

# **What You Don't Know Will Hurt You**

*The Press and Public's Know-Nothing Pact*

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## The Press and Public's Know-Nothing Pact

By Geneva Overholser

It's a great honor for me to be here and join this distinguished company of my predecessors in the Knight Lectureship. Not only that, but I've had a lovely day here already today, speaking with one class and meeting with the staff of the Stanford Daily, and generally enjoying the atmosphere. I was pretty sure that I had done the right thing to accept this, and then I called home and spoke with my managing editor and found out that it's 30 degrees and freezing rain, and then I was absolutely sure. So thank you very much for having me here.

My intention is to repay your honor to me by saying something unorthodox. That's my hope, anyway, to say something unsettling and perhaps something a little bit questionable. I am hoping to be kind of risky and maybe a little argumentative, and if any of those adjectives spring from your lips after my speech, I'll consider them a compliment.

My topic, as you know, is "What You Don't Know Will Hurt You — The Press and Public's Know-Nothing Pact." This title does not accord with the conventional wisdom. First of all the saying is, of course, what you don't know *won't* hurt you. And second, the press and the public hardly seem to have a pact. Rather, they are usually seen as at odds with one another. And finally, the press is commonly faulted for being altogether too aggressive. It's always invading someone's privacy, printing something nobody really needs to know, trying to bring glory to itself by butting into something or other.

The fact is, however, that there is a very great deal that the press is not telling you, and you ought to be deeply worried about that. That is what I am here to persuade you of. For all sorts of reasons — timidity, self-satisfaction, greed, inappropriate desire to belong, incompetence, prudishness — for all these reasons and more, there is an awful lot that the press keeps from you. And since you are part of a democracy, that is, a government that purports to be by the people and of the people and for the people, you ought to consider ignorance a great threat. Yet you as a public not only don't criticize the press for not printing something, you are one of the main reasons that the press continues to keep you in the dark. Enough of the harangue; let's go on to some specifics.

Let's start with some of the reasons that the press holds its tongue and some of the things that you don't know because of this. We'll begin with squeamishness, prudishness, timidity and an overdeveloped fear of offending someone. The press is robbing you of a full understanding of what goes on around you because it is afraid to use certain words, afraid to tell it like it is in sex crimes, afraid to offend grieving loved ones.

What does that mean as a practical matter? Well, for one thing, because of these weaknesses, this nation has taken a much longer time than it should have taken to understand the prevalence, to plumb the tragedy, of AIDS. For years after AIDS deaths began to accumulate in tragic numbers and indeed still to this day in far too many places, newspapers have delicately avoided telling you that someone died of it. The obituaries that listed pneumonia as a cause of death for a 30-year-old man down the block were written inaccurately out of a sensitivity to the family — a sensitivity which most of the public, I guarantee you, would approve of. But you shouldn't approve of it. You should be upset and insulted, and you should be calling your local editor to complain.

The public approved of a similar sensitivity some 50 years ago regarding cancer, a disease which at that time was seen as such a disgrace that no loved one wanted it listed as a cause of death. And the fact that this seems preposterous to us now ought to be good reason to question a similar practice masquerading today as sensitivity.

It is precisely this sort of sensitivity that keeps us in the dark as a society, prevents our changing and precludes our addressing our problems adequately. It is this sort of sensitivity that I saw praised in a recent "Dear Abby" column. Abby responded to a grieving parent, if I'm recalling this correctly, who was lamenting that some hard-hearted newspaper editors insist on listing suicide as a cause of death. Blessedly, said Abby, there are sensitive newspaper editors, rare though they may be, who will not so pointlessly deepen a grieving family's sadness. Well, here is this hard-hearted editor's charge. That sensitive editor is depriving you of an accurate picture of the world, and inhibiting our ability as a society to address our

problems, and you shouldn't let him or her get away with it. This is the sort of reaction that seems cold and cruel and so, unsurprisingly, many an editor will succumb to the public's preference for what it sees to be kindness.

Yet the editor, if he or she cares to look, can find stories everywhere that will help the public see why telling the whole truth is not only socially responsible, but it is even seen by many victims of tragedy as eminently merciful. This is a sentiment in which I have been absolutely affirmed by our experience at the Des Moines Register, with the series that ran on the rape of Nancy Ziegenmeyer. But before I get to that personal story, I want to give you a California example of how easily one can find affirming evidence of the correctness of telling the whole truth. Unfortunately, it's a Southern California example.

I happened to be in Los Angeles one Sunday a few weeks ago and there I read the Los Angeles Times. And in that one edition of the newspaper, I was struck by three different stories that offered affirmation of my point here. This was Sunday, September 15. One story had the headline, "AIDS Plea Planned for Benefit." The story says that the widow of the actor Brad Davis was expected to issue a personal appeal to Hollywood's leaders to "lift the veil of secrecy" surrounding the disease that had claimed her husband's life. A story in the Times the Wednesday before had apparently detailed the "heavy toll that secrecy took on Davis, his wife and their eight-year-old daughter, Alexandra." There's one example.

A second was in the Times Magazine on the same day, in the letters commending the paper for having printed an article called, "Daddy's Girls" on August 4, a story of familial sexual abuse. One letter came from Debra L. Brown of Glendora. She wrote, "In addition to the horrifying trauma that children experience during familial sexual abuse, there is a second trauma — keeping the family secret out of shame and fear. Articles like yours help to uncover sexual abuse which affects one out of every four girls and one out of every seven boys. I applaud the courage of the Lewis children for making their story public and putting the onus where it should be, on the perpetrator, not locked in the sweet hearts of its victims."

The third article in the same paper comes closer to home. It was a personal perspective piece by Frances K. Conley, the Professor of Neurosurgery here at Stanford at the School of Medicine, who had left her faculty position last June in part because of what she called "many episodes of gender insensitivity." "Those on campus," she wrote, "who

precipitated my departure, had every reason to expect the feminine behavioral response of a quiet and dignified exit, but media attention determined otherwise. I now know I'm not a lonely victim. An amazing outpouring of beautifully crafted supportive mail has told me that gender and racial insensitivity, sexual harassment and unequal allocation of resources are prevalent across a broad educational, institutional and occupational fronts in this country." You bet they are, and the reason it's surprising to find that one is not a lonely victim is that we in the press don't write about such things commonly enough thanks to our know-nothing pact with you.

I do not give you these affirming examples because I think we in the media ought to be social workers. On the contrary, I cite them because we seem too ready to be social workers, choosing not to list the cause of death, not to name a rape victim, not to write about such socially unacceptable crimes as incest in the interest of some social good other than the one we most ardently believe in — accuracy, comprehensiveness, completeness, unvarnished truth.

When we don't name, don't write, don't list, we feed the public ignorance and the public becomes accustomed to our not naming, not writing, not listing, and argues with us when we do. Yet we have only to look about us to see the appropriateness of full disclosure and to find the arguments that could win the public over, help the public remember that freedom of information is your freedom, not ours in the press.

I said I was going to talk about the Register's rape series. I want to do that briefly because I think that it does further illustrate my point. When we ran that series in February 1990, it was as if floodgates had lifted. Ever since, every week for over a year, I have seen an article here, talked with a journalism professor there, witnessed a debate in between that concerned rape, date rape, the reporting of rape. There's no question in my mind as to why this series was so powerful. It put a face on a faceless crime. We had kept rape victims in the dark and in the end, we being the human creatures that we are, there is very little difference between keeping rape victims in the dark and keeping rape in the dark. That's what the outpouring showed. Yet we repeat the mistake all the time. We repeat it with incest; we repeat it with battered women. We keep the victims and so the crimes in the dark.

Here is a less consequential example, but further affirmation, I would argue, of how newspapers' hands-off policies feed our national

hypocrisy about sex-related matters. We are so squeamish about sex that we do not put in the newspaper what children all over America hear on the radio, on their tape players every day. My own personal example: You'll remember last year when the rap group, 2 Live Crew's tape, "Nasty as They Wanna Be," was all the scourge nationally. We happened to have some friends over for dinner one evening during that controversy. Talk turned to the tape. What did it really say? How horribly misogynist was it really? Had anyone heard it? No! Then in walked our 12-year-old daughter, rosy cheeked, all American, fresh from a neighborhood gathering of kids down the street. This is Des Moines, Iowa, remember. Guess what the group had listened to? "Nasty as They Wanna Be," of course, and imagine her amazement when we asked her to tell us all about it. She was, after all, our only source.

Now I'm not arguing that I should fill my newspaper with coarse and hateful language. I certainly believe that newspapers should be exemplary in their use of the language. But wouldn't it have been wise if, in the midst of that controversy, we had printed some of the lyrics discreetly on the op-ed page, maybe with an explanation as to why, so that parents could know what their kids were listening to. Well, I didn't, and you and my readers should think less of me for that.

The final exhibit here is so obvious that I don't even need to go on about it. But I can't fail to mention the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas Hearings. Believe whom you may in those hearings. I will tell you what I think was the most villainous thing about them. The most villainous thing by far was that after they were over, it was said in high places what a disgrace it was that the hearings took place. Not a disgrace that something awful happened or might have happened. No! It was a disgrace that someone had talked about it, and in those dignified halls of Congress, no less. The President, characteristically of our leaders, rushed boldly to rail against this abomination — the telling — and swore to determine who had leaked and punish him or her. Well, I say thank goodness for the leaker. It was a hell of an event, those hearings. America heard a lot of things it hasn't heard nearly enough about, thanks to our know-nothing pact, and sexual harassment will never have the same chance again.

So much for squeamishness and prudishness. There are many other reasons that we editors fail you in this pact you and we have. Let me name a few more: orthodoxy, conventional thinking, a misplaced pleasure at being on the inside, incompetence and laziness. This is the

clause in our know-nothing pact that brought you Iran-Contra and the S&L scandal. It brought you the Gulf War with no pictures of the ground war. It has over the years beautifully served the nuclear priesthood, the medical priesthood, all other powers that thrived on being unquestioned authorities. It is this set of sins that determines what we will take seriously as a nation. Further it tells us how to talk about the things we take seriously.

Think, for example, about the phrase "you can't just throw money at...." This phrase may be used with a whole set of social services. Try it with welfare, education, health care. It sounds familiar. But have you ever heard anyone say, "we must not throw money at our national security"? Watching international events recently, I've been struck by how swiftly arguments about armaments and military strategy have changed. Of course, the political realities are drastically different in today's Soviet-U.S. relations from the days when I was writing about national security issues at the New York Times several years ago. But I am here to tell you that there were absolute absurdities that passed for profundities in those days. Assertions about which weapons were needed in which instances that begged for the most elementary questioning. Yet to question was sacrilege. There was barely enough air in those chambers where such issues were discussed to breathe, much less to work up a debate. And it is only in such a greenhouse atmosphere as our national orthodoxy creates, that some of the foolishness that sucked up billions of dollars and created immeasurable national angst could ever have thrived.

What of the Gulf War? Even as we allowed the powers that be to intone about "a moment of unparalleled military success against an international aggressor" — that's a phrase in a fund-raising letter I received from the Council on Foreign Relations a few months ago — there were questions on many a citizen's mind. Was it worth it to go to war? How much was it costing? Who was suffering? Did it work? Did we accomplish what we set out to do? Some in the media examined those questions, I'll grant you, but the copy given over to glorifying the technology of the war or to the human interest stories about our troops would surely outweigh those columns 300 to 1. And what about the success of those war toys so enthusiastically touted during that war? One might think that given the fact that we were fighting Iraq, previously so well armed by the superpowers, we might be now examining the wisdom of arming of Third World nations with such advanced technology. Hardly. We're the champion arms sellers to the Third World.

Last year, our agreements to sell arms to Third World countries jumped to \$18.5 billion compared with about \$8 billion in 1989.

But it's not just war and national security that these sins of orthodoxy afflict. These are the sins that bring you deadly, dull political campaigns. We in the news business allow the politicians to say what they want to say; we question them gently. We think we're brave if we talk about their love affairs. We're much less pushy when it comes to affairs of state. We're not doing nearly enough to push for open records, for open meetings.

We let public universities and other public bodies get away with saying that they must keep the list of presidential candidates names or candidates for other top positions secret. Meanwhile, every colleague of the candidates, whose knowledge of this candidacy this policy supposedly prevents, knows, and only the public does not.

Or how about this reminder of orthodoxy? How many stories have you seen in the news couched in this manner: The glass ceiling of the business world is shown in a recent study to be much lower and harder to break than previously thought. Or sexual harassment is more prevalent than previously thought. Or a smaller percentage of poor babies are born of single, black, urban dwelling mothers than previously thought. Smaller than who previously thought? Almost any woman could have told any newspaper that asked before the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings that sexual harassment was everywhere. But newspapers were too busy finding \$250,000-a-year women lawyers who had left the workplace to take care of a kid, a scenario that fit much more comfortably into the national orthodoxy. We say that we determine what we cover out of journalistic principles. Too often one of those principles seems to be, "listen to powerful, old white men in traditional institutions and take what they say seriously."

Let me just list one more set of tools in our know-nothing pact before the powerful old white men in the audience get back at me. These we can call greed or we can call them commerce. Either way, they contribute mightily to your ignorance. The effects are various. There is the fact, for example, that too many papers by far do not wish to offend major advertisers. There is the fact that newspaper corporations typically retain truly remarkable profit margins: 30 percent is not unusual and the metro average has been somewhere around 17 percent. That's 17 cents on every dollar made as profit for the company, yet the average beginning salary for a newspaper reporter last year

was \$17,000. I happen to believe that we continue against all the odds to attract some of the brightest and best people in the country to my trade. But we should not be surprised given what we pay if we increasingly end up with reporters who are incompetent, lazy, lack fire in the belly, and are satisfied with doing less. There is, too, the fact that newspapers typically put new resources these days into these parts of the product that bring money with them. "Niche publications," they are called. You do a tabloid on real estate news; you bring the real estate ads with it. This is not, to put it mildly, the sort of environment in which tough investigative reporting is likely to take place. These are only a few of the sins; there are plenty more.

There is that brother of orthodoxy — political correctness. We have this one to thank for the fact that it takes academics like Shelby Steele to get us to start really talking about race relations in this country. If we left it up to us in the media, we would continue to think there is really only one appropriate way for blacks to think, only one appropriate way for liberals to think, and only one for conservatives. And there is arrogance — humble backyard news of the sort that can really move people is beneath too many of us.

You put all these sins together, and there are more, and you come up with a public-press know-nothing pact that makes some sizeable contributions, I would argue, to our national problems currently. We suffer from a terrible poverty of civic discourse in this country. Surely it is outside of America's best traditions to send the signal that patriotism is mindless emotion, that leadership is avoiding saying tough things, that citizenship is toeing the line. But such is the result of a lack of openness, our nervousness with debate. We are cowardly people these days, fearful that our best days are behind us even as the world becomes ever more welcoming of the ideas that we stand for. Moreover, we have become disenchanted with the political process. Little wonder when the debate is so narrow. The spectrum of political discourse that is taken seriously is so narrow that it is hard to say anything at all. And for all the pace of change, we're not letting the change-makers into the halls of power.

Women got the right to vote 71 years ago. It was clear during those Hill-Thomas hearings how well they've infiltrated the very pinnacle of politics. One women's rights group in a recent report noted that at the current rate of increase in executive women, it will take until the year 2466 —that's over 450 years — to reach equality with executive men.

Yet we as a nation don't have to feel stuck.

If we open wide the windows of debate and hear more voices, welcome argument, face facts, embrace the notion that the truth will out, believe in our own strength and ability to withstand public scrutiny if the facts are known, we can emerge from this torpor.

Blessedly, in this country we have the world's finest guarantee of the free flow of information. It's called the First Amendment. We are celebrating its 200th anniversary these days. Well, celebrating may not be the word. Not everyone is happy with the guest of honor. In fact, various surveys have made it clear that if the First Amendment were submitted for ratification today, it wouldn't make it.

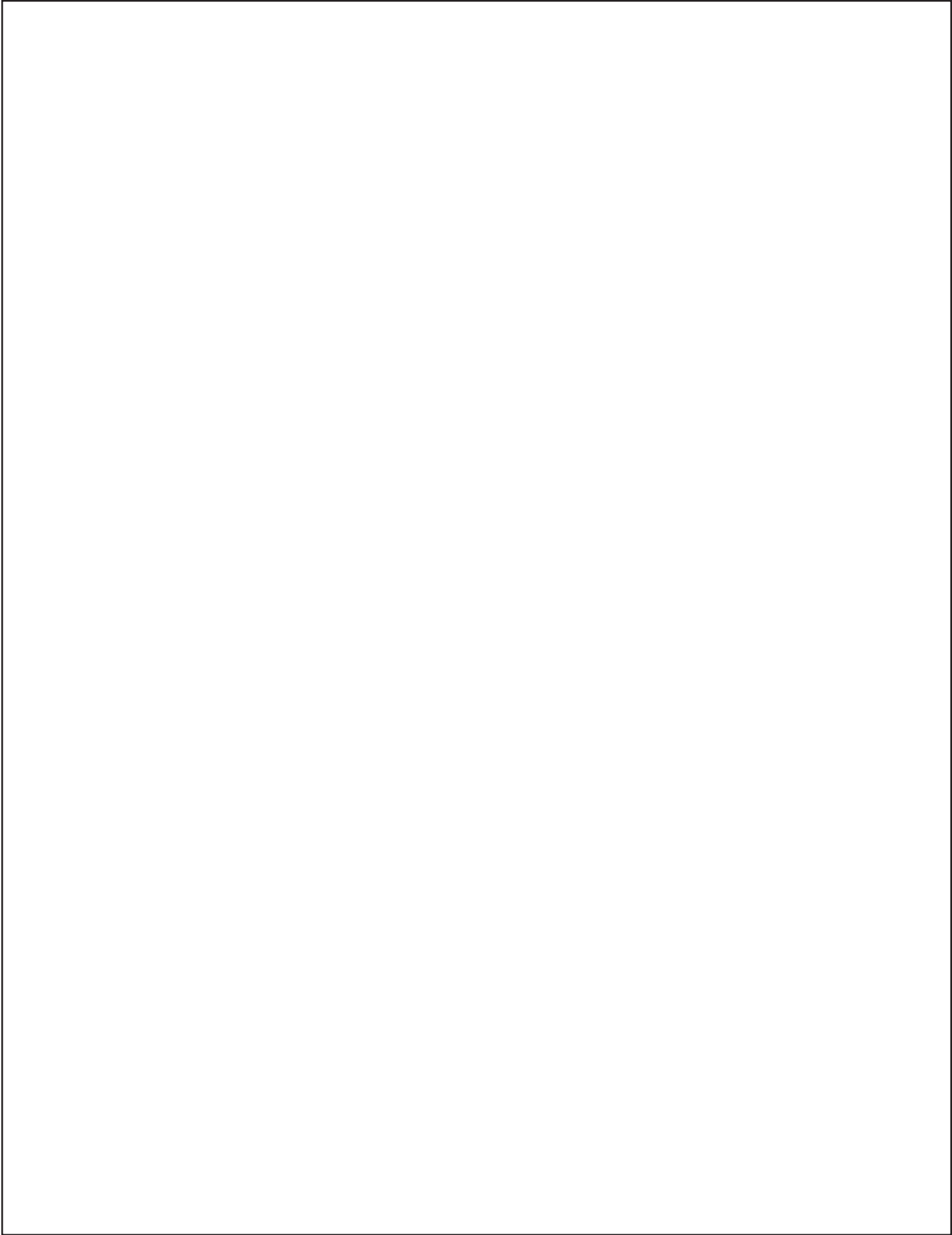
A few months ago at Harvard, I heard Alan Dershowitz, of the Harvard Law School faculty, tell a story that helps us understand why our current environment makes that true. This may be hypothetical — Alan Dershowitz has done that sort of thing before — but it's so good, I'm willing to repeat it. He recalled a time when a faculty member was trying to have Playboy removed from a university library. He didn't say it was at Harvard. "Just for an exercise," he told his fellow faculty members, "let's each pick one magazine and one book we would like removed because we don't think much of them. Then we can see how many are left in libraries across America."

Dershowitz used to think, he said, if he

carried this out long enough, you would have nothing left but "My Friend Flicka" and "My Fair Lady." Then he found out that "My Friend Flicka" had once been banned because it contained the word "bitch" referring to a female dog, and "My Fair Lady" had been banned, too, for its colonialist mentality.

This notion of free speech and the free flow of information relies on all of us. It requires us all to be its champions, always to put the burden of proof on a reason that some piece of information should not be available to the public, not to put the burden on the spokesperson or the media to prove why it should be. This is your gift, your freedom. It's your responsibility to protect it. If you are a feminist, you have to fight for the right of the misogynist to speak his piece. If you are black, you must defend the Ku Klux Klan march. If you are a Jew, you've got to champion the right of the Holocaust denier to make his case. And then you must speak out all the more enthusiastically for your cause. And all of you, all your lives, should be telling those of us in the media leadership positions to tell the whole truth and calling us to complain when we don't.

Break this know-nothing pact now and you will have taken as mighty a step as you can as an individual to help see to it that we as a nation move together toward a lively, hopeful, confident, and all-embracing future. Thank you.



# The John S. Knight Fellowships and Lecture

The 1991-92 academic year marks the 26th year of professional journalism fellowships at Stanford. The John S. Knight Fellowships are named for a distinguished American journalist whose major concern throughout a long career was the editorial quality of newspapers. The Knight Fellowships program each year awards fellowships to 12 professional journalists from the U.S. and six from other countries. These journalists take a leave of absence from their jobs to spend the year at Stanford studying and attending special seminars. In 1988, with the help of the Knight Foundation, the Knight Fellowships Program began an annual lecture series aimed at bringing distinguished journalists and authors to campus.

**Geneva Overholser** was born in South Carolina, graduated from high school in North Carolina, and earned a bachelor's degree in history at Wellesley College. In addition to her degree from Wellesley, she has a master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

Ms. Overholser began her journalistic career in Colorado as a reporter with the Colorado Springs Sun, and then spent five years working as a freelancer in Africa and in Europe.

In 1981, she joined the Des Moines Register as an editorial writer. In 1985, she was awarded a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University, after which she took a job at the New York Times as an editorial writer specializing in foreign affairs and security

issues. She returned to the Des Moines Register as its editor in 1988.

Under the editorship of Ms. Overholser the Register won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize Gold Metal for Public Service for "It Couldn't Happen To Me: One Woman's Story," a series of articles about the rape of an Iowa woman that used the woman's name and photograph. The series of articles resulted from a powerful essay Ms. Overholser wrote, arguing that the press needed to reconsider the way it covered rape cases.

She is a member of the Board of Directors of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and of the Pulitzer Prize Board. She was named the 1990 Editor of the Year by the Gannett Company, which owns the Register.

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