

The Citizen McCaw

2 DVD Learning Resource and Study Guide

Comments by noted journalists:

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The state of newspapers nationally

The newspaper industry is in free fall. Circulation for the nation's 379 largest papers, in decline since 1987, fell more than 10 percent in last year alone. Advertising lineage has dropped even more sharply, driven by the decline of the department store culture and the auto industry. The onetime cash cow of classified advertising has migrated to Craigslist. During the past two years more than 100 papers have shuttered their doors, including major dailies in Dallas, Denver and Seattle. The *San Francisco Chronicle* is on life support. Knight-Ridder, not so long ago the nation's biggest newspaper chain has disappeared, and McClatchy Newspapers, which purchased many of its papers, is losing money. The once-mighty Times-Mirror chain has been purchased by the Tribune Company, which in turn has filed for bankruptcy. The *Christian Science Monitor* has become an online newspaper. Even the proud *New York Times* has sold its building — to a Mexican billionaire who has leased it back at near-usurious rates. One can buy a share of stock in the *Times* for the price of two Sunday newspapers.

These horror stories have been accompanied by a steady decline in the content of newspapers large and small. *The Washington Post* has closed all of its domestic bureaus and most of its foreign bureaus. Dozens of papers and chains have also closed bureaus, in statehouses as well as Washington. Many states have open-meeting laws that are increasingly meaningless because there are no reporters at the meetings of city councils or other local government entities. This reduced coverage at every level has impacted the lives of ordinary Americans. To take only one example, a significant decision by the Securities and Exchange Commission to exempt the brokerage units of large investment banks from regulations that limited their amount of debt was taken at an open meeting that was not covered by any news organization.

The cautionary tale of a hometown newspaper

The struggle of newspapers to survive has raised ethical issues. With shrinking staffs, many papers have struggled to maintain high journalistic standards and rely increasingly for information on freelancers, untrained eyewitnesses, and outside groups. Publishers call the tune; if a newspaper reporter or editor doesn't like what is happening he or she can quit, knowing full well that it will be difficult to find another job in the news business. In Santa Barbara, a publisher who lacked either experience or interest in journalistic set the pattern in 2006 by firing editors and reporters who

insisted on doing their jobs professionally. The story of *The Santa Barbara News-Press* is a cautionary tale, one that has been overshadowed by the national newspaper decline. It is an important story nonetheless....

At first glance, the factual incidents underlying the controversy at *The Santa Barbara News-Press* - a drunk driving case, a zoning hearing involving a celebrity's house, and interference with the independence of a local newsroom - may seem insignificant.

But if the back-stories of the *News-Press* conflict are small-caliber stuff, the journalistic principles underlying it are anything but. The case generated so much passionate community reaction, and attracted national attention, because of the vital importance of these values, standards and ethics.

The most important asset of any news organization is its credibility, the trust that journalists earn from readers, viewers and listeners. Day in and day out, credibility comes from journalists producing work that fulfills our core mission, which is articulated succinctly in the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists:

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

That is the fundamental principle that was at stake in the *News-Press* case, and one that every journalist, whether at a small community newspaper or a giant media conglomerate, has a responsibility to stand up for every day.

We hope that journalism education programs throughout the country will use *The Citizen McCaw 2 DVD Learning Resource* to help teach students about this vital and vibrant profession.