

# Comments on "Customers or Citizens?"

**James K. Batten**, *chairman and chief executive officer, Knight-Ridder, Inc.*

In general, Ferrel Guillory has done a thoughtful and balanced job. These *are* interesting and important issues, and they affect the role the press will play in our democratic society over the next decade or two.

I had not read Tony Lewis' lecture at Chapel Hill last year. But from Guillory's portrayal, it does not represent a "contrasting vision" of newspapering from my own. As near as I can tell, Lewis and I were talking about somewhat different topics, even though they intersect at points along the way.

I do question the implications of Guillory's lead, in which he suggests that readers and potential readers are either customers or citizens. In fact, of course, they are both. If newspapers treat them as "citizens" only, the danger is we lose them as customers. If newspapers treat them as "customers" only, the danger is that the moral purpose will go out of newspapering.

Our challenge these days, it seems to me, is to avoid either of those results. We need to do more than one thing at a time. Good newspapers have always managed that.

In this dialogue, no one, as far as I know, is suggesting that newspapers relinquish their watchdog role. The trick is to play the role effectively—and in a context that encourages strong readership of public affairs reporting. It is not enough to print our stories about government and politics and go away feeling righteous, if our coverage doesn't really *reach* the people we're trying to serve.

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**Rich Oppel**, *editor,*  
*The Charlotte Observer*

I don't think Tony Lewis and Jim Batten are in conflict at all in what they say, certainly not in the notion of a difference in viewing people who buy newspapers as citizens (Lewis) versus customers (Batten).

Even Guillory notes Batten's call for newspapers to become active in voter registration efforts, and I can think of no situation in which a newspaper would address a reader more squarely as a citizen than in informing him and encouraging him to register to vote—and then to vote.

As for Lewis's point about the press going soft on the presidency, we and other Knight-Ridder newspapers are represented on the White House beat by Owen Ullman (who I hired into journalism in Detroit), and who I think provides solid, skeptical coverage of the presidency.

I understand how Guillory might have seen, on the surface, that our switch of the Dan Quayle story between the first and final editions on the Dan Quayle story last April [1989] was a diminution of a serious angle. The early version focused on busing ("Vice President Calls Busing a Failure"), the later version seemed softer ("Visit Leaves Little Time For Relaxation").

Yet, if you read the two versions [see pages 35-37], I think you will see that the first piece was a relatively shallow, early account of Quayle's boiler-plate remarks on busing. One more Republican knocking busing. A no-newser. I won't hold up the second version as a paragon of weightiness, but the article told what Quayle did and said—and, frankly, he didn't do or say much.

In any event, I think Guillory writes wisely about an important issue that concerns many of us today, how to hold to our traditional values (at least those worth holding to) and yet respond to the reader's interests. It does become a matter of giving up some of the editor's power to the reader. If we respect the American voter's ability to choose leaders, I think we also can also respect the American newspaper reader's ability to participate in the decision about what goes into his newspaper.

This is not easy. Some of those same people Guillory aptly describes as having gone into journalism because of their interest in public affairs today are responsible for seeing that newspapers stay alive as an institution—and that means selling them, one by one. I'm confident we can, and not abandon the historic role of the American newspaper.

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# A Tale of Two Stories

The following stories appeared in *The Charlotte Observer* on April 18, 1989. The first, by staff writer Jim Morrill, reports on Vice President Dan Quayle's remarks about busing in Charlotte. In the *Observer's* later editions, however, the article by staff writer Ricki Morell appeared, replacing the article on busing. Which article had more substance to it? Which article was more entertaining? You be the judge.

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## Quayle Spends a Day in Charlotte

### Vice President Calls Busing a Failure

CHARLOTTE— Vice President Dan Quayle, appearing at a Charlotte-Mecklenburg school that's combined integration with academic excellence, said Monday that forced school busing has not worked.

"I think mandatory busing, without any flexibility, is a tool that has proven to be not very successful," he said at a news conference at First Ward Elementary School. "Even those who have traditionally promoted that as a way to achieve desegregation have admitted that it has not been ... successful."

Quayle, whose comments came after meetings with students, teachers and parents, could name no specific school systems in the country where mandatory busing had failed.

Asked whether forced busing has failed in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, where it has been used to desegregate schools for nearly 20 years, Quayle said, "I do not know enough about this particular school district to give you an intelligent comment."

Quayle's visit to First Ward—one of four N.C. schools cited in the federal Outstanding School Recognition Program last year—was the first of a series of appearances. He also met with editors of *The Charlotte Observer*, attended two Republican receptions and spoke to more than 1,300 at a banquet of Concerned Charlotteans, a conservative group.

Quayle's appearance at the banquet was engineered by Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., one of five "special guests" on the program who failed to

attend. No-shows included GOP Gov. Jim Martin, who was ill; Lt. Gov. Jim Gardner; Rep. Alex McMillan, R-N.C.; and Democratic N.C. Attorney General Lacy Thornburg.

Though alluding to a shared "pro-family" agenda, Quayle spoke almost exclusively about taxes and defense. Some Concerned Charlotteans said Quayle's failure to emphasize social issues did not bother them.

"I think there's no dispute about where Quayle stands on those issues," said Charlotte developer Steve Walsh. "The mere fact that he is present here endorses the issues and positions that this group supports."

Earlier, Quayle said his speech to the conservative group did not signal, as some critics have suggested, that he has become the Bush administration's "spear carrier" for the right.

"First of all, I've come here to this school," he said. "I don't know if they (the students) thought I was the spear carrier for the right wing of my party.... I'm going from here down to *The Charlotte Observer* to meet with the editorial board. They may think that. I don't know."

"I don't know what their political goals are," he said of Concerned Charlotteans. "But from what I do know, they stand for traditional values. Strong defense. Pro-George Bush. For Dan Quayle. For issues we feel are important."

During his meeting with *Observer* editors, he refused to say whether he would support a constitutional amendment saying life begins at concep-

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## Visit Leaves Little Time for Relaxation

CHARLOTTE— Vice President Dan Quayle ducked into the Adam's Mark hotel room, slipping off his navy blue suit jacket.

The door closed.

Outside in the lobby, tall men with wires in their ears waited.

Reporters whispered, "What's going on?"

Minutes later Quayle reappeared, wearing his new red First Ward Elementary T-shirt and navy jogging shorts.

"Let's go," he said, grinning as he sprinted down the back stairs into a black limousine.

"Let's go," said the tall men, including reporters and police.

They made a 15-car caravan of flashing lights and dark cars, down 3rd Street to Kings Drive.

Then, on a sunny Charlotte afternoon, the vice president of the United States ran four times around Memorial Stadium.

It was probably the most relaxed 15 minutes of his six-hour, 45-minute visit to Charlotte on Monday.

At 1:30 p.m., he sang, "My Country 'Tis of Thee" with schoolchildren in the First Ward auditorium. At 7 p.m., he accepted the first annual Traditional American Family Award of 1989, before more than 1,300 Concerned Charlotteans in the convention center.

At First Ward, the waiting began at 1:15 p.m. In the faculty lounge, Quayle's favorite soft drink, Sprite, was being chilled.

In the auditorium, about 700 fourth through sixth graders found their seats. The band practiced "Reveille Rock."

At 1:38, assistant principal Carl Flamer said, "I have just gotten word that there is a helicopter in the vicinity."

Silence.

"I have just gotten an official sign ... that he is now in the building," Flamer added.

Gasps.

"The vice president of the United States."

Applause.

From behind a blue curtain, rented espe-

cially for the occasion, emerged Quayle, 41.

In a navy suit, white shirt and gray and maroon striped tie, he was stiff but smiling.

He shook the hand of the first child he encountered.

Then, with his right hand on his heart, his left hand moving nervously at his side, Quayle joined the assembly in saying the Pledge of Allegiance.

In brief remarks, he spoke of the strength of President Bush's commitment to education and the importance of saying no to drugs.

Quayle accepted gifts graciously, including T-shirts for himself and his three children, and then hurried off to Tina Wilson's sixth-grade classroom.

The children were sitting at their desks, corraled by a yellow rope. The press stood behind.

"Welcome to Room 201," said Wilson, wearing a corsage.

Quayle took a seat at a child's desk, hung his jacket on the back of his chair, folded his hands and listened.

He asked the children questions: "Is this—science class—the best class of the day? What's the most favorite experiment you've done?"

The children weren't given time to ask their own questions but did present him with a plaque.

"I guess vice presidents don't stop by here too often," Quayle said as he was leaving.

Later, Quayle held a new conference, then met with Republican party loyalists [sic] and the editorial board of *The Charlotte Observer*. He seemed the most relaxed during the small private sessions.

At the 3 p.m. news conference at First Ward, he was polite but obviously still sensitive to questions about his qualifications.

"I understand that in Washington the general feeling is you're doing better than expected," said a reporter.

"I'm glad that you asked that question,"

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**Hugh Stevens, general counsel, North Carolina Press Association**

I teach my Duke University seminar in First Amendment policy from a distinctly Meiklejohnian point of view.<sup>1</sup> I stress to my students that, as I understand it, the "preferred position" conferred on the press by the First Amendment involves an implicit bargain: the press was freed from the government so that it could tell the people about the government. Thus I tend strongly toward the view that telling people what they need to know in order to be informed, participating citizens is the highest calling—indeed, the constitutional duty—of the press.

Unfortunately, a substantial portion of the people seem not to want to be well informed about

government affairs. As Guillory notes, people seem increasingly caught up in themselves, either out of opportunity (more money, more leisure) or necessity (working overtime in order to earn more money). They are, in his words, "nonvoters and nonsubscribers." He implies that, for a variety of reasons, people are growing less interested in government, politics, and public affairs.

While there is some evidence to suggest that public apathy toward government is increasing, my congenial iconoclasm and my lawyer's skepticism lead me to wonder whether the perceived decline is as dramatic as we tend to think.

For example, when we talk about "declining political participation" and "falling voter turnout," what benchmarks are we using? Throughout the history of the Republic, the franchise has gradually been extended to persons who were legally excluded from voting in the Founding

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from "Busing a Failure," early edition:

tion. He said he favors delegating the issue to states. Concerned Charlotteans strongly opposes abortion.

Also during that interview, Quayle acknowledged that he's still bothered by persistent ridicule of his background and qualifications.

"Do I like the jokes?" he said. "No. But we'll live with it."

Asked if he'd changed since the election, Quayle said, "I hope so. If you go a year ago, I would describe myself as a capable, confident senator from the state of Indiana. I was young then."

from "Visit Leaves Little Time," later edition:

Quayle responded with chilly humor, "because I try to do that at every press conference—make sure someone says, 'Gee, you're doing a lot better than we all expected.'"

"So I thank you for bringing that up. If you

hadn't brought it up, I would have brought it up."

It was a considerably more relaxed Quayle who managed the 4:30 p.m. jog, though the outing was no quiet commune with nature.

In front and behind him ran Secret Service agents carrying two-way radios. Above him circled a helicopter.

"C'mon, why don't you join us?" Quayle called to the entourage of men in dark suits and women in high heels milling around the edge of the field.

Beside him ran five photogenic young men, all Republicans and First Union bank employees.

"It was not a setup," said Tracey Warren, part of the advance team.

"We just happened to be here playing Frisbee," said Richard Pace.

When Quayle stopped running, his cheeks were rosy, his cornflower blue eyes bright.

"You guys gonna show up for practice tomorrow?" he joked to the five young men.

"He's in better shape than I am," said Richard Davis.

Fathers' time: persons who do not own real property; women; blacks; and persons under 18. Other barriers to voter registration, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, also have been erased.

Therefore, to say that the percentage of "eligible voters" who vote has declined steadily in recent years is to state a statistical fact, but it is a misleading fact. Between 1972 and 1988, the percentage of persons over 65 who voted in presidential elections actually *increased*, while participation among those 45-64 remained just about steady. The group that was least likely to vote, those aged 18-24, was also the group whose participation declined by the largest percentage over those years.

Such figures suggest to me that, by steadily expanding the franchise, we have labeled as "participants" some persons (such as 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds) who are congenially inclined to be non-participants. If we carefully analyzed the demographics, we *might* conclude that our basic political apparatus—i.e., the election of public officials—is controlled by essentially the same segment of society which controlled it when the franchise was not so universal.

Thus, when we talk in terms of the press' obligation and ability to "inform the people" in order to keep democracy functioning, shouldn't we ask *which* people we mean? Perhaps our society tends to divide naturally into participants and non-participants, and the recent data should be viewed not as indicating that true participation has declined, but that our expectations have been unrealistic.

If our society *does* divide naturally into these two groups, then the dilemma posed by Guillory's article is not a dilemma at all: newspapers should cover government fully and aggressively for the benefit of the participants, but if they wish to attract non-participants, they had better stress features, sports, and other "entertainment." Indeed, newspapers have always included both types of content, with the balance between the two serving to define each newspaper's status. For example, *The New York Times* has defined itself as a "paper of record" by weighting itself heavily toward news about government, world affairs, and other "lofty" matters, whereas *The New York Daily News* has focused on crime, gossip, celebrities, and other "blue collar" fare. As a consequence, the *News'* circulation and readership have been much greater than the *Times'* for many years.

This same sort of demarcation between newspaper audiences, which is even more pronounced in Britain, existed in most U.S. cities until recently. In many instances, the A.M. daily was seen as the businessman's newspaper, whereas afternoon dailies often contained a high concentration of sports news, features, and other "entertainment" content. And, while it is correct to say that the number of "daily newspapers" has declined over the last 40 years (from 1,763 in 1946 to 1,643 in 1988), what really has happened is that there has been a dramatic shift from afternoon newspapers to morning and Sunday newspapers. Since 1946, the number of afternoon papers has declined from 1,429 to 1,150; during the same period, the number of morning dailies has *grown* from 334 to 525, while the number of Sunday papers has *grown* from 497 to 834. Although any definitive analysis would require much more concerted study, I suspect that these figures may tell us that while the number of daily newspaper subscribers has remained flat since the early 1960s, the people who are no longer reading newspapers are largely "non-participants" who read newspapers primarily for "entertainment" in the first place. Why buy a newspaper if "Entertainment Tonight" and "A Current Affair" will give you the same stuff for free and the only daily available in your market is filled with information about government which you find boring or intimidating to read?

Somewhere in the analysis we should also find room for the startling fact that while daily newspaper readership has remained flat for 30 years, the circulation figures for non-dailies have soared, as have those of the "supermarket tabloids."

In sum, I think it is possible that, despite our egalitarian theories, our society may tend to divide naturally into "participants" and "non-participants." If so, the future of democracy does not rest with everyone, but with those who care, and we had better be damned sure that we provide *them* with what they need to know, if for no other reason than because no one else is doing it. ☐

#### FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup> After Alexander Meiklejohn, a noted legal expert on the constitution and the free press, and author of *Free Speech and Its Relation to Self-Government*, 1948. The book has been out of print for years, but frequently is cited for Meiklejohn's views about the freedom of the press.