The 1994 Alexander Brin Forum co-sponsored by the Benjamin S. Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service and the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies Institute for Community and Religion

The North American Jewish Press

Brandeis University
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Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center
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INTRODUCTION

Bernard Reisman

This symposium on “The North American Jewish Press” is the fourth Brin Forum under the auspices of the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service and the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. The Brin Forum’s unique mission is to identify a cutting edge issue or development which is significantly affecting the American Jewish community. The Forum brings together the key people who have been involved in defining that issue or development, to share their perspectives in a day-long institute.

The first Forum, on the National Jewish Population Survey, took place in 1991. We convened the demographers and social planners who were responsible for designing and carrying out the 1990 survey. In 1992, on the occasion of the publication of Quiet Diplomat, the biography of Max Fisher, the Brin Forum brought him to the Brandeis campus, along with Peter Golden, the book’s author, and two leaders of the American Jewish community during the heyday of Fisher’s leadership: Shoshana Cardin, then chair of the Council of Jewish Federations, and Irving Bernstein, who was the chief executive of the United Jewish Appeal during this period. The third Brin Forum, in 1993, was on “The Impact of Foundations with Jewish Interests on the North American Jewish Community.” That discussion brought together key professionals and principal donors of several of the major Jewish foundations to explore how this relatively new phenomenon was shaping the agenda of the American Jewish community.

The Jewish Press—the subject of the 1994 Brin Forum—might at first glance seem, less clearly than preceding topics, to be a major force in contemporary America. Part of the faculty’s motivation in choosing this topic was the notion that the Jewish press was too important to be taken for granted. We hoped that perhaps making the subject of the Brin Forum would raise the community’s awareness of its central role. The response of the people in attendance at the Forum appeared to justify that decision. It became clear in the course of the day’s deliberations that as people have the opportunity to learn about the role and potential of a quality Jewish newspaper, they recognize that it is a basic requirement for building and sustaining a Jewish community.

The development of this awareness at the Forum can be attributed to its sessions, which provided historical background, reviews of current and future prospects for the North American Jewish press, and views from the editors of two foreign Diaspora newspapers. Professor Jonathan Sarna’s historical review helped the audience realize that the Jewish press has for almost 200 years played a prominent and consistent role in articulating the agenda of Jewish communities and serving as a force for educating and mobilizing the citizenry.

American Jews typically think of their community as the political and cultural center of life in the Diaspora. They were divested of this notion by the sophisticated descriptions by Sam Lipski (Australian Jewish News) and Ned Temko (Jewish Chronicle, London) of their newspapers. The Brin audience seemed startled to realize that they have things to learn from their foreign colleagues, certainly about the importance of a quality Jewish press.

This point was emphasized by the presentations of Jerome Lippman (Long Island Jewish World), Gary Rosenblatt (New York Jewish Week), Marc Klein (Jewish Bulletin of Northern California), Cynthia Dettelbach (Cleveland Jewish News), and independent journalist Yosef Abramowitz. Together they acknowledged the problems of declining readership and funding facing the Jewish press, and evaluated options for its future viability as a major force in the Jewish community. Mark Joffe of the JTA, unable to join us for the Forum itself, has contributed his views on these issues for these Proceedings.

At the end of the day there appeared to be a good feeling pervading both the Jewish journalists and the Jewish leaders and community members in the audience. It was as though, after many years, the hard work and dedication of the press were finally being recognized. At the
years, in no way diminished. In the United States, the earliest newspaper with a Jewish name is Cohen’s Gazette and Lottery Register (1814-1830), published by Jacob I. Cohen, Jr. While published by a Jew and read by Jews, this was hardly a Jewish newspaper; it was, in essence, a gambling sheet. A journal of a different sort was published in 1823-1825. Its title was The Jew, and its subtitle explained that it was “a defense of Judaism against all Adversaries, and particularly against the insidious Attacks of Israel’s Advocate,” which was a missionary journal. The Jew adumbrates one of the major functions of every vernacular Jewish newspaper: to defend Jews against their adversaries. But one can scarcely imagine anyone actually reading The Jew for news. The only significant news that it printed was a series of scoops about scandals within the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, the society dedicated to converting Jews to Christianity. Jewish news was published in various American newspapers, particularly those edited by the distinguished Jewish journalist-politician, Mordecai M. Noah. But like today’s New York Times, Noah’s dailies were designed for a broad audience. They never claimed to be Jewish newspapers, even if they did devote disproportionate attention to Jewish matters. Jewish journalism as we know it in the United States dates quite specifically to April 1843 and the publication of The Occident by Isaac Leeser, Chazzan of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia and the most significant Jewish traditionalist religious leader of his day. Leeser was influenced by a range of factors: the development of national Jewish periodicals in Germany, France and England, the evident need to unify the far-flung American Jewish community (a need made painfully evident by the Damascus Affair of 1840), the emergence of newspapers as instruments of Jewish enlightenment, and most immediately by the need to respond to a new missionary journal published in New York entitled The Jewish Chronicle, not to be confused with the distinguished London Jewish newspaper (1841-) of the same name. Publicly, Leeser described his journal as an “advocate” for Jewish interests (the full title was The Occident and American Jewish Advocate), and its announced aim was “diffusion of knowledge on Jewish literature and religion”—in other words, communal defense and Jewish education, two principal aims of Jewish journalism forever after. To carry out these aims, the Occident published news from American Jewish communities, and from abroad (often reprinted from foreign Jewish publications), as well as sermons, editorials, historical articles, book reviews, innovative policy proposals (for schools, Jewish colonies, unity etc.), religious philosophy, and controversial (or apologetic) articles levelled against missionaries and other enemies of the Jewish people. Leeser admitted into his pages many writers with whom he disagreed (sometimes he mentioned the disagreement in an introductory paragraph), and he published many verbatim documents. Especially in his early years, he saw his as the newspaper of record for the American Jewish community, and he opened its pages to a wide range of contributors, including non-Jews. 


6 On Noah’s newspapers, see Sarna, Jacksonian Jew, passim.


Occident, gained a wide national readership. So long as Wise was alive, it was recognized as his semi-official organ representing the Reform Movement in American Judaism.\(^{11}\) Although the American Israelite lost this mantle after Wise’s death and steadily deteriorated into a run-of-the-mill local newspaper, a pattern had been set. Thereafter in American Jewish life, we have many examples of significant, movement-sponsored periodicals. In the best cases, the idealism, energy and commitment that stand behind the movement are reflected in its journal. Such was the case, for example, with the American Hebrew, the vibrant weekly created in 1879 by religiously traditional young Jews (ages 21-29) hoping to revitalize American Jewish life.\(^{12}\) Later, we see this same pattern in such journals as the Menorah Journal, the Reconstructionist, Jewish Frontier, and in the Boston student newspaper, Genesis II.

The third model that we have beginning in this period is the foreign-language Jewish newspaper. Several of them appeared even before the Civil War, Sinai and Die Deborah being the most famous, and all of them were published in German. This is not the place for a full-scale discussion of the foreign-language Jewish press in America.\(^{13}\) Suffice it to say that significant Jewish newspapers were published in German, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino, and they deserve a separate analysis. A whole documentary film, in fact, has been produced just on the Jewish Daily Forward. For our purposes, however, let me confine myself to four salient points: (1) Foreign language journals consisted of two types: intellectual (high brow) journals and popular (low brow) ones. The former, like Sinai (in German) and Di Tsukunft (in Yiddish) addressed immigrant intellectuals, the latter, like Die Deborah (in German) and Der Hoyafrayd (in Yiddish) were directed to the masses and especially to women (although it was widely recognized that men read these journals as well). (2) Foreign language Jewish newspapers were much less compartmentalized than English ones. Like the American, they presented secular and Jewish news as well as features. One can see this clearly in Abraham Cahan’s Forward; it remains true even today in the newspaper produced for Israeli immigrants, Yisrael Shelanu. (3) The foreign-language press was much more focused on issues of immigration, Americanization, and developments in the old country than the Anglo-Jewish Press. The Yiddish press, in particular, covered developments in Eastern Europe with a depth not seen in parallel English language Jewish newspapers. (4) Finally, foreign-language Jewish newspapers were often bolder and more critical of America and American Jewish life than English-language ones. This is especially true of the intellectual journals and the Hebrew journals that had a small, well-defined readership and editors far less fearful of the journal “falling into the wrong hands.” Intellectuals, to be sure, tend to be alienated no matter what language they write in, but the secure sense that they were being read by a select and sympathetic audience made it possible for them to criticize people, institutions, and social trends in a way not often found in the parallel English-language Jewish publications that were more widely circulated and that gentiles sometimes perused as well.

So much, then, for the early decades of American Jewish journalism, when so many of the central trends and central tensions that characterize Jewish journalism in this country were determined. Now it is time to move on to the question with which I began: why did the once varied and vibrant world of Jewish journalism in the United States deteriorate into the so-called “weaklies” that Jewish leaders like Stephen S. Wise used so regu-

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others. The number of English-language national Jewish periodicals proliferated in the twentieth century. There were a grand total of four such periodicals in 1900: one for “Young People” (Young Israel), one for the Jewish Religious School and Home” (Helpful Thoughts), one for Hebrew Union College students and alumni (Hebrew Union College Journal), and one, The Menorah, the official organ of B’nai B’rith. Today, by contrast, the American Jewish Year Book lists more than sixty such periodicals, not including those for religious schoolchildren, catering to the widest array of ideologies and interests. As a result of this exponential growth, Jews dissatisfied with local Jewish newspapers, who want more serious and in-depth analyses, have in the twentieth century been able to find alternative publications to read.

Finally, I should mention two other sources that American Jews began to turn to for reliable news: first, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, founded in 1917 to provide world Jewry with news about the World War from a Jewish point of view. Its cable service, set up in the 1920s, soon became the dominant provider of worldwide Jewish news for most American Jewish weeklies, improving the quality of their Jewish news. Yet this development also created a certain uniformity of perspective, as almost all American Jewish newspapers came to rely on the same source—the “JTA”—for Jewish news from around the nation and the world. Moreover, as a Jewish sponsored agency, the JTA faced some of the same tensions that local weeklies faced: its commitment on the one hand to journalistic detachment, and on the other hand its very strong attachment to the American Jewish community to which it has always been beholden. Second, the New York Times became increasingly influential within the American Jewish community. Purchased by Adolph Ochs, the son-in-law of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, in 1896, it consciously paid special attention to news of Jewish interest both because of its Jewish ownership and because Jews comprised a substantial percentage of its New York readership. In return, Jews rightly or wrongly came to perceive the Times as the ultimate authority on substantial news stories of Jewish interest. The Times, in reporting such stories, has always projected an air of objectivity and detachment that no Jewish newspaper can match.

Recent years, as we all know, have witnessed a considerable revolution in the world of American Jewish jour-

nalism. This is not the place to analyze this revolution—especially since so many of the revolutionaries are participants in this forum—but I think it is fair to say that Jewish journalism’s long downward slide has during this time period begun to be reversed. The strong national emphasis on journalistic independence in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate have echoed in the halls of Jewish journalism, and almost all major American Jewish newspapers have been affected by this revolution. As a result, a new high-quality national Jewish newspaper, the English-language Forward, has been established that sets a new standard in the field, while the best local Jewish newspapers have displayed a willingness to tackle controversial issues that would just a few years ago have been shunned.

Rather than ending on this happy and uplifting note, however, I want to close by restating in question form three central problems that seem to me to have plagued American Jewish journalism over the past century and a half, problems that help to account for its decline early in the century, and problems that remain on the agenda today, even as we hope that Jewish journalism is improving. First, what is the mission of Jewish journalism? Is its mission primarily to inform? to educate? to defend? to support one or another Jewish ideology? to promote community and continuity? And if one insists that its mission embraces all of the above, what happens when two or more of them come into conflict? Second, what are the responsibilities of Jewish journalism? Should the “good of the Jewish people” (or the good of the local Jewish community) be the highest goal, or should “truth” be the highest goal? What happens when these two come into conflict? Finally, what compromises should a Jewish newspaper be prepared to make in order to ensure its survival? Should it seek private or communal support? How much independence should it be prepared to sacrifice in return for such support? Where must it forcefully draw the line?

These are not easy questions. Nor do I pretend that history provides us with sure answers to any of them based on past experience. What I do believe is that the quality of Jewish journalism depends on our willingness to confront these questions honestly—and to wrestle with them continuously.
And there is another myth that has been shattered: that Israel desperately wants and needs our financial help. For decades we have identified ourselves as friends and supporters of Israel by contributing to the UJA. And then along comes Yossi Beilin, the young deputy foreign minister, to tell us thank you very much but you can keep your money—we’re not schnorrers and we’re doing just fine, thank you.

Like parental victims of empty nest syndrome, who lose their meaning in life when their children grow up and move out of the house, we are searching for a new role because we’ve always thought of ourselves as playing a vital role in Israel’s support and development.

So in one sense, the question to ask is: If peace comes to Israel, will that be the end of American Jewry?

There’s no question that we have turned inward, because coupled with this distancing from Israel has come the news that assimilation is taking its toll on American Jewry, as evidenced by the national population study that found that 52% of all Jews who married in the last five years married non-Jews.

So the new rallying cry is Jewish continuity and identity, and a blue-ribbon commission was created last year by the organized Jewish community to deal with this crisis. But I am not convinced that a crisis of the spirit, at the very root of our heritage and identity, can be resolved by a process of compromise and consensus.

For decades, federations took care of the financially poor and needy. But today we have a Jewish community that is spiritually impoverished. Federations have a proven, and enviable, track record when it comes to raising funds, but what about the task of raising Jews?

Too much of Jewish life is dictated by a social work approach, and no matter how well meaning these practitioners are, they cannot round the edges of issues that speak to our hearts and souls. What does Jewish Community mean? Should we be defined by the amount of dollars we raise rather than the number of good deeds we accomplish?

Can we really speak about Jewish continuity and identity without discussing Judaism?

The language of the organized Jewish community speaks of consensus and committee and process, but where in our vocabulary do we talk about torah and mitzvot and covenant?

What, then, is the role of the weekly Jewish newspaper at a time when interest in Israel is waning, assimilation at home is growing, and fewer people are reading newspapers? This is not an academic question. If we don’t have people who care about Jewish life, we’re out of business. So part of our job is to promote and highlight the vibrancy of Jewish life, in as many forms as possible.

To meet the challenge of the next decade, Jewish newspapers will have to continue to change. They will have to do less reporting of news and far more reporting of trends, analyses, opinions and feature stories. That lesson is brought home to me each day when I look out my window from my Times Square office and see what is affectionately known as The Zipper, the moving headlines on the Newsday building.

If I am sitting at my desk on a Monday, working on a breaking story that our readers won’t receive until Friday, how can I compete with television, radio and dailies that are reporting the story instantly? I can’t, and I shouldn’t try to. I think it is our job to interpret that story in as fresh a way as possible, focusing on an angle that will still be meaningful days after the event. For example, the issue after the kidnapping and murder of Nachshon Waxman in Israel, our cover story focused on his mother. We called it, “A Different Jew From Brooklyn.”

And the subhead read, “In the worst week of Esther Waxman’s life, she brought all of Israel together—and transformed the image of Orthodox American immigrants, eight months after Baruch Goldstein.”

Whether or not that story was a success, the point is that our readers are looking to us for a “take”—our “take”—on the news of the day, from the Mideast peace process, to a Supreme Court ruling on church and state, to a political race at home, to relations between blacks and Jews.
But we can and should come up with programs where young men and women in the field of Jewish journalism could take courses or seminars or workshops which would provide insight into the workings of the organized Jewish community as well as offer a dose of Jewish history and values.

This field will never attract large numbers, but that makes it all the more important for those who are Jewish journalists to be knowledgeable about their craft.

Jewish journalists can play a vital role in setting the agenda for the community, for informing and even inspiring large numbers of caring Jews. We have the responsibility and opportunity to report on complex and emotional issues in as dispassionate way as possible, and at the same time to write and publish opinion pieces that reflect the passion of conviction, from many perspectives.

Credibility is our most cherished component, but it must be earned, week in and week out. That is why I still believe that, when done properly, Jewish journalism can be more than a job. It can be a calling.

Marc S. Klein
Jewish Bulletin of Northern California

There are many weeks when all the key issues facing the Jewish press get compressed into one small worry. How are we going to get this week’s issue out?

It’s a question I know that all my colleagues have faced. The deadline is only hours away. The flu has struck three members of the staff. The lead story is falling apart. The computer system is buggy. And there is still two day’s worth of work to do in the next three hours.

Yet the paper gets out. The paper always gets out.

But once the deadline is passed and we have a good night’s sleep—or the semblance thereof—we can once again ruminate about the deeper meaning of life and where the Jewish press fits in.

Who is going to read the paper we just struggled to put out? And who is going to criticize it? You can’t publish a paper in the Jewish world without hearing immediate criticism.

“There’s too much on Israel. There’s not enough on Israel. Why isn’t my picture in the paper? Why wasn’t my picture in the paper only once? There’s not enough fund-raising news. There’s too much fund-raising news. There’s nothing about the Orthodox. The paper has become too religious.”

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the world of the Jewish press. Trying to please everyone and going broke doing it.

We’ve been asked to discuss the key issues facing the Jewish press. Well, many of our key issues are the same faced by the general press. Except our readership is less forgiving, more demanding and is disappearing.

Yes, I said disappearing.

The Jewish press faces the same decrease in readership that confronts the general press. Jerry Lippman and Gary Rosenblatt are not competing with each other. Like the rest of us, they are competing against Time, Newsweek, ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox and MTV. And more recently, the Internet and other online computer services.

People have too many things to do in their free time and less free time to do it in. Ultimately, they will devote themselves to what either interests them the most or entertains them the best.

The Jewish press—at least papers in larger cities—has become more entertaining. The papers look better with graphic designs that rival many big city dailies. We have learned to some degree to take ourselves less seriously by running not only the hard news stories but the nice, warm, fuzzy bubbeh and zaydeh stories.

In the last ten years, there’s been a marked improvement in the quality of Jewish journalism in many of our larger papers. They’ve become vibrant and better written.
Well, I still don’t believe federations should be in the newspaper business. I’d like nothing better than to see every federation in the United States that owns a newspaper to spin it off to a not-for-profit community board of directors that is independent of the federation.

At the same time, however, my feeling is that the federation should then subsidize that paper much like it subsidizes the Jewish hospital, the Jewish home or the Jewish family service. Like all these other agencies, the Jewish newspaper is performing a vital service in the community that should receive community support.

Does such a subsidy create an unfair advantage against a competing locally-owned Jewish newspaper? Yes it does. But competing Jewish newspapers are just an aberration like competing daily newspapers. There are not enough Jews interested in reading a Jewish newspaper to sustain two competitors in the years to come. There also isn’t enough advertising to support two quality papers. If federation funds are totally withdrawn in New York, the readers ultimately will suffer.

Could federations better use that money elsewhere? Yes and no. It’s hard to argue against using that money to feed hungry people. At the same time, if the major criterion for allocations in the Jewish world today is Jewish continuity, what promotes Jewish continuity better than a Jewish newspaper? We bring Judaism into people’s homes every week. I don’t know anything else that federations do that can make the same claim.

In opposing such subsidies, my friend Jerry Lippman argues that a newspaper loses its independence when it accepts federation dollars. I agree.

Federation funding often comes with strings attached or at least some expectation of special treatment. Many federation executives do not see any difference between news and public relations, but we, as editors, do. That creates a tension between the Jewish press and each federation that some communities handle better than others. The more enlightened federation executives realize that a Jewish newspaper which gives the appearance of being independent will be better read by the community.

Independence, however, doesn’t necessarily mean better journalism. We have a number of independently-owned Jewish newspapers in this country that I think we can all can agree are not very good publications. The bigger independent Jewish papers, however, do not look or read that different from the bigger federation subsidized papers.

How often does any Jewish newspaper—even those that are independently owned—do investigative journalism? It’s just not affordable on a small newspaper. With so few writers, we can’t afford to designate one to do an in-depth story that is too time consuming. And there’s also the question of whether the readers want to see such a story in their Jewish newspaper. My contention is that most of our readers don’t.

Our readers—most of them anyway—want something warm and friendly to cozy up to over Shabbat. They take for granted that everything in the Jewish community is above board. That there are no Jewish crooks, no rabbis who cheat on their wives and no agencies that misuse funds. I have found that whenever we ultimately find some wrongdoing and reveal it on our pages, our readers are more angry at the messenger than the perpetrator of the wrongful act. We have an obligation to write such stories. But many readers have told us they don’t want their Jewish paper to show the bad side of life. Maybe that’s one reason that independent Jewish papers don’t look that different from those that are subsidized. That brings us to the issue of content.

The trend that we are just beginning to see in the Jewish press is a greater emphasis on community coverage. For too many years, our community papers wrote more about what was happening in Israel than what was going on at the JCC around the corner.

It has become clear in recent years that our readership wants and needs more news about the community in which they live. The continuity of the Jewish people starts in their own homes, in their own neighborhoods, in their own community institutions.

A good Jewish newspaper must examine whether its community is receiving the services that are needed. Are the elderly being taken care of? Are there enough classrooms for those children who want a Jewish education? Are we doing enough for the disabled, for the victims of AIDS, for the poor?
In closing, I’d like to thank Brandeis for hosting this conference. I wish more of our Jewish leadership in institutional life would begin to show greater concerns about the Jewish press and its future.

Our survival and the survival of the Jewish people are very much intertwined. I’m convinced that the better the Jewish newspaper, the better the Jewish community and the greater chance for its future.

Jerome Lippman
Long Island Jewish World

The topic of this panel is “Key Issues Facing the Jewish Press.” I assume that means issues besides Jerry Lippman. Kol HaKavod to the Horsstein Program in Jewish Communal Service, the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the organizers of this program for allowing a gadfly like myself to participate.

Let me say in my defense that I have made myself an issue in the Jewish press for the same reasons that the Cohen Center’s Gary Tobin has made himself an issue in the broader Jewish organizational world with his report, “Creating New Jewish Organizations and Institutions.” He and I and a lot of other gadflies out there aren’t rocking the boat because we enjoy the ride.

No, we’ve become critics out of genuine concern for the future of the American Jewish community. The future—where our community is headed as we enter the 21st century—is the key issue facing American Jewry.

Tobin argued in his report that Jewish institutions have fallen years behind American Jewry. That’s not good for the institutions and it’s certainly not good for American Jews. So let’s take Tobin’s mode of inquiry and apply it to the Jewish press. Are we keeping pace with the seismic shifts affecting Jewish life in America and around the world? Are we boosters for an out-of-step status quo? Or are we truly nudging—even inspiring—people and institutions to do the right thing, playing our role as constructive critics in the enterprise of clal Yisrael?

My answer? One: the best Jewish newspapers aren’t nearly as far behind the curve as Jewish institutions are. Two: privately owned, independent newspapers like the one I publish lead the pack in the race to keep up with aneka, the Jewish people. And three: Jewish newspapers, largely, are not recognized for the insights we provide into the here-and-now of American Jewry, or for our contributions to building and preserving the Jewish community.

The reason the good Jewish newspapers are keeping up with the Jewish people is that, every day, our reporters talk to people in and outside of the affiliated/federation world and listen to what’s turning them off and turning them on about Jewish life.

Our reporters talk to people on the streets and in the neighborhoods about the issues and subjects that concern them: the cost of Jewish living, relating to non-Jewish in-laws and grandchildren, our changing relationship with Israel and Israelis, the variety of ways of being Jewish. And, most crucially, what they can do to keep their children and grandchildren Jewish.

Jewish newspapers like ours were weather vanes long before all the recent surveys showed which way the wind is blowing. For years, we have reached out to the unaffiliated and the disaffected, the people ready to read a Jewish newspaper before they were prepared to join a synagogue or a Jewish organization.

And, I believe, independent, privately owned newspapers are the ones most likely to be in step with people rather than with institutions.

Why? For several reasons. Primarily because of our independence. We have to answer to our readers rather than to a board of directors. In many—if not most—cases, non-profit Jewish newspapers have overlapping boards with the organizations and institutions they’re trying to cover. Their freedom to talk frankly about the emperor’s new clothes is limited.

But an even more important motivation for those of us in the private sector to keep up with people is that we must be market-driven and market-sensitive. If we’re going to sell papers, we have to do our homework. That means knowing what our readers are about, what their habits are, and what they want to read.
The answer to this question will not come solely from the top down. It also rests with the people. And that is the richest resource Jewish newspapers have to offer: the people, the hundreds of thousands of current and potential readers of Jewish newspapers.

Newspapers like ours that look to our readers as our marketplace find out three crucial items of information: what they’re thinking about, what changes are going on, and what they want from their Judaism and from Jewish institutions. Jewish newspapers can play a crucial role as we enter ever more deeply into this Brave New World where we must compete in the global marketplace of ideas, beliefs and ways of living.

Jewish newspapers are simultaneously insiders and outsiders. We are part of organized Jewish life and at the same time, observers and critics of it. We want our Jewish institutions to survive and thrive, even as we have a responsibility to keep a sharp eye on them.

Newspapers that just pass on press releases are little more than dressed up bulletin boards. They serve a useful purpose in conveying information, but they do virtually nothing to stimulate people to think—or act. They don’t contribute in any significant way to reversing the forces pulling increasing numbers of people away from Judaism.

On the other hand, newspapers that provide platforms for the free forum of ideas can make significant contributions to our collective future. Newspapers like ours prove that such a forum works, that it can be done, that newspapers can broaden significantly our understanding of the Jewish community.

I said that the key issue facing the Jewish press is the future: the future of American Jewry. We ask that we be allowed to play our role in the collective attempt to rise to the challenges the future presents.

Let us be gadflies, coaxing organizations and institutions and individuals to get with the program, to stop using 20-year-old tools to meet 50-year-old problems. Recognize our place on the cutting edge. Read our pages for the clues they offer to the mystery the future represents. Do not treat us as vehicles for handouts, but as legitimate, full partners in the American Jewish enterprise.
Australia, is the third community, growing rapidly with the influx of South African Jews expected to bring its numbers to over 10,000 in the next few years. Adelaide in South Australia, and Brisbane and the Gold Coast communities in Queensland with about 2,500 Jews each make up the three smaller centres.

Overall, the Australian Jewish community is a rare Diaspora phenomenon: it is a growing community, not a dying one. An immigration spurt in the 1970s and 80s from the former Soviet Union, South Africa and Israel has increased overall numbers by some 20-25 percent in the past 20 years. Undisputed figures on intermarriage rates are hard to come by, but they range from a low of around nine percent according to some demographers to those of some of the more impressionistic doomsayers who insist the real figures are closer to 25 percent. But everybody agrees that even at their highest they are lower than those of North America and much of Europe and that Australia has some lead time—perhaps another 20 years—before there is a similar threat.

Associated with a strong Jewish communal identity—whether as cause or effect is not altogether clear—is Australian Jewry’s most notable achievement, an extensive and pluralistic Jewish day school network. In addition there are many congregations and yeshivot and the religious expressions run from ultra-Orthodox through to Liberal-Progressive.

Even though a major sociological survey in 1993 found that well over 80 percent of the Melbourne community described themselves as religiously unobservant and committed to making their future in Australia, the same community has a strongly traditional and Zionist “feel” to it. On the Zionist side there is strong support for Israel financially and politically through the United Israel Appeal and through an effective Jewish lobby which, if anything, is criticised in the mainstream media and even in some sections of the Jewish community for being too prominent and too influential.

On the religious side Chabad and the Charedi sections of the community are strong, as are the Mizrahi congregations. Within their own camp so are the Liberal/Progressive communities in Melbourne and Sydney where they have established day schools of their own. There is the full range of active Zionist youth movements, many of our young people go to Israel on exchange programs at the end of their high school years, and there is a relatively high aliyah of committed young professionals.

One other factor promoting Jewish identity which has been highlighted by an American observer who is now also an Australian is directly relevant, especially to this audience. Professor Bill Rubinstein, a definitive historian of Australian Jewry, with his wife Hilary has pointed out that young Australian Jews do not leave home for another city when it comes time to go to college. They stay at home and go to campuses in their own city where they have grown up and made friends and connections with the community. Now there are some downsides to this closeness, of course. But it has kept the younger generation more Jewishly involved during the critical university years and it may explain why they do not intermarry as much.

Yes, there is prejudice against Jews in some quarters, although few indications of outright discrimination. While there are occasional outbursts of anti-semitism, which include firebomb attacks and racist graffiti on synagogues and schools, Australia remains one of the most hospitable and accepting societies of Jews in every field of endeavour, whether it be in business, politics, the professions, or the arts. Australia also awards them the highest honours of rank and privilege that the country can bestow, including that of Governor-General, a post most recently held by Sir Zelman Cowen from 1977 to 1982.

This may sound a picture too good to be true. In fact, as with any community, there are many shortcomings, some serious, which the Australian Jewish News is generally the first to point out to its readers. My reason for spending the time on the success story is because, compared to other Diaspora Jewish communities with which I am familiar, Australian Jews have fewer of the existential problems of sheer survival and diminishing hope about the future which bedevil so many other communities. We are a community that looks forward with some reason for confidence, if we can avoid smugness.

The beguiling seductions of the open society, which to date have proven themselves threatening to long-term Jewish cohesion in North and South America and in
president, do not like professional journalism because they do not like the idea that the test of what is published should be whether it is newsworthy to the majority of readers. Their test is whether it boosts their organisation's image, the president and donors' images, and, above all, in a community such as Melbourne where there is no united communal appeal, their capacity to raise funds. They see the Jewish paper, especially because it is a monopoly, as a forum for their publicity.

I should add, at once, that I have some sympathy for this approach. Wherever possible, and that means wherever space considerations allow us, we do try to publish the edited news releases and routine organisational information about plaques and people. But something usually has to give in a contest between space and material for publication sent in to us. This is especially true in a community such as Melbourne's, where there are some 200 active organisations and therefore 200 presidents and committees.

The point is that whatever news we publish, and no matter how many photographs we publish, it is never enough for most organisations. It is a rare event, therefore, and enough to create moments of stunned amazement in the office when it occurs, to receive an acknowledgement from a communal organisation that it is "quite happy" with the coverage it has received. So the pressures go on, even if we are independent. But that is not a complaint, so much as an observation.

Now I try to reassure our journalists that we are hounded every week—the phones start ringing at 9 a.m. every Thursday when the paper lands at the news agents in the Jewish suburbs—because that is what community newspapers should expect to be in order to get the news. That, after all, is our role in life—to be hounded and to respond professionally. Being hounded because readers care about every word and read things into headlines and articles which were never intended is also a compliment. If we were just another communal rag, nobody would care very much. The fact that they care so passionately is a form of tribute. At least that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

We can employ journalists who can see a career path in Jewish journalism, or can return to mainstream journalism after some years with us without seeing any setback to their professional advancement. Indeed, the opposite is usually true. This an important factor in a small community where there is only one paper.

The point, therefore, is not that our organisations and communal makher try the squeeze, develop elaborate conspiracy theories, and become jealous if the other makher's pictures appear. Of course they do. That is the nature of the communal beast. It is, rather, that knowing we are independent, and assuming our editors and reporters are doing their job, the makher know they will fail to apply the squeeze technique successfully.

So, albeit in some cases grudgingly, they have come, over recent years, to accept the idea that we are in nobody's pocket; that you cannot buy your way into the editorial columns of the paper just because you are a big advertiser; that you cannot frighten the editors by approaching the chairman of the board, the major shareholders or their relatives.

Our independence has another basic effect. It attracts experienced journalists who have made their mark in mainstream journalism and who know that they will not have to make fundamental compromises with journalistic standards to work for a Jewish newspaper. The result is that we can employ journalists who can see a career path in Jewish journalism, or can return to mainstream journalism after some years with us without seeing any setback to their professional advancement. Indeed, the opposite is usually true. This an important factor in a small community where there is only one paper.

I just want to conclude by saying something about the Jerusalem Report. The Jerusalem Report was born because the Jerusalem Post was put on the market in early 1989. I had been the Washington correspondent for the Jerusalem Post many years ago (as I've told friends here, "There was life before Wolf Blitzer and it was me"). I came to Washington to be the correspondent for the Australian which is the national daily newspaper in Australia. While there I became the correspondent of the Jerusalem Post from 1970-1973. Because of my contact with Ari Rath and Erwin Frenkel, they heard that the Jewish News had been bought in Australia by Richard Pratt, a very, significant manufacturer and entrepreneur and a major donor to all the Jewish appeals, and that I had been involved with Richard in
Jerusalem Report is a success, it's a success only because it's a very high standard example of first-rate journalism which happens to be Jewish. There's no conflict between the two. There's no contradiction in terms.

Ned Temko
London Jewish Chronicle

At first, I thought Sam was merely being generous when he offered to lead off the session. But he has, of course, now said almost everything that I could possibly say. So, short of telling a few jokes, I may find myself at a loss for words.

Let me begin by thanking Bernard Reisman for inviting me here. Unlike Sam, who used this trip as an excuse to visit his wife's birthplace, I used it to go back to my own roots—I'm from Washington, DC, and this enabled me to see the Redskins lose again, which I have not done for many years. Indeed, I feel I have almost existentially redeemed myself, because the last time the Redskins were in the Superbowl, I was unable to attend, since I was the Moscow correspondent of a small Jewish paper called the Christian Science Monitor. For the record, I don't think there were Jewish players on either side of yesterday's game... which is not the kind of question I would have asked myself several years ago in my Christian Science Monitor incarnation, of course. But now that I write headlines the likes of which are "Jew Finishes Sixth," my view of sports reporting, and of journalism in general, has instinctively changed.

All of which, believe it or not, is by way of introduction to some more serious comments, which will indeed begin very much where Sam ended.

I will try to be brief, because I think the best contribution both Sam and I can make is perhaps to open the session up to questions or suggestions to which we can respond. Because it's hard to know precisely where to begin in attempting to add a global perspective to a discussion of an American Jewish press that is much more diverse geographically, and larger in terms of quantity of publications, than is the case in virtual monopoly markets such as Sam's and my own.

But I do want to give a brief history of the "JC" as the Jewish Chronicle—with no intent to infringe on Christian copyright—is popularly known in Britain. I want to speak particularly of the last few years, during which the paper has changed a lot, and of where it is going now. In listening this morning to my American colleagues, I was reminded of the advance publicity for a European Jewish conference to which I was invited (but did not in fact attend) some weeks ago. It was held in Paris, and one of the sessions was scheduled to debate the question of "what model of Jewish newspaper" is most desirable. And the models suggested ranged from, I think, "community-building" through a number of other degrees of explicit communal links or control, to, finally, the notion of an "independent newspaper." And I realized both in reading that meeting's proposed agenda, and while listening to this morning's proceedings, how fortunate I am—and I imagine Sam feels the same way—to edit an independent Jewish newspaper. I guess I feel particularly strongly about this because, to harken back to remarks made in this morning's session, I entered journalism in the 1970s on the back of Watergate with some fairly naive, idealistic views of why one becomes a journalist instead of a lawyer or an accountant. Particularly with that kind of background, I confess that I find it hard to imagine a non-independent newspaper, Jewish or otherwise, as being anything but a contradiction in terms.

I don't say that one cannot publish a good and readable paper, Jewish or otherwise, that is not independent. But it's a little bit like virginity, or pregnancy—a newspaper either is independent or it is not. One that is, functions very differently than one that is not. And one of the things that I am very grateful for is the fact that the Jewish Chronicle is not only the oldest Jewish newspaper in the world; and is not only a profitable Jewish newspaper, and has been for some 150-odd years; but that it is also both financially and editorially independent. And I dare say that all of these things go hand in hand. I can't imagine a newspaper, Jewish or otherwise, surviving for 153 years—thriving for 153 years—if it weren't fundamentally independent. Equally, I can't see how an editorially independent newspaper can be sustained if it is not also financially independent.

Now basically the JC is a purposely schizophrenic publication. It is, in a way, a combination of all the various
talking about than practically addressing. On all these issues, I think, what we see our future role as being is to broaden the sense of what it is possible, and necessary, to discuss and debate in a modern Jewish community. Basically, I begin with an assumption that intermarriage, although a very sexy thing for communal leaders to get worked up about, shouldn’t really be the central concern of any Jewish community with reason for confidence in its future. Intermarriage, after all, is merely a symptom of a more fundamental opting out. For communal leaders, our paper has argued that it is more useful to ask why people don’t want to be involved in various aspects of things Jewish, of which only one is dating, marriage, or those sorts of life choices. A Jewish newspaper’s responsibility—and opportunity—is less overtly political, or perhaps not political at all. Although fortuitously answering the challenge I have just men-
tioned, a newspaper’s vocation is to vibrant, is to be provocative, is to be unafraid—without being merely cheap or sensational—and to be, dare I say it, although in most such media seminars we don’t spend enough time on this, simply fun as well. After all, one of the things that has kept us alive as a people is precisely what keeps newspapers, Jewish or otherwise, alive. It is a sense of distance on oneself, the ability to laugh.

For let’s face it. In addition to everything else that a serious newspaper has to do, you also have to entertain your readers. Not by trivializing issues, but by choice of material, by tone of voice, by excellence of presentation, and by excellence of writing. I would end by adding one, perhaps obvious but crucially important, thing: a good Jewish newspaper can be good only if it is a good newspaper.
risk another myth Jewish newspapers have long clung to: that we have a niche business. The good news—and the bad news—is that others have discovered the richness of our niche and have begun to encroach upon it, often with the added benefits of a larger editorial well and with full color illustrations and pictures. That kind of unaccustomed competition will put pressure on Jewish newspapers to publish a better and, finances permitting, a more colorful product than it has in the past.

On the subject of finances—and newspapers are, at bottom line, a business—many Jewish papers will face the prospect of shrinking revenues in the 21st century. This is particularly true of federation papers subsidized by Jewish welfare fund dollars. That’s because the so-called hot button issues (saving the remnant and Israel’s survival) used to raise those welfare fund dollars year after year are now cooling down.

American Jews are surely concerned about the plight of their elderly. They care that their JCCs are attractive places for our young men and women to meet and for our families to gather and recreate. And we’re all for raising the quality of religious school education. But none of these issues seem to have the same magnetizing pull on our wallets as does the prospect of saving Jews in peril or. more galvanizing yet, saving Israel from its enemies.

Assuming there will be no dramatic new group to save or new war for Israel to fight, assuming, in fact, that peace really will break out, federations will have increasing difficulty raising record-breaking revenues each year. In turn, they and their constituent agencies will cut back on subsidies and advertising dollars earmarked for their Jewish papers. Independent and privately owned papers as well will feel the effects of reduced non-profit advertising.

At the same time, in a classic Catch-22, these non-profit organizations will demand more “free” editorial space to get their message across. Moreover, a federation worried about shrinking dollars and skittish donors will be increasingly intolerant of its papers publishing articles on, say, a Jewish day school whose reputation outshines its performance; a JCC whose workout areas are poorly supervised; or a big makher whose financial activities may be less than kosher.

The more news is perceived as being managed, whitewashed, censored or adversarialized, the harder it will be to get journalists of integrity to serve as editors and reporters. If the qualified, self-respecting journalist is considered dispensable, with editing and writing responsibilities simply falling to the Federation’s PR staff, it won’t be long before a disgruntled public will rebel in the most effective way possible: by not buying or reading the newspaper.

Just as the content of Jewish newspapers is changing, so too is the technology. Communication is becoming, increasingly, an electronic phenomenon. Not only in the way newspapers gather news but in the way they disseminate it to their readers.

Newspapers as we know them may never disappear entirely, but increasingly they and their readers may become part of the so-called information superhighway. During the 21st century, many of us may be scrolling video screens rather than turning pages to find out who married whom, who died and what is happening in our community and in the world. Jewish news text, accompanying graphics and (still hard to believe) sound and moving video images will be transmitted electronically on CD-ROM, through our modems, on our computer screens, and via our television sets.

Time, Inc. has already announced a test to offer an interactive version of some of its magazines to those with access to the global network of computers known as the Internet. If Jewish newspapers are to be experienced on screen, rather than perused propped between the coffee cup and the bagel, then the way we present the news must be altered as well.

Text, on screen, must be more concise and better-written, with catchy, eye-popping headlines to draw the viewer in. Moreover, text must share the spotlight with far more graphics than any of us use or that most of us can afford today. And as if this weren’t change enough,
What am I talking about?

This is a case of change or die, albeit a slow death. There are many factors and trends that spell the death of Jewish journalism.

a. If the average age of our readers is in the 50s, and if younger generations receive most of their information from television, and since half of all Jews who marry, marry out of the religion and usually out of organized Jewish life, who then are the readers of the future? Not only is that pool shrinking, but they are well-read, well-educated and are used to top-quality publications. The average Jewish newspaper is not up to the challenge, both content-wise and graphically.

b. The Jewish community is techno-phobic. That’s actually not true. Jews in their 30s and younger have generally mastered the computer and even the modem. But the decision-makers in the Jewish community are of a different generation. I call them the “Fountain Pen Generation.” And because they generally cannot and do not access emerging technologies, they are also not investing in these technologies for use by the community, including for Jewish newspapers.

There are over 100,000 Jews, mostly younger Jews, on the Internet and that number is growing quickly every day. But no Jewish newspaper is on the Internet.

In 2 years’ time, CD ROM drives are going to be as common in homes as VCRs. While the Christian community has developed some wonderful interactive CD ROMS—I know because I have spent many hours playing with them—there is no one in the Jewish community, and certainly none of the Jewish publications, that offer CD ROM versions or are seriously investigating their use. The Jerusalem Post offers a disc with 5 years worth of their daily edition, but it is priced out of the market and is not multimedia or interactive. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency has real history in its files that would be worthwhile to make accessible on CD ROM, but it’s not going to happen and even if it does, they aren’t going to do it right. Why?

Two reasons: money and training.

There is enough money in the Jewish community to transform Jewish publications, but it’s not going to happen. With all the talk of continuity, no one is really saying that Jewish publications are an important link in the chain. We know this because all we have to do is follow the money trail. For those publications that are dependent upon federation allocations—and I think that’s about half of them—communal triage is taking its toll.

There are no think-tanks for the Jewish media. There are no foundations underwriting blue-ribbon commissions on the future of Jewish journalism. There are no fellowships or cash awards. There are no foundations underwriting target cities for journalism or for training the next generation of journalists and editors.

I was fortunate to receive a fellowship from within the Jewish community to go to the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. A third of my class of 100 students were Jewish and only two of us are working in the Jewish community. Only one of the two is making a living by being a Jewish journalist and it’s not me. The best and the brightest of our community do not return and I don’t blame them. Why should I work for a Jewish paper? I’ve received a bunch of job offers in the community and flirted with other related opportunities, but I have a baby, another on the way, a mortgage and a future to secure.

But if, for some reason, a good Jewish journalism job comes my way, why should I take it? If I really want to have an impact on the Jewish community, I should work for a respected non-Jewish paper. One article in the Wall Street Journal on the Jewish community carries more weight than one hundred in any Jewish newspaper. We saw that play out recently when the Journal reported on the unease in the Jewish community over a central unifying focus now that Israel is on the verge of peace. We saw that whenever Ari Goldman was allowed to do a substantive piece on Jewish life in the New York Times.
Our second challenge was to find a model of journalism that was independent, exciting, cutting-edge, informative and entertaining. We think we have that down.

Our third challenge was to find a way to integrate emerging technologies into our game-plan. We think we have that down.

Our final challenge is to find investors who want to be partners in redefining Jewish journalism and, in the process, help the American Jewish community transform and adapt in positive ways.

Secular publications are spending millions and millions of dollars to improve themselves financially and editorially. If we enter the tent as we are today—publications of the past—then surely the blessing of future readers will go to our non-Jewish siblings. If, however, we learn valuable lessons from secular publications and adapt many of them to our profession, then we will receive the blessing and be a blessing for the Jewish community.

Mark Joffe
The Jewish Telegraphic Agency

Editor’s note: Mark Joffe had been expected to speak at the Brin Forum but was unable to attend. He did, however, send his remarks for inclusion in these Proceedings.

I’m sorry I could not be with you all today to participate in what I believe is a most important opportunity to discuss and debate critical issues facing the North American Jewish press. But I did want to share a few general observations.

First, as will be pointed out in several of the presentations today, there is good news and bad news when it comes to the general state of the Jewish press in North America.

The good news is that Jewish newspapers are getting better and better: Almost across the board, weekly Jewish papers are much more vibrant-looking and contain much better writing than they did a decade or two ago.

The bad news, of course, is that these papers are reaching fewer and fewer Jews, and their audiences are getting older and older.

I have nothing against supplying quality journalism to a sophisticated, if quite mature, Jewish readership. But our failure to interest and attract younger readers does not bode well for either our future as Jewish journalists or that of the Jewish community at large. We cannot afford to serve only the bubbehs and zaydehs of America, no matter how compelling their demographics are to high-end advertisers.

The question is: What do younger readers want? And by younger readers, I’m talking about not only “thirtysomethings,” but those in their 40s as well.

In an attempt to reach this audience, a number of papers have turned away from “hard news” toward softer, “feel-good” features. Papers are doing more pieces on issues facing young people, especially Jewish singles. Other papers have invested more energy in local coverage, on the premise that the younger generation is less interested in news about Israel and Europe and more preoccupied with events and issues closer to home.

But there is little evidence that these efforts have sent the average age of Jewish newspaper readership plunging downward. So perhaps we should ask an even more basic question: Do Jews under 50 really need a Jewish newspaper?

And I think if we are really honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the answer to that question is No.

The time has long since passed when one had to read a Jewish newspaper to find out news about Israel, the persecution of Jews in various parts of the world, or even who in the local Jewish community got Bar-Mitzvahed, got married or died.

Happily or unhappily, the New York Times has become a sort of national newspaper of Jewish interest. And for those who don’t subscribe to the Times, there are plenty of alternative sources to turn to for news about the Jewish people and the Jewish state.

True, there is news in Jewish newspapers—most of it supplied by my organization, the Jewish Telegraphic