured city officials to find Jimmy and help him. Washington D.C. mayor Marion Barry and other city officials organized an all-out police search for the boy. This search was unsuccessful. The police, frustrated by their inability to find Jimmy, publicly proclaimed that there was no Jimmy. They said the story was fabricated.

Despite growing signs of problems, the *Post* defended the veracity of the story, and assistant managing editor Bob Woodward nominated the story for the Pulitzer Prize. Cooke was named winner of the prize on April 13, 1981. At first Janet Cooke held to her story that Jimmy was real. Her editors asked her to take them to Jimmy’s home. She agreed, but when they started driving, she said she couldn’t remember exactly which house was his. Her story began to unwind.

Two days after the Pulitzer Prize had been awarded, Janet Cooke, under great pressure, tearfully admitted that Jimmy didn’t exist, that he was the composite of a number of children she had interviewed. The *Washington Post* held a press conference and admitted that the story was fraudulent. Janet Cooke lost her Pulitzer Prize. She also lost her job and her reputation.

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### *Stephen Glass*

In 1997, 25-year-old Stephen Glass rose quickly to national prominence in the competitive world of political journalism. He was a rising star at *The New Republic* and wrote dozens of high-profile articles, for a number of national publications, in which he made things up.

*The New Republic* received complaints from those who had been the targets of the articles that Glass’s articles were misleading, inaccurate, distorted, totally false, and sometimes plagiarized. However, Glass always had notes, witnesses, and other proof that the stories were accurate and original.

Glass’s writing soon received accolades and attention from readers. They were always fascinating to read and seemed authoritative. But the accusations continued that Glass’s articles were inaccurate, sometimes even fabricated and that some contained plagiarism. In truth, the accusations were right. He made up people, places, and events. He made up organizations and quotations. Sometimes, he made up entire articles. And to back it all up, he created fake notes, fake voicemails, fake faxes, even a fake website—whatever it took to deceive his editors, not to mention hundreds of thousands of readers.

Glass was finally caught in May 1998. The story that triggered his downfall appeared in the May 18, 1998, issue of *The New Republic*. It was called “Hack Heaven.”<sup>16</sup> It concerned a supposed 15-year-old computer hacker. The story claimed Glass had been hired to work for a large company as an information security consultant. Like several of Stephen Glass’s previous stories, “Hack Heaven” depicted events that were vivid and enticing to readers. They were told from a first-person perspective, implying Glass was there as the action took place.

Soon after “Hack Heaven” was published, an online publication *Forbes.com* reporter Adam Penenberg read the article and did his own research. His research revealed that none of the people in the story even existed. Furthermore, he discovered that Jukt Micronics didn’t exist. Despite an elaborate cover-up attempt, Glass was eventually caught and fired. After his departure, *The New Republic* verified that at least 27 of his 41 articles contained fabricated material. Glass later told *60 Minutes* that he lied for esteem.<sup>17</sup>

### *Jayson Blair*

About the same time as Stephen Glass’s dishonesty was being discovered, a young intern at the *New York Times* was quickly building a reputation for his writings. His name was Jayson Blair. After his internship, he was promoted to the national desk. Blair wrote over 600 articles for the *Times*, including coverage of the beltway sniper attacks and coverage of the Iraq war.

Unfortunately, like Stephen Glass, Blair ignored the principle of truth. Perhaps it is more accurate to say he sacrificed the principle of truth to jumpstart his own career. He fabricated comments. He concocted scenes. He lifted material from other newspapers and wire services. He selected details from photographs to create the impression he had been somewhere or seen someone when he had not.

On April 28, 2003, Blair received a call from *Times* national editor Jim Roberts, asking him about similarities between a story he had written two days earlier and one written by a *San Antonio Express-News* reporter, Macarena Hernandez, 10 days earlier.

Blair’s plagiarism of Hernandez’s article was so blatant that it led to further pressing by *Times* editors, who asked him to prove that he had, in fact, traveled to Texas and interviewed the woman in his article. After being unable to provide proof, Blair resigned from the *Times* on May 2, 2003.<sup>18</sup> Following the resignation, a full investigation of all of Blair’s articles began.

A committee discovered that 36 of the 73 national news stories Blair had written in recent months were suspect, ranging from fabrications

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to copying stories from other sources. Several of Blair’s editors then resigned as well.

#### ETHICAL MEDIA AND STUDENTS AT BYU–IDAHO

These three examples are worrisome. Are they symptomatic of an ethically bankrupt younger generation of media practitioners, or are they anomalies? The first explanation seems possible, judging from the number of problems writing instructors are having in high schools, colleges, and universities nationwide with students buying term papers online or simply downloading from Google. Students are using websites such as Essayfinder.com to buy term papers for a nominal fee. To counter, then, universities have to purchase software such as Turnitin to catch the students who, like the three examples given above, want a shortcut to great writing.

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But just as I believe the majority of God’s children on earth make correct choices under our Savior’s free agency plan, I also believe the majority of the media practitioners are honest people, advocates of the First Amendment who sincerely believe their work helps make America a better place. They strive for accuracy. They have compassion for those they write about. In many respects the mainstream media never have been fairer and more professional. They employ the best-educated journalists in history. They hold lengthy, introspective conversations in-house about how stories should be handled and played.

Even so, there can be no doubt that there is a mounting hostility toward the news media. Each year Gallup asks: “In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media—such as newspapers, TV, and radio—when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?” In 1974, 69 percent answered “a great deal” or “a fair amount.” In 2004, fewer than half—44 percent—responded favorably to the same question.<sup>19</sup>

Researchers at the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press also report a shocking decline in media credibility. They report that in 1985, 16 percent said they believe almost nothing of what they read in daily newspapers. In 2004, the number of disbelievers had grown to 45 percent.<sup>20</sup>

So where does all this leave those of us who are strong proponents of the First Amendment, who love the youth of the Church and who are charged with the task of preparing them to play influential roles as tomorrow’s media leaders?

Here are a few specific ways we can train the young people of today to deal with media of tomorrow, not only as practitioners but also as consumers.

1. Help them understand the blessing of the First Amendment. The First Amendment is the cornerstone of our free society, an integral part of why the United States is the greatest nation on earth. Like free agency, free speech allows us to grow intellectually, spiritually, and academically. It is a powerful concept that can be used for good or bad. We must use it for good.
2. Help them develop a tolerance for the viewpoints of other religions and other political parties. As the 11th Article of Faith says, “We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.” We must also recognize that peaceful protests of war, or even peaceful protests in a public area near the opening of one our sacred temples, is a constitutional right. Yes, and we may read an opinion on the editorial page of a newspaper that we vehemently disagree with, that makes our blood boil, but we should remember later in our prayers to thank our Heavenly Father for allowing us to live in a country with guaranteed free speech.
3. Teach them the importance of accuracy and academic honesty. We do students no favor by winking at inaccuracies or granting a degree of “poetic license” in their work. We do them no favor if we tolerate plagiarized work. In my media writing classes, one misspelled name drops the grade on the paper one full grade. I have a friend at Indiana University who fails students from the course on their third misspelled name of the semester. If students learn that they can download a paper off the Internet or take substantial parts of others’ writings and pass them off as their own, they are well on their way to becoming the next Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass, or Jayson Blair.
4. Encourage them to be proactive in the causes of accuracy, truth, and media decency. Elder Russell M. Ballard encouraged the graduates of BYU–Idaho on April 11, 2008, to use the Internet proactively to correct misconceptions about the Church and to hold the media accountable for accuracy.<sup>21</sup> Most online media outlets have a space reserved where readers can react and give feedback.

My scholarship and my theology are inextricable. I cannot read church history, feast on the scriptures, learn in Sunday School, speak in sacrament meeting, or teach my children and grandchildren in family home evening without being influenced by my scholarship, my deep appreciation for free press and the First Amendment. Conversely, I cannot use my scholarship, my knowledge of media writing and the function of the media in a free society, without my theology. That is, I cannot begin to prepare students for careers in television, newspaper,

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**We must all pray  
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students after they  
leave.**

magazine, public relations, media advertising, or the literally hundreds of other communication-related careers without doing my best to teach these skills in an integrity-based, morally sound, spiritual environment. If we don't produce future media practitioners who are concerned about fairness and balance and who look for basic human goodness and charity, rather than having a fixation with the negative—or worse yet, who are willing to fabricate stories—then who will?

It is a daunting challenge. But the challenge is not unique to the Communication Department. Many students will leave BYU–Idaho and enter worldly occupations. We must all pray that our teachings and the environment of spirituality, decency, and charity will stay with them after they leave. ∞

## NOTES

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