

Dec. 8, 1982

Editor
The Washington Post
Washington DC

Dear Sir,

Yesterday I received a telephone call from a member of the Post's editorial staff. May I emphasize, at the outset, that I appreciated the courtesy of the call, lest any comments I now make should appear churlish, contrary to my intent. I would also like to emphasize that I attach no great importance to my original letter to you, a part of which you printed in slightly altered form on December 5. What follows at some length are some comments on general journalistic practices and attitudes, for your consideration.

Your telephone caller's essential message to me was that he had reviewed his own editing of my letter and found such editing to be entirely satisfactory, even though the result as printed in the Post over my signature was neither all that I said, nor exactly what I said. Since a signed letter represents itself to the public as being exactly what the writer said, and presumably the total of what he said, I had noted an inherent danger in writing letters to editors, and had suggested that perhaps it would be a better journalistic practice to either print such letters intact, warts and all, or not at all.

Over the years I have seen a number of letters of mine printed in the Post, sometimes in their entirety and sometimes not. Comparing the parts included and the parts left out, I sometimes had to wonder the omissions represented mere abridgments taken at random to save space, or had been specifically selected out because the particular editor disagreed with the views expressed. In a word, is it possible that abridgment sometimes creeps in as a convenient form of censorship?

In any case, I would like to offer a specific procedural suggestion: When editing is challenged and you wish to have it reviewed in your own organization, does it make sense to assign the review to the same editor who did the original editing in the first place? In law, a judge on appeal is not assigned to rule on his own earlier rulings. Presidents are not permitted to be the sole final judges of their own policies. This may seem to be a small procedural point, but I would submit that the press is already, in the eyes of the public, in the suspect position of being the only element in our democratic system of checks and balances which has been exempted from the restraints applied to democracy, but also fears sees the press as the ultimate guarantor of democracy, and its unbridled power - here I include the media as a whole - and its perceived arrogance. Self-regulation is thought to be the only answer, although no one would trust other institutions to be self-regulating. In any case, the small procedural suggestion above noted might be a minor contribution.

Sincerely,

Ogden Williams