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ABSTRACT

This paper explores an alternative way of studying journalism in the classroom by focusing on contemporary journalists' ironic treatment of morality. The paper examines the performative character of the language of news, when the words investigative journalists use are of interest not so much for what they say but for what they do. The paper establishes an appropriate framework of irony as a rhetorical device, with emphasis on its evaluative role and the implications of that role for journalists who, as a matter of professional obligation, must eschew explicit evaluation. The paper presents detailed examination of how irony works in the work of several distinguished reporters. (Twenty references are attached.) (KEH)

NEWS VALUES AND NARRATIVE THEMES: IRONY, HYPOCRISY AND OTHER ENDURING VALUES

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IRONY AND MORALITY

Once upon a time Mike Wallace, senior correspondent for CBS' 60 Minutes, interviewed a former fund-raiser and learned that $2.5 million was raised for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference but only $150,000 actually went to the organization. Incredulous, Wallace repeated what he had just heard: "Two and a half million is raised ostensibly on behalf of S.C.L.C. and a hundred and fifty thousand goes to S.C.L.C.?" The former fund-raiser confirmed: "That's correct." In a similar exchange between another 60 Minutes correspondent, Morley Safer, and an Illinois tax collector who claimed that "half" of all cash businesses are "skimming something," Safer repeats: "Half?" And the tax collector verified: "Half."

Michael Schudson (1981) uses these and other excerpts from 60 Minutes to illustrate the "pure irony" of the journalistic interview. Under the skillful guidance of a Wallace or a Safer, a repeated question serves as a "whispered aside" to the viewer; for these journalists "are not hard of hearing," Schudson reminds us, "but they *are* busy building a structure of ironic rapport with their audience":

> In the theater, a character may have an understanding with the audience that excludes the other characters. In 60 Minutes, the correspondent, by repeating a

question already answered, underlines the significance of what the interviewee supposedly finds less startling than he should (182).

If irony is but one of many conventions of narration characteristic of modern news, it is also one of the most powerful rhetorical devices journalists can use to vivify the boundaries of morality without making explicit moral judgments. Thus, while irony may be a popular narrative strategy among a variety of journalists, especially columnists, reviewers, and other "opinion" writers, it is particularly prevalent among investigative reporters who as a matter of course deal openly and yet objectively with matters of morality.

To engage questions of morality and at the same time honor their professional commitment to balance and impartiality, which requires them to be morally <u>dis</u>engaged, investigative reporters objectify morality by transforming moral claims into empirical claims (cf. Gans, 1979; Glasser and Ettema, 1989a). But often these reporters must do more: Exposing wrongdoing may require, as it did for Wallace and Safer, that the audience not only recognize a transgression as a transgression but understand as well how <u>serious</u> a transgression it "really" is, and the subtlety of irony can serve this end well. To be sure, the subtlety of irony enables the journalist to simultaneously interpret what is reported <u>and</u> deny the very intentionality that interpretation requires. Accordingly, irony works for the journalist not as it violates or contravenes the conventions of objective reporting but as it quietly--perhaps even deceptively--uses these conventions for dramatic effect, which is precisely the point Rostek (1989) makes in his study of Edward R. Murrow's famous <u>See It Now</u> "Report on Senator McCarthy": "the rhetoric of irony saturates the objective discourse of journalism with meanings, while, at the same time, it disguises this connection" (295).

Understanding irony, then, moves us closer to understanding how journalists can elicit outrage without appearing to violate the norms of neutrality; that is, irony helps explain how the very strategies journalists use to insure balance and impartiality can be transfigured into a strategy that invites an interpretation considerably beyond--or even at odds with--a literal or "transparent" reading of the news text. Thus, we follow in the tradition of Hackett (1984), Bennett (1988), and others whose work appreciates the paradox of objectivity in journalism: "that news is not biased in spite of, but precisely because of, the professional standards intended to prevent bias" (Bennett, 1988: 117).

We take quite seriously Carey's (1974) dictum that press criticism, properly conceived, is criticism of language. If journalists need to believe that the language they use transcends personal and institutional interests, news nonetheless "sizes up situations, names their elements and names them in a way that contains an attitude toward them" (245). Even if journalists need to insist that they report the news, not create it, journalism is nonetheless a fundamentally creative enterprise that "dissects events from a particular point of view" and therefore "brings a certain kind of world into existence" (246). If, in short, journalists cling to a strictly referential view of language, where the "real" world is taken to be both the source and justification of the truth of statements about it, the "reality" of news is nonetheless what Hall (1982) describes as an "effect," an illusion maintained through a belief in the ability of language to faithfully "reflect" or "mirror" the world it describes;[1] news, it follows, can be best understood not as "naturalistic but as _naturalized_: not grounded in nature," Hall points out, "but producing nature as a sort of guarantee of its truth" (75).

Our goal here is to continue our study of the language of journalism, a discussion we began elsewhere with attention to the narrative strategies journalists use to convey guilt and innocence (Ettema and Glasser, 1988), by concentrating on journalism's ironic treatment of morality. Generally, we are interested in learning more about the language "games"[2] journalists play and what these games portend for the practice and consumption of journalism. Specifically, by focusing on irony and its relation to morality, we intend to examine the performative character of the language of news, when the words journalists use are of interest not so much for what they say but for what they _do_. We begin, then, with a overview of irony as a rhetorical device, with emphasis on its evaluative role and the implications of that role for journalists who, as a matter of professional obligation, must eschew explicit evaluation. Having established an appropriate framework and vocabulary, we turn to a more detailed examination of what irony does in the work of several distinguished reporters.

Irony and Understanding

Irony serves to direct readers, viewers, or listeners to a preferred or intended understanding of communication; it is a way of "speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting, etc., in which the real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with, the ostensible or pretended meaning" (Muecke, 1969: 53). As a device of rhetoric, irony underscores the duality of language by questioning, opposing, or contradicting the obvious or common sensical meaning of a text. Irony counfounds the appearance of language by inviting readers to "read between the lines" or to "see beneath the surface."

As a mode of thought, irony makes a similar but larger claim: It points to the contingency of language--any language--by treating language not as medium between individuals and a world independent of them--an empty vessel waiting to be loaded with "reality"--but as an artifact of culture, a game of symbols whose players agree on how--i.e., by what rules--to make sense of experience and how to share that sense with others. Irony, Booth (1974: 44) explains, is an "aggressively intellectual exercise that fuses fact and value, requiring us to construct alternative hierarchies and choose among them." From this larger perspective, irony casts doubt on the entire enterprise of language by affirming the folly of any "entrenched" or "final" vocabulary; for ironists must realize, Rorty (1989: 73) observes, "that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed."

Indeed, making things look good or bad is precisely irony's objective. Whether it serves to discredit or negate language or to heighten a text's moral tone, irony's chief rhetorical role is an evaluative one (cf. Kaufer, 1977, 1981). And it plays this role in a rather particular way: Irony enables authors to disavow a proffered judgment and/or to render their own judgment where, ordinarily, it would be inappropriate to do so.

What distinguishes irony from other modes of evaluation, and what separates it from other forms of indirect communication (cf. Holdcroft, 1976), is its function: "to render _incompatible_ the levels of meaning the ironist produces" (Kaufer, 1977: 97). Put a little differently, the relationship of irony to meaning is basically binary--either irony works, in which case the reader understands the intended meaning of the text, or it does not work, in which case the reader simply misses the point. Unlike other forms of indirect communication, which characteristically enhance, embellish, or enlarge a text's meaning, irony _establishes_ the meaning of a text by invalidating what would be reasonably understood as its literal or "straightforward" meaning. Metaphor and allegory, for example, invite _parallel_ reading; if a text is intended to be read metaphorically or allegorically but is not, its meaning may be diminished but does not become unintelligible or altogether "lost." In contrast, irony fosters _oppositional_ reading; if a text is intended to be read ironically but is not, the meaning of the text may turn out to be the opposite of--or at least a considerable departure from--what the author intended.

Moreover, by establishing conditions conducive to what is in effect a reverse evaluation--an evaluation contrary to what appears to be the evaluation--irony serves to disassociate authors from <u>any</u> evaluation. Kaufer (1981) attends to this phenomenon by suggesting that the judgments conveyed by irony are best understood as a "meta-evaluation," a kind of rhetorical masquerade: "unlike non-ironic evaluators who predicate evaluative terms of an object, ironic evaluators only <u>pretend</u> to do so while actually questioning the grounds of the application and suggesting that grounds for a contrary evaluation are operative" (29). Muecke (1969) makes much the same point when he observes that irony enables an author to evoke a "duality of opposed 'valid' and 'invalid' levels" of meaning while "at the same time pretending, more or less covertly, not to be aware of the 'valid' level" (20). It is scarcely surprising, then, that irony is often the strategy of choice when an evaluation is needed and more direct forms of communication are likely to be offensive, indiscreet, ineffective, unprofessional or otherwise undesireable: Authors who use irony not only can avoid making an explicit evaluation but can avoid as well any mention of the reasons for their evaluation.

Irony, in sum, works within a text by moving readers away from what the text <u>says</u> and toward what the text <u>means</u>, which is essentially what Rostek (1989) noted in his study of the use of irony in a television documentary: it "invites us to read against the overt and surface signification of the words and images" (295). Irony works silently, or at least quietly, insofar as the knowledge it conveys is, to borrow a well worn distinction, more knowledge-how than knowledge-that; in other words, irony succeeds by alerting us how to read a text and not by telling us that the text means one thing or another. Finally, irony requires a tacit agreement between the author and the reader that what the text appears to mean is not what it really means, for what accounts for irony's rhetorical force is not merely the recognition of a discrepancy in meaning but a recognition of the discrepancy as a device under the mutual control of author and reader.

The Requirements of Irony

At a minimum, irony requires that the author and reader share an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the values needed for a reconstruction of the text. Without these shared values, there can be no basis for substituting a preferred or intended judgment for the proffered or ostensible one; in short, there would be no foundation on which to build a case for a reverse evaluation.

As a necessary condition for any ironic evaluation, these shared values point to what Kaufer (1981:30) calls the "two tiered" composition of irony: the evaluative statement itself and the "background context" that provides the rationale for subverting the evaluation. They also account for Kaufer's larger claim, an argument developed at considerable length by Booth (1974) as well, that because the epistemology of irony rests on a shared knowledge of norms, irony fosters "the building of amiable communities":

> Often the predominant emotion when reading . . . ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits. The author . infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes _my_ capacity for dealing with it, and--most important--because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built (Booth, 1974: 28).

The values shared by author and reader are of two types: _substantive_ norms, which are used in irony to reinforce (when the norms are shared) or to ridicule (when the norms are not shared), and _formal_ norms, which are used to refute. Kaufer and Neuwirth (1982) elaborate:

> Substantive norms refer to norms which offer positive directives like "brush your teeth three times a day," or "vote communist." Formal norms, on the other hand, refer to norms which do not themselves commit one to a substantive content but which instead are directives for assessing normative and even nonnormative systems. Formal norms include norms of consistency, coherence, and so on (32).

These norms, to the extent that they are adequately "foregrounded" in the text, provide the basis for an ironic reading of the text; they constitute the necessary evidence that the author intends the text to be read ironically. The norms themselves, of course, cannot be made explicit; rather, the text's context - linguistic and otherwise - "clues" the reader that certain norms are operative and need to be applied for a "proper" understanding of what is being said. Because irony operates covertly, the author's principal task is to put the reader on "the right trail of discovery"; and that trail must lead the reader to make the necessary "inferential link between what the ironist says and what is foregrounded" (Kaufer and Neuwirth, 1982: 30).

Irony in Journalism

Irony in journalism, like irony elsewhere, depends on "reserves of tact and experience and even wisdom that are likely at any moment to prove lacking in any of us" (Booth, 1974: 44). Journalists and their readers may be as well equipped, technically and intellectually, as others but the conditions under which journalism is produced and consumed are not ideally suited to irony. From the journalist's perspective, too much news is written in a hurray and without attention to the subtleties necessary for irony. Also, journalism is typically not studied--or even practiced--as a genre of literature; whatever techniques of irony journalists learn and use are probably acquired through common sense (cf. Glasser and Ettema, 1989b).

From the reader's perspective, news is read quickly and without attention to detail and nuance. It is telling that Booth uses newsreading to illustrate what he regards as a "crippling handicap" to understanding irony--the inability to pay attention:

> One can read most pages of a daily newspaper at a great rate, while watching a baseball game on TV. But then one comes to Art Buchwald's daily ironies, or--more dangerous still--to Russell Baker's column, one day ironic, the next day literal, the third day a mixture, and one sits down, morally alert and mentally torpid, to write an indignant letter to the editor, attacking the ironist for a position that he himself was attacking (1974: 223-224).

Even if irony is not entirely at home in journalism, it is nonetheless an important and useful technique for journalists who need to go beyond mere "coverage" of events and issues in an effort to to help readers understand that the "facts" being reported do not "speak for themselves." Skillful journalists have long used irony to convey their reservations about what is being "impartially" reported, and there is perhaps no better contemporary example than the Washington Post's Lou Cannon.

In August 1985, Cannon wrote the following lead for a story about Ronald Reagan's views on South African President B. W. Botha and the state of apartheid in South Africa:

> President Reagan, in an interview broadcast Monday, defended what he called the "reformist administration" of South African President P. W. Botha and contended that it had eliminated segregation in public places (Canon, 1985: 1A)

In the second paragraph Reagan was quoted as saying, "They have eliminated the segregation that we once had in our own country - the type of thing where hotels and restaurants and places of entertainment and so forth were segregated - that has all been eliminated." He went on to say, "They recognize now interracial marriages and all."

In his lede paragraph Cannon had given readers clues about how the Presidential remarks that followed were to be understood ("what he called the 'reformist administration'") but in the third paragraph the reporter provided more than just a clue: "White House spokesman Larry Speakes acknowledged later than 'some' rather than 'all' public segregation has been eliminated and said Reagan was aware of this." This juxtaposition of comments by the President and his long suffering aide calls into question Reagan's understanding of the situation and opens up an opportunity for Cannon to review in his own authorial voice - that is, without quoting others - some of the realities of South Africa. He reports, for example, "Only specially designated international hotels now admit people of all races as do some restaurants and some places of entertainment."

In effect, Cannon was able to use the very conventions of objective reporting - particularly, the use of quotation - as an ironic device to undermine the credibility of what was attributed to the President. Thus, later in the story, when Cannon mentions the policy of "constructive engagement" (in quotation marks, of course,) and quotes the President as saying that "apartheid is very repugnant to us," those readers within the interpretive community of Reagan's opponents on this issue, perhaps, do have a fleeting sense of communing with a reporter who is a kindred spirit - someone who knows the "shared and secret truths" about the President's grip on reality.

IRONY AND OUTRAGE

Irony has a special place in investigative journalism where it is often called upon to do much more than merely express reservations about what is being "impartially" reported. In this journalistic genre, irony is called upon to signal how serious the transgressions uncovered by investigative reporters really are and to summon the righteous indignation of the community in response to to those wrongs. The genius of irony is that it performs this service in a way that distances the, presumably, impartial reporter from moral evaluations and, thereby, naturalizes those evaluations. Investigative reporters are not so tightly bound by the contraints of objectivity as daily political reporters; their tone is often more moralistic and their use of irony less restrained. Nevertheless, as in other genres, the essential function of irony in investigative journalism is still to convey unobtrusive instructions about how to read the text; and in this genre, the instructions are: read with outrage.

The work of two distinguished journalists, Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele of the Philadelphia Inquirer, provides an example of special interest because it demonstrates the persistent

- if sometimes heavy handed - use of irony to summon outrage at a topic that might, at first, seem very dull: the federal tax code. Their Pulitzer Prize-winning series of reports collectively entitled "The Great Tax Giveaway" examined the many provisions added to the tax code by the Tax Reform Act of 1986 creating tax loopholes applicable to only one or a few businesses or individuals. The series went on to warn that Congress was at work on a "technical corrections bill" ostensibly to correct errors and oversights in the 1986 law but which offered another opportunity for more such loopholes.

Clearly, the facts of this situation offered greater potential to outrage readers' sense of fairplay than might be supposed. The facts, however, never speak for themselves. They must be given voice and in the first report in the series, the reporters established the tone of that voice:

> When Congress passed the Tax Reform Act of 1986, radically overhauling the Internal Revenue Code, Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D., IL), chairman of the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee, hailed the effort as "a bill that reaches deep into our national sense of justice - and gives us back a trust in government that has slipped away in the maze of tax preferences for the rich and powerful."
>
> In fact, Rostenkowski and other self-styled reformers created a new maze of unprecedented favoritism. Working in secret, they wove at least 650 exemptions - preferences, really, for the rich and powerful - through the legislation, most written in cryptic legal and tax jargon that conceals the identity of the beneficiaries.
>
> When they were finished, thousands of wealthy individuals and hundreds of businesses were absolved from paying billions upon billions of dollars in federal income taxes. It was, an Inquirer investigation has established, the largest tax giveaway in the 75-year history of the federal income tax.

This passage offers the usual formal features of contemporary journalism: officials are quoted and specific facts are cited all in the familiar clipped paragraphs. But, obviously, this passage does not offer the usual sense that the world is just as an elected official claims it to be. There is signal of increduality here: reformers (members of Congress, no less) are "self-styled." There is a whispered aside to the reader: exemptions are "preferences, really." And, most compellingly, there is a juxtaposition of quotation and fact that established incompatible meanings. Here, in closest possible proximity, are the two tiers of irony: the evaluation and the context that subverts that evaluation. In this particular instance, the two tiers are created by an official who says one thing but has done quite another. The exposure of such hypocrisy is an easy irony, perhaps, but it is the irony of the ordinary reader and the average citizen. What it lacks in subtlety, it ma' 's up with raw emotional power. The situation is outrageous.

Throughout the multi-part series, the facts were made to speak in exactly that tone of voice. In the third part, for example, the role of Congressional staff members in the creating the loopholes was assessed:

> It is an old Capitol Hill tradition that those who write the tax laws one year go to work the next year for those seeking to tailor the tax laws to their own desires. What is new is that the pace of the practice has accelerated since 1981, when Congress took to rewriting the massive Internal Revenue Code very year or two.
>
> Lawmakers often cite the need for simplification as the reason for tax-code revisions. That was especially true when President Reagan began marshalling support for

the tax-overhaul movement that lead to the 1986 Tax Reform Act. Declaring the system was "too complicated", the President said that Americans "often resent complexity" because "they sense it is unfair - that complexity is the means by which some benefit while others do not".

When the President and Congress' self-styled reformers had finished, they hailed the results.

"A vastly simplified tax structure will be created for both individuals and corporations," Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D., Mass.) proclaimed...

Instead of simplifying the code, the reformers in 1986 actually rendered it the most complex ever, fueling what has become in the 1980s, America's most explosive growth industry - the tax industry. As a result, more lawyers, accountants and tax specialists than ever are needed to interpret the law.

Who better to do that for businesses than the people responsible for writing the code in the first place?

By the fourth part of the series, which closely examined a number of the loopholes, the ironic tone had reached its shrillest pitch:

Herewith a civics quiz.

As a result of efforts by Congress' tax reformers, the Internal Revenue Code contains a provision that will:

(A) Allow members of a socially prominent Chicago-area family, who have made the Forbes magazine list of the 400 richest Americans, to take tax writeoffs denied to most taxpayers.

(B) Permits a millionaire Beverly Hills stockbroker, who boasts the world's largest private collection of Rodin sculpture, to escape payment of taxes that others must pay.

(C) Benefits a New York lawyer, who has specialized in helping his clients avoid taxes, by allowing him to buy the losses of a defunct company and use them to reduce the taxes owed by a profitable company.

(D) Raise the taxes of several million low-and-middle-income individuals and family members who are dealing with chronic diseases or unexpected and costly illnesses.

(E) All of the above.

If you answered (E), score yourself 100.

Each of those provisions was wrapped into the Tax Reform Act of 1986 that was so widely praised as a model of fairness by the lawmakers and others who engineered it.

With these, and other such passages, the reporters created a context or frame for their investigation of the tax revision process and of specific tax concessions that rendered the very idea of "tax reform" as an ironic joke - the promise of justice that yields outrageous injustice. The reporters also found the same sort of irony in the arcane, but seemingly benign, prospect of a "technical corrections" bill which presumably only would remedy errors and oversights in the reformers' first effort, the 1986 law:

> That was Round 1.
>
> Now, Congress is preparing to do it all over again, this time adding the private tax provisions to a so-called technical-corrections bill to remedy defects in the Tax Reform Act of 1986.
>
> The cost of the latest round of special deals - many of which are still being written - already is approaching the multibillion-dollar range.
>
> Whatever the final figure, it will come on top of the $10.6 billion outlay for such concessions in 1986. That $10.6 bill, by the way, was Congress' official estimate; the ultimate price tag, Inquirer projections show, could run two to three times that amount.
>
> Even the understated $10.6 billion cost was substantial. It exceeds every dollar paid in federal income tax for the next five years or more by low-and-middle income residents of Philadelphia.

Within this frame, it is difficult to read anything the 'self-styled reformers' or their 'beneficiaries' might have to say without a sense of ironic knowingness - But, of course, they would say that. The reader now can see beneath the surface when, for example, members of Congress praise their aides' commitment to "public service":

> William J. Wilkins was the minority chief of staff for the Senate Finance Committee when the 1986 act was written - Moynihan hailed him as "an exemplar of public service at every stage, providing insightful, direct and accurate analysis always".
>
> Wilkins subsequently became the committee's staff

director. In March, he announced his resignation to join Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering, a Washington law firm.

Because readers can now read between the lines, the reformers and beneficiaries can be given the last word. For example, Sen. Bob Packwood, who was chairman of the Senate Finance Committee when the 1986 law was written, had the last word in a section devoted to the cost of the loopholes:

> "In the overall scheme of events", said Bob Packwood just prior to enactment of the 1986 act, a few billion dollars in transition rules represents "a relatively minor part of the whole bill."

Similarly, the president of a company that had asked for a concession was given the last word in a section devoted to his company's tax problems:

> "We just wrote a letter to the senator and explained it to him, and had a member of his staff contact us", Furman said. "We made a case to our senator that it wasn't fair, that we would lose the order because the economics were all changed. So we were successful in getting some protection.
>
> "We were very fortunate that Sen. Packwood was willing to consider the particular problems of our company."
>
> "I'll bet there are some transition rules that are not good ones. But, boy, I'll tell you this one - we're sure pleased that we got it."

Yeah, right.

All of this is really only the frame for Barlett and Steele's masterwork: the carefully documented case studies revealing who the beneficiaries of the cryptic tax provisions really are. In case after case, the reporters juxtapose an inscrutable provision of the tax code with well-chosen details concerning the individuals or business for whom the loophole was created. Here is one such provision:

(i) IN GENERAL.--In the case of any pre-1987 open year, the amendment made by section 1275(b) shall not apply to any income derived from transactions described in clause (ii) by 1 or more corporations which were formed in Delaware on or about March 6, 1981 and which have owned 1 or more office buildings in St. Thomas, United States Virgin Islands for at least 5 years before the date of the enactment of this Act.

(ii) DESCRIPTION OF TRANSACTIONS.--The transactions described in this clause are-

(I) the redemptions of limited partnership interest for cash and property described in an agreement (as amended) dated March 12, 1981,

(II) the subsequent disposition of the properties distributed in such redemptions, and

(III) interest earned before January 1, 1987, on bank deposits of proceeds received from such redemptions to the extent such deposits are located in the United States Virgin Islands.

This provision of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code resulted in tax savings of $4.5 million for a single company. That company, La Isla Virgen owned primarily by California businessman, William M. Lansdale, had been using its ownership of a single small office building in the U. S. Virgin Islands to shelter income earned elsewhere, but by 1986 the firm had come under the scrutiny of both the Virgin Islands Bureau of Internal Revenue and the IRS:

The agencies were moving to close a loophole in U.S. and Virgin Islands tax laws that the company had used to shelter income earned in the United States from being taxed in either place.

As it turned out, though, there was no cause for concern on the part of Lansdale.

While tax investigators were bearing down on La Isla Virgen, Lansdale, or someone on his behalf, was bearing down on Capitol Hill.

The same month that the IRS issued its summonses, Sen. Bob Packwood (R. Ore.) and Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D., Ill.), the chairmen of Congress' powerful tax-writing committees, approved a special tax dispensation that absolved La Isla Virgen from paying back taxes.

> The tax concession - arranged by a friendly colleague whom they refused to identify - was then incorporated in the Tax Reform Act of 1986, which was passed by Congress in September of that year and signed into law by the President the next month.

The reporters never discovered which "friendly colleague" had come to Lansdale's rescue in the nick of time, but they did find interesting connections between Lansdale and his wife and the Reagan administration. "About the same time that Capitol Hill tax writers were wrapping up work on drafting Lansdale's second tax preference the story reported, "President Reagan appointed Landale's wife to the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs " The reporters also found the sources of the Lansdales' wealth to be of interest. "His real estate interests have ranged from housing and condominium projects to the Marina Pacifica Mall in Long Beach, an open, two story mall with courtyards," the story continued. "There are $150,000 yachts moored in an adjoining waterway, enabling weekend sailors to step from their boats into a boutique or restaurant." And the reporters found the legal squabbles within the extended Lansdale family - over money, of course - to be of interest. "Says a lawyer familiar with the proceedings, who requested anonymity: 'This is one of those real stories that makes Dallas or the Colbys (Dynasty) pale in comparison'."

The reporters bring this tangled tale to a close by returning to a theme developed at several points in their series of articles: the secrecy that surrounds the, presumably, public business of lawmaking. Most of the characters who appeared in this story would not agree to be interviewed. The reporters did, however, reach a lawyer named Gustav Danielson who claims to have invented the tax loophole exploited by Lansdale:

> Asked if he had any notion of how La Isla Virgen arranged its provision, Danielson replied:
> "I would trust that they got in touch with the right people."
> The staffs of the tax-writing committees - who know the identity of all "the right people" - are not talking either. All refused comment to Inquirer reporters.
> James M. Jaffe, a staff member of the House Ways and Means Committee, summed up the prevailing attitude on Capitol Hill:
> "We don't talk. We have people who clearly know, but who have yet to talk to a reporter - ever."

The writing here does not so much drip with irony as gush, with the stuff. To be sure, the essential ironic story theme - "the dynamics of hope abridged," in Paul Fussell's phase - is shared by many of the investigative reports that we have studied. Also, the story elements of villains (reformers and beneficiaries in this case) and victims (you and me) and the story devices of selected detail and juxtaposed fact are found in many other reports. Nonetheless, as compared to other news reports and even other investigative reports, this series is more aggressively ironic than most.

It is tempting to conclude that the reporters could get away with it in the news columns of their newspaper because the situation <u>was</u> so ironic. This is the stance that reporters themselves typically take - to deny their own mastery of the narrative arts and to assert that their language simply portrays the wrongdoing they have discovered. Reporters would also dispute Booth's contention that, through irony, they fuse fact and value;

although that is exactly the function of irony - to allow denial of, or at least distance from, the moral evaluations that have been rendered. Whatever the reporters themselves might say about their work, the facts of the situation carry the powerful charge of righteous energy that they do because of the way that we have been told about them. After all, as Rorty argues, "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" (or by being described in the first place).

In investigative journalism, irony can perform its evaluative function with great moral force even if not always with great subtlety. What irony does not do in this application, however, is to confront the contingency of those moral descriptions. Rorty's ultimate ironists know the folly of affirming any "entrenched" or "final" vocabulary and, therefore, they are free to construct, debate, and choose among alternative hierarchies. Journalistic ironists, however, must employ the entrenched moral vocabulary of their time and place. They can do no more than attempt to summon outrage at that which we already know to be an outrage. That is the irony of irony in journalism.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a worthwhile review and critique of the philosophical origins of a referential view of language, with attention to its epistemological implications, see Rorty (1979).

2. We do not mean to be frivolous in our reference to language "games." Rather, we mean to appreciate that any system of discourse--and news is no exception--operates within a set of discourse conventions or "constitutive rules" which account for its particular way of describing--i.e., <u>interpreting</u>--a world inevitably external to it: "the players of the game," Stanley Fish (1980:241) points out, "are able to agree that they mean the same things by their words not because they see the same things, in some absolute phenomenal sense, but because they are predisposed by the fact of being in the game . . . to 'see them,' to pick them out."

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