

On Meeting Queen Margrethe

By Scott Aiken

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I. Introduction

Tonight's paper deals with the news media, my own experiences with reporting and editing, and some thoughts about how the profession is evolving.

My credentials:

For the better part of thirty years, I was a newspaper reporter, wire-service editor, foreign correspondent, editorial writer, and editor. I was also producer, researcher, sometime engineer, and on-air host of a radio show on foreign affairs.

Since this paper is about the news media, let's begin ... *in media res*....

It's Paris August 1960. The newsroom of the European Edition of the New York Herald Tribune is on the third floor of 19, Rue de Berri, a half block from the Champs Elysees.

It's a typical midafternoon: The newest employee – me – is at his desk writing captions for photos for tomorrow's paper.

Some fifteen feet away ...

... sits, or more likely stands and paces about, a cheery, rotund, cigar-smoking writer in horn-rimmed glasses – humor columnist Art Buchwald.

(And I do affirm: Art was nonassuming and as funny in person and every day as he was in print.)

Hear the newsroom chatter. Feel the clatter of manual typewriters and teletype machines, with a low thrum rising from rotary presses several floors below.

Contrast that with the hush of today's *Cincinnati Enquirer* – or any other – newsroom with its individual cubicles, computer terminals and keyboards.

The soft silence is not from computers alone. There are far fewer reporters and editors than there were just a year or two ago.

These folk are, on average, a good deal younger than the reporters and editors were forty years ago. Most older, higher-salaried journalists have been urged into taking early retirement...

The national president of the Society of Professional Journalists – Hagit Limor of Cincinnati's WCPO-TV (Channel 9) – says:

“We're concerned about shrinking resources and personnel in the midst of expanding duties to service new [digital] platforms.

“... We're dismayed by falling salaries that make us question this calling [journalism] as a lifelong career.”

For the most part, too, today's journalists have better academic educations than my generation. No longer is a high school diploma enough to get you started as a cub reporter.

Today they are all college graduates, some with advanced degrees. They have in-depth knowledge, but ... lack breadth of life experience.

II. Two Premises

As I talk this evening about American journalism, I'm operating from two premises.

Premise No. 1: In this world, change is constant. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “Everything changes and nothing remains still... One cannot step twice into the same stream.”

My second premise: Good journalism is essential to good government and to the commonweal. A well-functioning civil society depends as much on the Fourth Estate as it does on the three formal branches of government created by the Constitution.

This has been a gesture of full disclosure. I’m not going to defend either premise tonight.

The fate of daily newspapers is my focus – although what I have to say applies to TV and radio as well.

III. Change

There’s not much fun in journalism today.

I did have fun....

Here’s another slice from my own story, one that connects with Heraclitus’ adage.

I have picked a moment in time ... June 1964 ... to illustrate a critical change between then and now.

In your mind’s eye..., conjure up a picture of a formal garden. This one is behind the royal Amalienborg Palace in Copenhagen.

I’m standing with a hundred other journalists – Europeans, Americans and Soviets. The afternoon is sunny, pleasantly warm, relaxing in a uniquely Scandinavian way.

We’re awaiting the end of a state lunch. Frederick the Ninth, king of Denmark, is host to Nikita Serge/i/vitch Khrushchev, prime minister of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and first secretary of the Soviet Communist Party.

The palace doors swing wide.

Out come King Frederick and Khrushchev, side by side, with wives and adult children behind.

Reporters and cameramen swarm on the heels of the king and Khrushchev.

From above it would appear an alliance of queen bees is leading a hive of workers to new founts of nectar.

I’m not a swarmer, never was, never would be.

So there along a garden path, among marble statues of cupids and nymphs and gods, ... a quite lissome princess ... and I ...,

And how do I say this delicately yet accurately? ...

The swarm presses the princess and I somewhat closely, ... intimately ... against Apollo’s statue.

... We converse politely about weather and flowers.

Apollo ... smiles.

Regrettably ... Aphrodite is taking a nap.

The swarm moves on. And so do we. But that is how I met the quite lovely, charming, and composed princess, now Denmark’s Queen Margrethe.

Freeze this moment. See it in every detail: flowers, trees, graveled paths, neatly trimmed lawns....

Scores of journalists ... some wielding mikes on booms, others with cameras clicking ... urgently pursue the tall and lean monarch and his luncheon guest, the balding and chunky leader of the world’s No. 2 superpower....

Where's the security? You know, the wary-eyed men with the slight bulges in their jackets, earphone wires curling down their necks...?

Not present. Naturally not for King Frederick. You could meet him along a public sidewalk on his morning constitutional. But not for Nikita Serge/i/vitch Khrushchev either.

Security. ...

How our world has changed!

In my experience, newsrooms were open to anyone who wanted to walk in. Now, locked doors, cameras, and intercoms stand between a visitor and the reporters. No longer can you just come in with a news release ... a complaint ... or a good story idea.

We have lost something precious by sealing off the newspeople from the public.

And should you have been wondering why your morning newspaper has become so emaciated ...

[Holding up the *Cincinnati Enquirer* of October 17, 2011] ...

A number of my years as reporter, columnist, and editor was spent at the *Cincinnati Enquirer* on the fourth floor of the grand old building at 617 Vine Street, where foot-thick reinforced concrete floors dampened the shaking generated by the presses below.

IV. The Three Causes of Radical Change

Today, the shaking comes from three outside forces, which are buffeting and shattering the mainstream news media.

Bits of matter – readers and advertisers – are flying away; staffs are decaying. Bombarded like an atom with a stream of neutrons, the daily newspaper's nucleus is coming apart.

First and most significant, digital technologies – from the Internet to the iPhone and iPad, Twitter and Face Book – as we are all aware – have refashioned how we travel, where we live and work, as well as how we learn about and understand the world. Digital technologies have created a world more compressed in time and distance than mankind ever dreamed of in millennia gone past.

They have changed our world ... as much as did Gutenberg's invention in the 16th Century of movable type and the printing press.

Second, in the bygone days of the last century, private, independent owners created and published daily newspapers. Some were liberal. Some were conservative.

Some were more idiosyncratic than others. Colonel Rupert McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune* springs to mind.

One example we all recognize: So ardently did McCormick support the Republican Party, and hate the Democrats – such as President Truman – that, the morning after the presidential election of 1948, his *Chicago Daily Tribune* could neither conceive of nor wait upon an outcome other than a Republican triumph.

We all can see the famous photo of Truman, grinning from ear to ear, holding aloft his copy of the *Tribune* of November 3, 1948, with its bold, eight-column banner headline “Dewey Defeats Truman.”

But the vision (however eccentric or biased it may have been) of McCormick and other publishers was of a better city, a better state, a better nation. The business side of the newspaper existed primarily to serve and support their paper's news and opinions.

Up until recently..., that is, up until the digital communications revolution..., daily newspapers printed money as prolifically as they did the papers themselves. Owners enjoyed profit margins of 20 percent, or more.

But the heirs of the twentieth century owners have been eager – for a variety of reasons – to convert the wealth of ownership into cash.

As a result, with few exceptions, independent dailies have been folded into large, multimedia and publicly traded corporations – like Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. or Gannett.

Responsibility to the community is fine, but it’s secondary to serving Wall Street’s unrelenting demand for profits. With corporations in the saddle, daily newspapers are being whipped and spurred towards that goal.

In the process, corporate executives have become more and more distant from the profession and purpose of journalism.

Take the Gannett company – owner of the Cincinnati Enquirer since 1979. Gannett’s CEO at that time – Al Neuharth, who a few years later created *USA Today* – started life as a reporter. His successor – John Curley – did too. John was head of Gannett’s news service when I first met him more than 30 years ago.

Gannett’s CEO is a finance person, who started her career in banking. Her predecessor began in advertising.

In preparing this paper, I reviewed Gannett’s current management team and board of directors.

Among those 21 men and women, I found just one who had any experience in journalism. Early on, he had been a TV news director.

And I came across a fiery letter to Gannett’s current management from retired chairman and CEO Al Neuharth.

Protesting the use of the front page of the *USA Today* for a full-page ad for Jeep, Neuharth wrote:

If I had been USA Today’s editor, I would have led the entire news staff walking out in protest. If such a stupid decision is ever made again, I hope that will be the result.

The third, and obviously closely related, reason for the shrinking and sinking of daily newspapers is our deep economic slump. It began in 2008 and continues today.

Another story from long-ago days.

It’s May 1959, President Eisenhower, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and French President Charles de Gaulle have gathered in Paris for a summit conference.

At the time, I have left the *Hartford Courant* and returned to being a student, on a Fulbright scholarship in “science po” – political science, at the University of Toulouse in southern France.

However, in my pocket is a press card from the Connecticut state police.

So, with a school chum who is at the London School of Economics ... and a fellow Fulbright who is just curious, I take the metro down to the Hotel de Crillon, one of the magnificent sandstone palaces on the Place de la Concorde.

I wave that Connecticut press card, and Charlie, Mary, and I take seats in a front row of a news conference with Jim Hagerty, Eisenhower’s press secretary.

Oh, and afterwards we pop over to the British embassy for a briefing – this one served up with glasses of very fine Scotch.

How would that play out today?

V. “Nina at the Pasture Gate”

But let’s get back to Khrushchev in Scandinavia.

My second Khrushchev tale I title ... “Nina at the pasture gate”

At heart, Nikita Sergeivitch was a farmer. Whenever his schedule focused on agriculture, he relaxed. He perked up.

(He did become very irritated, however, when the easy-going Danes refused to give him a pair of their Race hogs – the source of Denmark’s superb pork products.

(The Danes said, “Sorry, Race hogs leave this country only as ham and bacon. It is illegal to export a live hog.”

(Nikita’s response may have been snappish, probably nasty and peremptory. The Danes didn’t budge.

(This is, after all, a nation whose king donned a yellow star when the Nazis ordered all Danish Jews to wear them. Alone amongst countries under Nazi occupation, Denmark smuggled nearly all its Jewish citizens to safety.

(Nikita might fancy himself the big bad wolf, but the Danes were not taking their part as “little pigs.” The Russian wolf’s huffing and puffing didn’t scare them into handing over real ... and live ... Danish hogs!)

But here’s the story of Nina Petrovna Khrushchev.

The Danes invited the Soviet leader to visit the island of Funen, a major agricultural center.

On the tour is a cattle farm.

After inspecting the barns, after listening to a recitation of Danish livestock practices, Khrushchev asks to walk out into the pasture. He wants a close-up look at prize beef on the hoof.

The official entourage, along with reporters and cameramen, stampede after Nikita – all, that is, but three of us, Rod MacLeish of Westinghouse Broadcasting, myself, and Nina Petrovna.

We three linger by the pasture gate. Nina has a very basic command of English. Over the next quarter hour, Rod and I talk with her about the weather, her children, and other matters equally non-political.

Just the three of us. No one else. No Danes. No Russians.

No KGB.

In 2011, can you imagine the spouse of any government chief being left alone, especially with reporters?

Here is another significant difference between then and now. I didn’t write, broadcast or blog about my “exclusive interview” with the wife of the leader of the Soviet Union. Neither did Rod.

Our focus was Nikita Khrushchev: What he said, what he did, and why.

Today in our personality, celebrity mindset, our chat at the pasture gate would lead cable news for hours.

What color dress did Nina wear? Black. And how fashionably was it styled and cut? Not in the least.

Bloggers would feast for days upon that quarter hour.

Fast forward, as we used to say when reel-to-reel tape was the spanking new technology in radio.

VI. RFE’s Role

Fast forward:

Remember the transistor radio, a radio in which the tiny transistor – at least at the time it seemed minute – replaced vacuum tubes?

During the Cold War, Czechoslovaks ... for example ... took their transistor radios, clambered aboard trams, and rode to the outskirts of Prague. Away from the city center, they escaped the Communist regime's jamming of the BBC and Radio Free Europe.

RFE's news broadcasts – 10 minutes at the top of the hour around the clock in six East European languages – played a supportive role in Lech Walesa and Solidarity's strike against the Polish regime and in Czechoslovakia's "velvet revolution" as well as in other movements from Hungary to Romania and Bulgaria.

An incident from my own years as RFE's bureau chief in Stockholm demonstrates, albeit in a backhanded way, the concerns RFE broadcasts gave the Russians and their satellites.

Mario, the Romanian, was a regular visitor to our offices in downtown Stockholm.

We all know the song from "My Fair Lady" about the Hungarian who "oiled his way across the floor" and proclaims Liza Doolittle to be a royal princess.

Ironically ... Mario, a plump little man, in an ill-fitting suit, with black hair slicked back, poses as a petroleum expert ... except he isn't "oozing charm from every pore." He is just ... oily.

Mario ... I never learned his last name ... comes by regularly to sell – for U.S. dollars – information about East Europe, the Soviet Union ... and China. We pay him and dutifully ship his intelligence to RFE's analysts in Munich, Germany.

But, for sure, just as important as our dollars are to him, is the money he certainly receives from the Soviet and other Communist embassies.

To them, he brings information about the Swedes, the Poles, the Estonian, and the American at RFE's offices, two floors up at Kungsgatan, 69.

Now, it's the fall of 1965. Mario tells us he has just observed Chinese diplomats in the embassy's gardens smashing traditional statuary with sledge hammers.

Since whispers are just beginning that Chairman Mao has launched a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, this report becomes one of the early confirmations of that deadly upheaval.

VII. Digital Technology in the Saddle

How many Mario's, how many Nina's, do today's reporters get to know firsthand?

Yes, reporters connect with their sources through the Internet, Face Book, and so on, but at the cost of restricting personal contact.

The nineteenth century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in a poem, "The horseman serves the horse,/The neat-herd serves the neat,/The merchant serves the purse, .../Things are in the saddle,/And ride mankind."

There will come a time, perhaps it's ten years from now, more likely fifteen or even twenty, when the iPad is as ordinary a communications tool to reporters who grew up with it in the 21st century, as the telephone was to you and me in the 20th century.

Right now, digital technologies are in the saddle, riding America's journalists.

[Mr. Hawk Mountain]

One result:

Today's reporters have difficulty in knowing what they do not know.

Knowing what you don't know is a skill unrelated to Internet searches.

Knowing what you do not know? If you don't know something, how would you know that you don't know it?

“Knowing what you do not know...”

This is a skill learned only from mistakes you make, primarily from assumptions we all instinctively leap to about the world and people.

Let me give you an example.

In fact, a couple of examples.

In 1973, on my first trip to Tokyo I knew many Japanese would react to a Caucasian face and American demeanor with the same instinctive prejudices we ourselves have for people who look and behave differently from our norms.

The sight of a gaijin ... foreigner ... would provoke an automatic response of non-comprehension. It could be as simple as ... the waitress in a café serving a Coke when the American thought he was ordering tea.

It could be as baffling as this: I had an appointment for lunch one Saturday with the editor in chief of *Nihon Kazai Shimbun* – Japan's *Wall Street Journal*.

I have the time – noon, the place – the newspaper office itself, and the name -- Mr. Takeyama [Ta-kuh-ya-ma]....

From my hotel, across from the moat of the imperial palace, the newspaper is an easy walk, a mile or less.

I decide to walk. On the way, I'll learn something. I'll hear, see, and feel life on the streets of Tokyo.

However, to be absolutely sure that, when I arrive at the reception desk, I'll be taken to see Mr. Takeyama ... I ask a hotel clerk to transliterate his name ... spelled out in Roman script for my benefit ... back into Japanese characters -- Kanji.

Arriving on time, quite proud of my ingenuity, I hand the slip of paper to the guard. A minute or two pass. An elevator arrives and disgorges a worried young editor.

“There is no Takeyama [Ta-kuh-ya-ma] here,” says he. “But there is,” say I.

“No, no, but come this way” ... up the elevator to a conference room where the young man pops in and out, reporting with ever greater and greater anxiety ... “There is no editor Takeyama [Ta-kuh-ya-ma].”

Noon has come. And gone. In a society of great punctuality, I've committed a serious misdemeanor.

Now anxious myself, I have a final flash of inspiration.

“Here,” I urge on him, “is the name and phone number of the go-between who arranged my meeting.”

A phone call. Much lusty intake of breath, equally excited expulsion.

The editor hangs up. He swings around, smiling delightedly, bowing with hands together, and says ...

He says...

“Ah so, Mr. Takayama [Ta-ka-ya-ma], most important editor in all Japan. Come this way. Come. Most important editor in all Japan.”

Mr. Takayama [Ta-ka-ya-ma], who has spent years as his paper's bureau chief in New York, is most unperturbed by my delay. We have a cordial and informative lunch.

Some days later, I arrive at the home of the U.S. consul general in Osaka, a good friend from our earlier assignments in Stockholm.

Conversing with Jerry Holloway over Scotch, I bring up the confounding mystery of Mr. Takeyama ... “most important journalist in all Japan.”

“Do you,” inquiries Jerry, “still have that slip of paper?”

On a three-week assignment in the Far East, I have one suit, and I’m still wearing it.

In the left hand coat pocket is the paper, creased and crumpled, but with the Kanji transliteration.

Inspecting it, Jerry smiles, “I suspected as much. This says the editor is Mr. Takeyama [Ta-kuh-ya-ma] – with an “e”; that is, Mr. Bamboo Mountain. But his name is Takayama [Ta-ka-ya-ma] – that’s with an “a” – Mr. Hawk Mountain.

“You were asking for Mr. Smith, when you should have been asking for Mr. Brown.”

That’s a story of deeply embedded assumptions – mine about the Japanese; the hotel clerk’s about her ability to transliterate from Roman script to Kanji, and perhaps the young editor’s literal mindedness.

Another story from Asia, again from my years as the *Enquirer’s* foreign news commentator.

On the island of Quemoy, just a long swim from the beach in mainland China, I’m a guest of the Chinese Nationalist army. At the same time, it is playing host to the chief of staff of the French prime minister.

Not only is it a pleasure to have a language in common – French – that the Chinese generals don’t understand, but Pierre is an old Asia hand.

The army invites us to a special concert of Chinese opera songs. Entering a tunnel carved into a granite mountain, we eventually come out into an auditorium deep in the mountain’s roots. It holds several hundred people.

As the singers perform, Pierre leans over and whispers, “Look at the generals” – two long rows of aged, bemedaled men seated in front of us – “see: They are watching the super titles rather than the singers.”

I nod yes, but I’m mystified.

“They’re reading the characters,” Pierre whispers, “because they don’t understand the spoken words.”

This small incident gave me an insight into the cultural complexity of China.

But you had to be there, in the heart of a Quemoy mountain. You had to be part of a real experience rather than what a reporter might learn from a Tweet.

And it is an opening into understanding a challenge the Chinese Communist Party has to this day. China’s rulers govern an ancient land of many ethnic populations, many cultures, many dialects.

The peoples of China share a written language, but the official spoken language – Mandarin – is as foreign to hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens as French was to the Kuomintang generals.

One more story about the importance of getting out and meeting people....

VIII. “Don’t spoil the party”

As business editor of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* in the late seventies, I shoved my reporters out the door, out of the office, out on the street....

One day, I send one of the best reporters I have ever worked with to a nothing meeting.

It is the monthly social gathering of the Cincinnati chapter of certified public accountants.

The guest speaker that evening is Cincinnati city manager Bill Donaldson. He talks informally about the city's development efforts and ... just in passing ... not knowing a reporter is present ... he mentions that Federated Department Stores ... now Macy's ... has decided to build a new corporate headquarters atop its parking garage at the corner of Seventh and Vine.

For downtown business generally, for shops and property owners around Seventh and Vine specifically, this is big and positive news.

Wayne Buckhout comes into work the next morning with that news.

We call City Hall. We try again to have Donaldson confirm and comment. He won't. We seek out Nell Surber, Cincinnati's longtime development director.

We call Federated. I reach John Hoving, Federated's public affairs vice president, at a meeting in Washington DC.

You don't have to confirm or deny, I tell him. Just tell me if any of the facts I'm going to pass by you are wrong.

They aren't.

Nell calls back again. Don't run the story. If we do, we're not being good corporate citizens. We'll be spoiling a speech Federated Chairman Ralph Lazarus is to give in two weeks ... in Atlanta.

He will be pledging Federated's commitment to American cities, using the building of a new corporate headquarters in downtown Cincinnati as an example.

Editor and former Literary Club member Luke Feck says, "Go with it."

With an inch-high banner headline across the top of page one, the story runs the next morning.

To get the inside story ... to get inside the story ... you really have to be there, not back in the newsroom scrutinizing a computer screen.

IX. Conclusion

In conclusion, new media of communications have revolutionized the world of journalism.

Piling on to that radical change, multimedia corporations or leveraged buyout speculators have taken over most daily papers, thus putting their profitability ahead of their journalism.

Even the newspapers that are coping and changing as best they can, papers like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, seem to me to be trying to contain the rush of advertising and readers away from metropolitan dailies to the easy and relatively inexpensive forums of the Internet.

What will the new news media be like in 2025 or 2030?

I don't know. I'm too much an artifact of one of the "golden ages" of American journalism.

Change is unrelenting. Just as local TV news at 6 and 11 help drained the lifeblood from afternoon dailies in the last century, Face Book, Google, blogs, Twitter, et al., have mortally wounded daily newspapers.

Yet ... let me end by sounding a more pleasant note.

Again, a couple of stories.

The first is a bit of nostalgia.... The second presents a perspective on human nature, a perspective contrary to Heraclitus' philosophy.

Story No. 1.

The year is 1959. The date is June the sixth. The place is Groton, Connecticut. More precisely, the dockyards of the Electric Boat Division of General Dynamics.

I'm the *Courant's* reporter and photographer for the launch of the Navy's – and the world's – first ballistic missile submarine.

The day is clear and mild.

On the viewing platform, 60 feet or so above the slipway, John Massaro – state editor of the *Hartford Courant* – has his hand in my back as I lean out and over the platform rail.

The USS George Washington slides, hesitantly slowly, almost reluctantly, then faster and faster, down the slip

I still have the commemorative tie clip. It's fashioned in the shape of a sub.

[Hold up the USS George Washington tie clip]

"Get another shot, get closer, get the splash." Urgent and excited John is shoving me and my camera further and further out.

As I'm close to flipping over the rail, the George Washington at last splashes into the harbor.

We ride back to Hartford, the top of John's little red Italian sports car down, afternoon sun on our faces, smoke from his large cigar curling into my nostrils.

Isn't it funny? The past is always sunny.

Fast forward. Now it's downtown Cincinnati and it's March 2001. The Cincinnati World Affairs Council is presenting a conference on the new Russia in the Westin Hotel.

In a makeshift radio studio – a cloakroom near the hotel ballroom, I'm recording an interview with a Pittsburgh University professor on his specialty – community politics in a post-Soviet Russia.

The interview will be part of the weekly program "World Front", one of the homegrown features on the old WVXU.

The door is closed. It's locked. A member of the Council's staff stands guard, shielding us from outside noise or interruption.

When suddenly there arose ... a hammering of fists upon the door. Again and again.

Halting the interview, I open the door to find the conference's keynote speaker – Sergei Ni/kit/vich Khrushchev – face red, fist raised, ready to pound again.

Since I last saw him in Scandinavia in 1964, Nikita's son has aged. Like his father, he's going bald. He's become pudgy. And he has his father's temperament and temper.

He wants his briefcase, his overcoat – both stored in the cloakroom – and he wants them NOW.

Contrary to Heraclitus, everything changes – except human nature.

... Or ...

The nut does not fall far from the tree.

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