

Charles Gibson's Fred Friendly Speech  
June 10, 2008

At the risk of appearing ungrateful and perhaps even a bit arrogant, let me say that I'm not much on awards. Working in this profession, frankly, is reward enough. But this one is special. For this one honors Fred Friendly.

I never met him. I heard descriptions of his imposing size and presence. I've seen pictures. And Ruth, will all due respect, he was no George Clooney.

Nonetheless he was one of my heroes.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to pursue a career in television news. My mom and dad were news junkies. The conversation at the dinner table each night was the front page of the Washington Post and the Times Herald – our local paper.

Since I think we spend our lives trying to prove to our parents that we're worth a darn, I couldn't think of anything that would impress my mother and father more than being a reporter.

Dad had one failing. He didn't see the point of television news – until my eleventh birthday – March 9, 1954. Those of you who are very old might remember that Edward R. Murrow on that evening did a documentary on Senator Joe McCarthy. My father was appalled by McCarthy, and when he heard about the Murrow program, he went out and bought a television – a 12 inch Philco.

And as soon as I began watching television news a few years later, and sensed my parents' enthusiasm for this still-new medium, I wanted to work in it.

When I was an-about-to-graduate-maybe senior at Princeton, I went to the Firestone Library and checked the Broadcasting Magazine Yearbook. In it were listed the approximately 100 correspondents for CBS, NBC, and ABC and I remember thinking, 'this will be something of a quixotic journey' – I'm going for one job in a universe of 100.

Good luck.

Then as a newly minted intern at Channel 7 in Washington, DC, making the princely sum of \$325 a month, Fred Friendly wrote a book telling me that network news was going to hell.

You can imagine the disappointment of this idealistic, young, fledgling network correspondent. I hadn't gotten there yet, and already one of the pillars of the industry was telling me not to bother.

The book was “Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control.” It cost \$6.95. I bought it in hardback – and I learned Fred Friendly had been behind that McCarthy documentary that was the genesis a) of our getting a TV and b) my resulting interest in pursuing television news as a profession. It cautioned me, it did not discourage me.

The book was a bestseller. It is often quoted. Its criticisms and admonitions – in many instances – are still applicable to the business. But the part of it that affected me most profoundly, and resonated with me still is the frontispiece of that book.

Fred wrote “I’d know, that’s who’d know.”

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I think that is not only a profound caution and watchword for journalists, it applies to virtually all aspects of life.

On the night before the freshman class at Princeton matriculates and begins classes, an old foggy graduate is invited back to give a lecture on the honor code. Each freshman, as a condition of matriculation, is required to sign a pledge that he or she will abide by the very strict provisions of that code. This got-his-diploma-by-the-Grace-of-God alumnus was invited back a few years ago to give the lecture, and I told the incoming freshman that if you do cheat, if you do plagiarize, chances are you won’t get caught. But the great deterrent ought to be – “I’d know, that’s who’d know.” You’ll know you’ve destroyed four years of work – you will always know you’ve gotten that diploma under false pretenses.

And as Fred knew, so it is in this profession.

A profession built on trust.

It is all we have to sell, really, our own integrity, and a bond with readers or viewers that we bring them the truth as best we can discern it; the story as best we can learn it.

And a primary concern ought to be doing that in as objective a manner as possible.

What I just said – much of what Fred Friendly wrote in “Due to Circumstances” about the integrity of our profession ought to go without saying.

But television news in recent years seems to have embraced a cult of personality. Who can be most strident, who can be most outrageous, who can be most opinionated. There’s nothing wrong with commentary on a television newscast, but label it as such. And separate your commentators from your reporters and anchors.

But as we co-mingle reporting and commentary, we muddy the distinction, and eventually our viewers or readers don’t know what to believe.

It may work short term—it may get a network or a station – ratings or ‘buzz’ temporarily – but it undermines the product and ultimately the trust of viewers long term.

We live in an age of 24 hour cable news, internet information being posted 24/7, bloggers spouting opinion everywhere you turn. I am not unaware that the way to get noticed amid the cacophony of competing voices is to be outrageous or to be so opinionated that those of like mind will gravitate to your voice.

As the audience continues to fractionalize, you get your fraction by trying to stand out from the crowd. But after awhile it becomes noise. After awhile what is at first distinctive, is no longer distinctive. After awhile the viewers or reader has seen your act, and will move on.

This business, I believe, is now and always has been very simply about the news. Honor that dictum and you can endure.

Those of us who anchor or represent our networks in a studio are unimportant. But what will bring you, a loyal long-term audience, is a sense on the part of that audience that you’ve given them the best half-hour summary of the day’s news you could possibly produce. It is the reporters who matter. It is the news that matters. All I try to do each night is say good evening and then get out of their way.

Would Fred approve of where we are in network television right now? Probably not.

The documentary form—of which he was a master—is largely squeezed out of network schedules—there is no regularly scheduled programming like CBS Reports now—but not every single one of Fred’s programs was a Harvest of Shame—and every few weeks there is a truly excellent documentary that shows up on one network or another. I’m pleased to say that my network does a number of them every year at substantial cost to the bottom line. It is just that with so many channels and so many outlets, the uniqueness of the documentary format is not perhaps what it was in Fred’s heyday.

Would Fred still agitate to get Congressional hearings on the Iraq war on his network—as he did to get Vietnam hearings broadcast? Probably.

But here the cables really do produce a public service and while Congressional hearings have lost a bit of their currency as the Congress becomes more and more politicized—the important events are there for the audience to see.

And how would he feel about the amount of news on the airwaves? Well, I’d love to talk to him about it. For all in all, I think we do a pretty decent job—even with the commercial pressures against which he railed. News from Myanmar, Zimbabwe, and Darfur may not be ratings-grabbers or sexy, but we cover it.

Which brings me to the current controversy over whether the media was responsible enough in the lead up to the Iraq war.

I'd love to discuss it with him.

Is it our role to debate an administration heading the country for war? Or is it simply to ask the questions—and press government officials to prove their case? I believe it is the latter—he might argue the former. But we're not elected. And I think the questions were asked. And asked often. I think what we see now is a bit of public remorse that they did not listen—or hear, the inadequacy of the answers.

So where do we stand? Well, the commercial pressures are still there just as he wrote about forty years ago. They've increased some, but it's not as dire as I think he forecast. We compete to draw an audience to be sure, but commercial pressures don't keep us from covering the news, and in forty years in this business, I have almost never seen an instance when I thought corporate or commercial interests stood in the way of our covering the news.

In this day and age when having a computer mouse in your hand makes everyone a citizen journalist who can pursue the news that interests them, there is still a realization, I believe, that the much maligned 'mainstream media' has a vital role to play. It is still important to have some with forty years experience putting together the front page of the Miami Herald or the Minneapolis Star Tribune or—ABC's World News. People can take the mouse and look for the news they want to know, but the traditional organs are there for the news they need to know.

So while you wrote a book, Fred, that might have warned me off the profession, I barged ahead anyway, and am so glad I did. And I stuck around long enough—at the sufferance of an audience that has always been very kind to me—to pick up an award in your name. I hope you are okay with the choice.

A couple of asides – I loved the Fred Friendly seminars—when he conceived of them and then brought them to public television. I loved watching the best of minds wrestling with hypothetical situations posed by expert moderators—and they always taught me a great deal.

John McCain and Barack Obama have agreed in principle to a series of town meetings—I'd love for one of them to be a Fred Friendly seminar. Let Arthur Miller of the NYU Law School posit a situation with terrorism at its center, juxtaposing individual rights with the need for national security. I would venture to say it might be a useful way to judge the candidates side by side.

And just one more comment. I would be remiss if I didn't mention that I'm aware there is a disagreement on the Quinnipiac campus over the independence of the school newspaper. Some of the students solicited me to take sides in that dispute. I don't pretend to know enough about it to do so—though I have read coverage of the situation in the New York Times and the Yale Daily. The college certainly has a legitimate right of oversight for a paper it finances, but at the same time, to train young journalists properly,

they must have the freedom to publish what they learn when they learn it. I sincerely hope the two sides can reach accommodation—and who knows—maybe a young journalist now working on the Quinnipiac Chronicle will someday receive the Fred Friendly Award.

In the meantime, I am very grateful to have it.

Long after I am retired, and no one much remembers this day, “I’ll know, that’s who’ll know” that I received the Fred Friendly Award. And it will make me smile.