EDGAR SIMPSON

Pressing the Press
W.E. Chilton III’s Investigation of Newspaper Owners

During twenty-five years as owner/publisher of West Virginia’s largest newspaper, the Charleston Gazette, W.E. Chilton III developed a journalism philosophy that he called “sustained outrage.” Newspapers too often failed, he argued to the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association in 1983, to examine “basic injustices and fundamental idiocies.” This philosophy was underscored by a deep belief that newspapers were dying at their own hands by pursuing profit rather than robust democratic debate. Thus, in 1980 and 1986, he ordered his reporters to launch two in-depth investigations into his fellow West Virginia newspaper owners and publishers. This study explores these unusual investigations within the context of historical industry criticism and ongoing concerns over the fate of First Amendment values without a vigorous press.

William E. “Ned” Chilton III, the third-generation owner and publisher of West Virginia’s largest newspaper, the Charleston Gazette, accepted the national Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award on November 8, 1982, with fire, his gravelly voice predicting the death of newspapers. The press, he told the crowd, was not only under attack from an onslaught of electronic competition, including the computer-spawned “cybernetic revolution,” but from corporate newspaper owners who insisted on mass profits, pap rather than news, and tepid chiding instead of editorials that demanded true reform. “It worries me . . . to read that media stocks are among the nation’s hottest growth and profit properties,” he said. “Keepers of the tablets shouldn’t have to go around in sackcloth, but neither should they be wrapped in ermine.”

Chilton invoked the press’ unique role in American life and warned of a dire threat to free expression if their mission of “protecting First Amendment freedoms” was not passed on to the next generation of technology. He was referring to the explosive growth of cable television in the early 1980s. Though he could not see the Internet revolution that has assaulted the press recently, he correctly predicted the impact of video and why new technologies threatened newspapers, telling the crowd that “video is bringing to viewers data and information from myriad fields and sources never previously covered.”

Newspapers were their own worst enemies, Chilton asserted. Though occasionally interested enough in the public sphere to investigate government failings, they rarely if ever used their First Amendment protections to look at each other and to hold themselves accountable for their responsibilities to public debate and clean government. “Are newspapers as willing to accept criticism and print criticism about themselves as they are to dish it out?” he continued. “I think not. In addition, newspapers aren’t as eager or as quick to mix it up with other newspapers as they are other institutions in their society. Why? No newspaper is always correct.”

Chilton’s words were not empty rhetoric. Intensely wary of allegations of hypocrisy, he never leveled charges at others that he would not confront himself. In 1974, for instance, calling for more transparency from public officials, he demanded West Virginia Attorney General Chauncey Browning and other statewide elected officials release their income tax returns. Browning replied that

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he would if Chilton would. At first reluctant, Chilton ultimately released his 1973 tax returns to the Gazette, which did a front-page story.

He followed the same pattern when it came to scrutinizing the press, allowing the spotlight to shine as brightly on himself as on others, a policy that more than once put him in the position of having to answer questions from his own reporters. In 1980, the chairman of the Republican Party in Kanawha County, where the Gazette was located, held a well-attended news conference to announce his apparently sincere intention to ask for a new state law that would require some Democratic politicians to report Gazette news stories as paid political advertising. The news conference was held during the heat of the race for the governor's office and was sparked by Gazette Editor Don Marsh's column in which he acknowledged the newspaper probably went overboard in a few recent stories. This, he noted, probably was because “the thinking of the people who work here is that they won't go wrong if they turn out something which makes [Republican gubernatorial candidate Arch Moore] look bad. Part of the reason, I suspect, is their knowledge that...the publisher want[s] to see Jay Rockefeller beat Moore in November.”

This study examines Chilton's efforts at probing newspapers in his home state of West Virginia in two investigations—“All the News?” and “The Insipid Press”—which were conducted between 1980 and 1986 as part of his emerging philosophy of “sustained outrage.” The purpose of this article is to explore his rare practice of using his reporters to investigate other reporters as well as fellow newspaper owner/publishers. His bulldog approach to upholding what he saw as his First Amendment responsibilities is as important today as it has ever been and should not be lost.

As the only “mass” medium in existence at the time of the framing of the U.S. Constitution, the “press” symbolized not just a technology but an important idea. The technology was the printing press, a clunky, hand-operated machine that could be used with a lot of brawn but not necessarily much brain. The idea was more complex—free expression, which was defined as the right of a people tasked with governing themselves to demand information from their government, to openly criticize their institutions, and to share these thoughts among themselves. The means of achieving this was the press, which splashed words on paper and shared them among the populace. The press was deemed so important in the context of preserving popular government that it was the only private industry protected from government regulation by the Constitution.

The press always has been viewed differently than radio and television, which have been regulated by the government in some form or other since their commercialization. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover explained the philosophy of government intervention into broadcast in a speech to the First National Radio Conference in 1922. He saw broadcast, since it used limited public airwaves as a means of distribution, as a commonly owned commodity and believed its content should be restricted to “news, to entertainment, to education and to communication of such commercial matters as are of interest to large portions of the community at the same time.” The press, in the form of the
written word, was viewed as having few limits; anybody with the capital and desire could start a printing press and therefore had no need to claim public resources.

Free from direct government intervention (except in times of war when sedition becomes an issue) does not mean free from scrutiny or criticism. As private industry, the printing medium has come under wide examination, much of it focusing on the owners of the press, their agendas, and whether they are conducting their operations within the spirit of the Constitution's First Amendment that protects their private businesses. Early in the republic, those who owned the presses were seen as the politically elite, either politically powerful themselves or serving at the behest of the politically powerful.6

As the nation grew and the press stormed through the Penny Press days of the 1830s, which saw the rise of popular journalism, and into the more sensational Yellow Journalism period of the 1890s, more and more critics were taking note that the press as a private enterprise, while free from government censors, often had another, bigger barrier to independent reporting: those who owned the presses and paid the salaries of the journalists. In 1880, noted New York City journalist John Swinton, speaking to his colleagues, pointed out the differences between reporters and owners during an awards acceptance speech: “There is not one of you who dares to write his honest opinions, and if you did, you know before hand that they would never appear in print . . . We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes.”7

Criticism that separates owners from the work of day-to-day journalists rests on the theory that the owners control journalists, either through direct orders or by establishing a culture that fosters obedience. In a 1955 study, Warren Breed attempted to explain why newspapers, largely populated with college-educated, liberal thinkers, failed to report some stories and largely stayed within the bounds of the status quo.

Through a series of interviews and applying his own experience as a newsman, he argued there was a gulf between the reporters, who gathered the information and wrote the stories, and the executives, who set policy and controlled the reporters through a variety of subtle means. While some reporters wanted to pursue stories of corruption and abhorrent business practices, the executives had many ways of stopping the reporting or the printing of the information without directly saying no.

These methods included “blue penciling” (or spiking) the story, assigning the reporter to cover something else, or withholding a kind comment. Breed contended one of the most powerful means of control was new reporters simply reading the newspaper. Through this practice, they learned what was played well and what was buried, and the natural inclination was to follow what had gone before. The social controls to ensure this system included successful senior reporters, a desire to advance to management positions, the good will of their fellows, and positive feedback from their sources. Like Marsh's explanation for Gazette stories that occasionally overstepped the bounds of fairness, he noted: “The newsmen's source of rewards is located not among the readers, who are manifestly his clients, but among his colleagues and superiors.”8

In 1947, the Commission on Freedom of the Press, popularly known as the Hutchins Commission, examined the state of the press, using as its underlying premise the idea that the press as big business was the single greatest danger to American free expression. The commission wrote that too many owners failed to “recognize the press needs of a modern nation . . . and to accept the responsibilities which those needs impose upon them.”9

Press critic A.J. Liebling, best known for his “Wayward Press” column in New Yorker magazine, suggested that established press owners often became giddy with profit and were dazzled by the country club company that they kept and the power that they wielded.10 Though there were many examples of press owners who started out as trumpets for “the common man” as they built circulation and advertising, they invariably become less champions of the people and more general managers, serving as employers, landlords, and keepers of the local status quo. Liebling was often pilloried by the newspaper owners whom he criticized, which he argued reflected a widely held publisher belief that they “are part of the great American heritage with a right to travel wrapped in the folds of the flag like a boll weevil in a cotton boll.”11 The sons and daughters of press titans, he noted, were even less likely to carry on the founding traditions, observing wryly that “mavericks seldom breed true.”12

Chilton was the exception to Liebling’s rule. Born on November 26, 1922, in Kingston, New York, he was the third generation to serve as owner/publisher of the Gazette.13 His mother died when he was seven, and his father, W.E. Chilton Jr., who was vice president of the Gazette, sent him and his sister to live with his mother's wealthy and socially connected relatives in Kingston. He spent most of his youth in upscale boarding schools, returning to Charleston only to finish his senior year at the local public high school.14 He then spent four years in the U.S. Army Air Corps during and immediately after World War II, rising from private to private first class, a lackluster career that was no doubt influenced by a 3:30 a.m. confrontation with a barracks sergeant during his first year at a Georgia training base that ended with a $10 fine and ten days in the base jail.15

After the Army, Chilton graduated from Yale University, where he met and began decades-long relationships with conservative scion William F. Buckley Jr. and Catcher in the Rye author J.D. Salinger.16 He started working at the Gazette in 1951 as the promotion manager, which entailed running various events sponsored by the newspaper. In 1953, he was elected as a Democratic delegate to the
West Virginia House of Delegates. After four, two-year terms, he quit politics when he was named publisher of the Gazette in 1961, following his father and grandfather. At the time, he told his wife, the former Elizabeth Early, that he could not serve two masters— the Gazette and politics—and he far favored the newspaper.

The newspaper came to the Chiltons when W.E. “Ned” Chilton Sr. purchased an interest in the Gazette in 1907. Four years later, he successfully battled the West Virginia Legislature to become one of the state’s two Democratic U.S. senators. A lawyer, a former West Virginia Secretary of State, and a Democratic Party power broker, he was embroiled in allegations of bribery and was cleared by a U.S. Senate panel that had been petitioned by a group of West Virginians to look into the purported fraud. He died in 1939, after serving as editor and vice president of the Gazette for more than twenty years. His son, Chilton Jr., who was seen as a talented writer but a heavy drinker and a recluse, was named president of the Gazette in 1922 and managing editor in 1924. He died at his home in 1950, leaving his twenty-eight-year-old son, Chilton III, with one-quarter ownership of the Gazette. The rest of the ownership, including a quarter share to his sister, was shared among various family members.

Throughout most of its history, the liberal Gazette, which was delivered in the morning, was locked in a circulation battle with the conservative evening Charleston Daily Mail. The Gazette had struggled financially until 1937, when circulation passed 50,000 for the first time, enabling Eustace Chilton, Chilton Jr.’s brother, to declare to their father in a hand-scrawled letter written during a sleepless night that they were “set for life” after ten years of “hard struggling.” Eustace Chilton pledged the paper would remain in the family “as a cherished duty and responsibility.” In 1958, the business operations of the Gazette and the Daily Mail merged, becoming one of only eight Joint Operating Agreements in the country at the time. Under this agreement, the two papers kept separate newsrooms but shared circulation, advertising, accounting, and other business functions. The Gazette staff produced the newly formed Sunday Gazette-Mail.

Fifteen at the time that his uncle’s letter was written and away at a Virginia boarding school, Chilton III would never consider selling the Gazette, instead choosing a life that eventually landed him onstage accepting the Elijah Parish Lovejoy award at Colby College, a small, private Maine institution that annually celebrates the memory of the award’s namesake, a crusading newspaper owner who was lynched for opposing slavery. Over the course of more than two decades as owner, publisher, and chief editorial writer of West Virginia’s largest newspaper, he built a reputation as a gruff, liberal crusader, slowly crafting his philosophy of “sustained outrage” through many battles with state and national elite. Handsome, athletic, and with a personality that engendered love or hate, he wrote editorials with a biting venom and was known for frightening reporters, as Gazette columnist Rick Steelhammer noted, “when he had those blue eyes locked on you and he had his voice rising and he had his finger pointed at your chest.”

He believed newspapers existed for the purpose of watching the establishment and holding those in power accountable for promises kept and promises broken. He formally outlined his policy of institutional memory and outrage in a 1981 speech to the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association during a meeting in Memphis, Tennessee:

> Precious few of us practice crusading journalism on a day-to-day basis. The hallmark of crusading journalism is sustained outrage. I’m not talking about spurts of indignation or vituperative anger. We all relieve ourselves from time to time with that. I’m talking about sustained outrage over basic injustices and fundamental idiocies. I think we’ve allowed our minds and spirits to become three-piece suited. We’re too conscious of our own position in the community.

> Our editorials too often sound like what they are: the voice of an extremely wealthy corporation that needs to be concerned about certain pressing problems. Our editorials make the sound of a decorous jackhammer, not the startling thump of a sledgehammer, and worst of all we don’t keep hammering away, day after day, day after day.

> Chilton wrote about half of the newspaper’s editorials and those that he did not craft personally, he directed with a sharp comment or rewrote to suit the points that he wanted to make. He sought to punish those in public office— or in private business or his own reporters (though usually privately, if not quietly)—who failed in his eyes to uphold the public trust. This was a wide-ranging mission. Chilton consistently and virulently railed against United States involvement in Vietnam, at one point framing the issue as racist and calling the conflict “incredible stupidity.” He pushed insistently for passage of housing reform in 1967, chastising the president of the West Virginia Realtors Association, B.Y. Chalfant, a powerful voice for hundreds of advertisers. A Gazette editorial noted: “What Mr. Chalfant means is that all-white neighborhoods must be insured the right to wall out those whose complexion isn’t quite socially acceptable.” Chilton dispatched his investigative reporter to Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1979 to investigate the Praise The Lord Club after seeing televangelist Jim Bakker’s daily talk/variety show. And he forced the West Virginia Bar Association to open its disciplinary records to the public, successfully arguing to the state Supreme Court that since the group acted as overseers of the profession their records were public.

> A child of privilege who inherited what already had become the state’s widest circulation newspaper, Chilton could have taken several paths. He could have spent his considerable energies building his family’s fortune by buying more newspapers; he could have chosen to sit back in the executive suite of the Gazette building, guiding the newspaper’s business functions and forming closer relationships with the newspaper’s advertisers, and he could have stayed in politics, like his grandfather and many newspapermen who had gone before him. Instead, he chose to take the corner office in the newspaper and repeatedly put his fortune and his personal energies to work for causes he believed in: governments that worked, policies that protected the powerless, and the exposure of hypocrisy at every level, including at times his own. As publisher, he turned his outrage on fellow West Virginia newspaper owners, ordering investigations into what he perceived as his colleagues’ failure to uphold their First Amendment obligations.
In early June 1980, Chilton was heading out for a month-long vacation to his summer home in the Bahamas, when he called his top investigative reporter, James Haught, into his office and ordered an in-depth probe into the state’s newspapers. Though accustomed to Chilton’s frequent demands, Haught was reluctant. He liked the quick hit, wielding the dagger, drawing blood, and then moving on.

Still, experience had taught him not to argue. A faithful and longtime admirer of his boss, Haught was a native West Virginian, growing up in rural Wetzel County with no electricity, dirt roads, and thirteen students in his high school graduating class. He started work in 1951 as an apprentice printer for the rival Daily Mail. Enamored with newspapers and journalism, he asked Daily Mail editors to let him work without pay as a reporter in his off hours from the pressroom. They accepted and two years later the Gazette offered him a full-time job as a reporter. In 1960, when Chilton was associate publisher of the Gazette, Haught was promoted to investigative reporter.3

Chiltonloomed large over Haught’s work. In 1979, for instance, after watching the PTL Club on television, Chilton became convinced that Jim Bakker, the founder and leader of the club, was bilking his congregation. He phoned Haught and ordered him to North Carolina, telling him to book himself into one of the PTL Club villas and find out how much money was being collected and where it went. The result was “Gospel Millions,” a four-part series that dismantled televangelism. He noted the PTL Club daily talk/variety show was the most popular religious program in southern West Virginia. An editor’s note on the series cautioned “we-meaning followers that, in some cases, their money may be misused.”34

Chilton wanted Haught’s investigative report on the state’s newspapers ready for publication in time for the annual meeting of the West Virginia Publisher’s Association meeting in late June. He met the deadline, launching a three-part series examining the state’s press called “All the News?” before Chilton returned from vacation.

In his report, Haught exposed conflicting circulation numbers, a failure to challenge powerful businessmen, and what he called the “corrupt practice” of taking advantage of state legal advertising laws by changing nameplates on a newspaper and calling one Democrat and one Republican.

He kicked off the series with this: “In some parts of West Virginia, residents may live their entire lives without reading any question raised about their congressman.” Haught never returned to that issue in the first series. Instead, the first installment quoted a variety of press experts and association officials, including Marshall University Professor Ralph Turner, who told Haught that state newspapers ranged from “super to lousy” with the worst of them putting a “birthday cake on Page 1, but somebody could sell the courthouse and nobody’d know.”35 In the second installment, Haught exposed wildly optimistic circulation figures by comparing numbers reported by the West Virginia Press Association and those contained in signed affidavits with the Secretary of State’s office. In addition to the questionable circulation claims, some newspapers took advantage of a West Virginia law on legal advertising, which required local governments to advertise in “two qualified newspapers of opposite politics.”36 For instance, he reported:

The Braxton County government buys $8,000 worth of legal notices annually in the Braxton Democrat and the Braxton Central (Republican) . . . . The Democrat claims 4,100 circulation, The Central lists only 170. Editor Ed Given said the Democrat and Central are word-for-word identical, printed on the same press by the same staff. During the Democrat’s press run, the name is switched and a few extra copies are called Republican, he said.37

The first series ended with installment three: “Less-than-heroic journalism means covering up the truth.” The majority of that story was Haught’s account of a Parkersburg, West Virginia, banker driving home after a party and killing a Vienna, West Virginia, teen-ager. Ron Loar, the police reporter for the local newspaper, the Parkersburg News, came across the police report. But, as Loar began working on the story, he quickly turned to help from the state press, secretly calling Charleston reporters. Haught reported:

He said his editors and bank officials were engaged in a cover-up. Loar said he was told to write that [the banker] suffered a heart attack, and not mention alcohol or that the banker was on the wrong side of the road. Loar said he resisted, and the heart attack part wasn’t printed. The reporter said bank officers came to the newsroom to oversee his report.38

The Publishers Auxiliary, a newspaper produced by the National Newspapers Association, carried an account of the series as its lead story on August 25, 1980. The reporter, Suzan Richmond, talked to Chilton about the motivation for the series. He told her that the state press too often fawned over politicians and business brokers and were at least partly responsible for ongoing corruption. “I think the press in West Virginia has dismally failed in its responsibility to tell people about their public servants. I think the state’s press stinks,” he told her. “I think West Virginia has had rotten, corrupt government over the years.” Reaction to the series at the publishers’ meeting ranged from “bitter to indifferent” with the prevailing sentiment being that Haught did a poor job. One publisher said, “If you’re doing the damn best job you can, and some jerk comes from out of town and tells you it’s lousy, I’d be hotter than hell. I’d tell them to stick it.”39

While Chilton’s reasons as he outlined them to Richmond no doubt were sincere—he would make similar comments in coming years—there was a more specific rationale for his orders to Haught to investigate the state press: he was upset that newspapers in the northern part of West Virginia failed to pick up on political corruption allegations revealed during a racketeering trial of a purported gambling operator.40 Wiretap tapes played during the trial alleged that U.S. Representative Alan Mollohan, a Democrat, received “a lot of money” from the operator, and a subsequent investigation by the Gazette revealed he had become a “millionaire” while in public office. Chilton had wanted Haught to expose the newspapers that failed to challenge Mollohan. Haught later...
acknowledged he had misunderstood Chilton’s orders, and though he
defended the initial series as the best he could do with the time
he had, he put up no fight when Chilton ordered him to re-do it:

Ned truly believed that a newspaper had a duty to watch the local
government and the local politicians and reveal any shady dealings go-
ing on. The Gazette did that, but no other paper in the state did that, or
more than a little bit. He became frustrated that nobody would go after
Mollohan when the Gazette exposed . . . Mollohan and nobody else
would write about it. That spurred him . . . I did the series once and
then I did it again to nail his point exactly. He wouldn’t quit pounding
and pounding until he achieved the breakthrough he wanted.41

Three months after the initial series, Gazette readers saw three additional
installments of the “resumed” series, which began by laying out the thesis
that corruption in the state was linked to a “weak press.”42 In the second part
of the redone series, Haught focused on Mollohan and coverage of the trial
in the two Clarksburg newspapers, the Telegram and the Exponent, which were
both owned by Cecil Highland, a wealthy city banker whom Time magazine once
called the “egg bald tyrant of Clarksburg . . . who controlled the town for years . . .
by imposing a complete news blackout on people, issues and organizations he didn’t
like.”43 Haught noted that the papers did not carry Associated Press reports of
Mollohan’s name surfacing in the racketeering trial; instead they reported
on their front pages that he “favored oil price controls.”44

In the final part of the series, Haught accused the rival Daily Mail of colluding
with Republican Arch A. Moore Jr. during the 1968 West Virginia gubernatorial race
by smearing Democrat James Sprouse

with innuendos of a shady land deal. “A week before the election,”
Haught wrote, “the Mail printed a huge, front page ‘land-grab’
story saying Sprouse and some partners might ‘clean up nearly
$500,000’” on land purchased near a state park.45 Moore won the
election and served two terms as governor. Chilton was persuaded
he was a crook and maintained a continual assault against him and
his policies that favored big business, especially the coal industry.46
It would take more than ten years, but Chilton was proved right
when Moore was convicted of federal corruption charges for taking
more than $550,000 in bribes from coal operators.47

The last of the series also ratcheted up the ongoing feud between the Daily Mail and the Gazette and caught the attention
of the New York Times, which devoted the top half of page A18
on October 6, 1980, to the series and Chilton’s criticism of the
state press.48 Reporter Ben A. Franklin noted that while Chilton’s
distaste for the conservative-leaning Mail was well known, he had
now succeeded in setting the state’s 100 other newspapers against
him. “All the News!” was published during the midst of Moore’s
ultimately unsuccessful campaign to upset incumbent Gov. John
D. Rockefeller IV, a Chilton protégé who spent nine months living
with him when he first arrived in West Virginia.49 Logically it might
be assumed that Chilton’s antipathy toward Moore, his obvious
friendship with Rockefeller, and the governorship being at stake
would indicate that the press investigation was motivated by the
governor’s race rather than Mollohan’s alleged misdeeds. Haught
believed the primary motivation was Mollohan, not Moore, but
Chilton’s editorial addressing the series suggested otherwise:

If Richard Nixon were to seek the presidency again, newspapers
would jeer him off the campaign circuit. If Spiro Agnew ran for vice
president again—ditto. Yet Arch Moore—whose scandal record is pure
Nixon-Agnew—is running for governor again, and West Virginia news-
papers don’t raise a murmur. That was the essential point of the Gazette’s
“All the News!” series.50

Regardless, the Mail fired back editorials at the Gazette, suggesting readers
could only hope that Chilton would “run out of vitriol.” His response was that the
Mail clearly had a “new man” writing editorials: “Anyone who has been around here very long would know we have not
run out of vitriol at all.”51

Chilton’s ire at the West Virginia press boiled over again six years
later in 1986 when he felt the state’s newspapers failed to adequately
report new Gazette revelations of government wrongdoing,
including a story
on the West Virginia
economic development
director using the state plane seventy-two
times to travel from Charleston
to his home near Wheeling,
a trip of 204 miles.”

This was just a pet peeve of Chilton: that the reason West Virginia
government was so corrupt, so bad, was because the press didn’t do its
watchdog function. He had a thing about it. The whole thing was a little
hokey to me, for one newspaper to be going around and doing stories
about how bad the other newspapers were. It was like shooting fish in a
barel—lots of them didn’t even pretend to be real newspapers.52

In kicking off the series under the logo “The Insipid Press”
on September 6, 1986, Berg took wide latitude with the assign-
ment, addressing the rising trend of chain ownership, the failure to
cover the news or challenge local politicians, and what he perceived
as a prevailing country club mentality by owners and publishers. His conclusion said: “Most West Virginia papers are so bland and toothless, they would not be significantly affected if the First Amendment were repealed.” He quoted Robert Hammond, the publisher of the Fairmont Times-West Virginian, which was owned by the Thomson chain, who told him that chains were interested in money, not politics, and newspapers should not get involved in investigating local corruption. “That’s what we have law enforcement officials for,” he said.54

Berg spent nearly a quarter of the first story addressing the Gazette and Chilton. Overall, he wrote, Chilton was the unchallenged top crusader in the state but not without his faults. He noted that he urged restraint when his friend and fellow Yale University graduate, West Virginia Supreme Court Justice Richard Neely, came under fire for using his taxpayer-paid secretary as a babysitter. Berg also reported that Chilton printed columns from two Gazette reporters who disputed their boss on the Neely issue, an occurrence so unusual that the Columbia Journalism Review reported on it. Berg chastised the Gazette for “union-busting” during a bitter, year-long battle in the early 1970s in which the paper turned back a unionizing attempt by the national Teamsters in the circulation and press departments. He also criticized it for failing to tackle local chemical plants and coal interests. “To his credit, Chilton at least sometimes makes use of his newspaper’s First Amendment protection, while other publishers just pay lip-service,” he wrote.55

In the second installment, Berg returned to Clarksburg, questioning the election of Cecil Highland Jr., the son of the man that Time had labeled an “egg bald tyrant,” as president of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, noting that he was a bank president and a lawyer and paid little attention to the Clarksburg Exponent or Telegram. In fact, Berg noted, he kept his office in the Empire National Bank, which was around the block from the newspaper building. Highland acknowledged the newspapers were “a horse upon which I ride my hobby.” He defended his father’s reputation, saying Time magazine was unfair and noted that Haught’s story six years before was “riddled with errors,” although he was not specific.56

In his third installment, Berg noted newspapers in the Ogden chain often ran identical editorials, and in Elkins, West Virginia, the Inter-Mountain, an Ogden-owned paper, ran unsigned stories about the controversial merging of two local hospitals.57 The stories were written by Tom Stafford, a public relations representative hired by the new entity that would run the merged operation. The Ogden chain, based in Wheeling, owned forty daily newspapers and several weeklies and magazines in twelve states and had six daily newspapers in West Virginia, including morning and evening editions in both Parkersburg and Wheeling.58 Berg again took a less-than-subtle shot at Chilton, noting G. Ogden Nutting, the grandson of the newspaper chain’s founder, refused to be interviewed for the story, “no doubt fearing a Gazette hatchet job.” He continued:

“In kicking off the series under the logo “The Insipid Press” on September 6, 1986, [Martin] Berg took wide latitude with the assignment, addressing the rising trend of chain ownership, the failure to cover the news or challenge local politicians, and what he perceived as a prevailing country club mentality by owners and publishers.”

It didn’t stop him from attending a country club bash thrown recently by Gazette Publisher Ned Chilton in honor of the new owner of UPI [United Press International]. It also didn’t keep Nutting and Chilton from sharing the UPI president’s box at the World Cup soccer match in Mexico City.

Newspaper publishers may disagree over their newspaper’s politics and policies, but they are drawn together in their appreciation of the good life. It’s a good life that few newsroom employees at Ogden News papers could dream of sharing, inasmuch as their beginning salaries reportedly hover near $175 a week for a reporter with no experience.59

The Dominion Post in Morgantown came under perhaps the most withering scrutiny of the series. Like the Gazette, it was family-owned and run by the son of the founder. John Raese served as a counterpoint in the state to Chilton. A virulent Republican, he waged a bitter and ultimately losing campaign against Rockefeller for a U.S. Senate seat in 1984 and was state chairman of the Republican Party when Berg was writing “The Insipid Press.”60

A graduate of Morgantown public schools and of West Virginia University, which is based in Morgantown, with a physical education degree and a letter in baseball, Raese remained tanned, hands ome, and athletic. His newspaper was successful and growing in circulation with content emphasizing WVU sports, not controversy. Berg accused the Post of downplaying major stories broken by the Daily Athenaeum, the university's student newspaper. They included a landlord with hundreds of violations of the city’s rental code, a rape case involving five WVU basketball players, and the university allegedly bending its admission requirements for athletes. Raese did not dispute the charges, saying the newspaper’s success spoke for itself. “In Charleston, you have the Legislature, so you write about politics,” Raese told Berg. “In Morgantown, we have WVU—so we write about sports.” He told Berg he was worth “about $30 million” but put most of it back into the newspaper and the company’s other business, a gravel quarry, although Berg noted he drove a red Porsche and vacationed in Palm Beach, Florida. During the 1984 Republican National Convention, Berg noted, the Associated Press sent out a story that Raese had lost his temper with Gazette reporter Chris Knap, grabbing him by the lapels of his jacket and “shrinking, I buy and sell reporters like you everyday.”61

Berg’s attention to his wealth and temper was likely a nod to Chilton’s reputation of wealth, Caribbean vacations, and anger directed at those who disagreed with him. For example, former Gazette Sports Editor Danny Wells once suffered one of Chilton’s blistering tirades in his office over Well’s handling of a controversy involving the University of Charleston firing its basketball coach. Chilton thought the basketball program was taking priority over academics, and he was upset when Wells came to the coach’s defense in a column. Wells wrote about the incident: “A few days later, Chilton placed a note on the office bulletin board apologizing for intimidating a Gazette columnist, namely me.”62

Berg did not address a story on the plane trips taken by the
state’s economic development director, Jack Redline, until near the end of the series. He noted that only four of the state’s twenty-four daily newspapers ran the story, which was picked up from the *Gazette-Mail* by the Associated Press. The trips cost taxpayers $23,245 and were defended by the governor’s spokesman as a necessary expense because Redline was working on getting a steel company’s headquarters to relocate to Wheeling. The second paragraph in Berg’s story stated baldly, “That shows how indifferent most state newspapers are to abuses by public officials.” The rival *Daily Mail* was among the indifferent. Executive Editor Sam Hindman told Berg that because the AP picked up a *Gazette* story did not make it news. “That’s not going to dictate our news judgment,” he said. The other wire service in the state, UPI, failed to pick up the story at all because the bureau chief said it simply “slipped through the cracks.”

In another between-the-lines swipe at Chilton’s handling of his newspaper, Berg wrote kindly of chains that had taken over newspapers in Bluefield and Huntington. He noted both had won prestigious awards since being purchased, though both were getting heat from community members about being owned by corporations outside the community. The Shott family was notorious for its ironclad grip on news in Bluefield, owning the local newspaper, the radio station, and the television station. The Federal Communications Commission had cited Bluefield as one of the seven worst media monopolies in the country and had forced the Shotts to sell the television station in 1975. The *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* was staunchly conservative and ardently Republican under owner Hugh Shott, the son of Republican U.S. Senator Hugh Ike Shott. Ike Shott had bought the newspaper in 1893, and the family acquired the broadcast media as they developed over the coming decades. A local lawyer became so frustrated that he started a rival newspaper in nearby Princeton. The Worrell chain had purchased the start-up in 1976 and bought the *Daily Telegraph* in 1985. “The new owners have revamped the look of the *Daily Telegraph* and livened up its editorial page, where staunch support for right-to-work laws nuzzles up against fierce blasts at Union Carbide,” Berg wrote.

In Huntington, the *Herald-Dispatch* was surviving but suffering from a local downturn. Seven years before, the Gannett chain had closed the evening paper, the *Huntington Advertiser*, promising that the remaining newspaper would be “Bigger, Brighter, Better.” Those promises were never fulfilled. The *Advertiser*’s editor, C. Donald Hatfield, a Huntington native and a well-known figure in town, eventually was named publisher of the *Dispatch* and a regional vice president for Gannett. Berg noted that while the reporting staff had declined through attrition, the paper could point to several investigations, including *Dispatch* statehouse reporter Tom Miller’s series, “Who Owns West Virginia,” which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Hatfield acknowledged the *Dispatch* never fully replaced the coverage offered by the *Advertiser*, but he said the paper was hampered by a sluggish economy.

Part of the plan for “The Insipid Press” series was that Chilton would allow an outside reporter to investigate the *Gazette,* and Miller agreed to take on the assignment. Chilton told him that newspapers that did not aggressively probe and agitate for change on the local level were simply not papers; they were something else. In his report for the series, Miller dissected the trio that put together the newspaper’s editorial page—Haught, Editor Don Marsh, and Chilton. He noted Marsh’s friendship with West Virginia Supreme Court Chief Justice Darrell McGraw and his decades-long feud with the *Gazette*’s statehouse reporter, Fanny Seiler, who was a former United Press International statehouse reporter. Citing anonymous sources in the statehouse press corps, Miller wrote that when Marsh covered the statehouse for the *Gazette*, he was known to steal Seiler’s information. Marsh, a native of Logan County, had worked for the *Gazette* since 1952 and had become editor in 1976.

The press corps had long suspected favored treatment by the *Gazette* of state Attorney General Charlie Brown and Supreme Court Justice Richard Neely, not only because they were Democrats but because they, like Chilton, were Yale graduates. Yet, Miller noted, Chilton was instrumental in revealing controversies about both men. He had tipped off Seiler that Neely was using his court secretary as a babysitter, and a *Gazette* reporter broke the story that Brown had tried to solicit campaign donations from his AG employees.

Chilton was unapologetic about an ongoing feud with an editor of the *Beckley Register-Herald*, Walter Massey, who was a one-time bulldog conservative who called welfare programs an outrageous use of public money and wrote that “hunger was a wonderful motivator.” He had undergone a religious conversion, perhaps inspired by reader backlash, and was now far milder in his social critiques. Miller quoted Chilton as saying about Massey: “He called me a communist. And I’m not a communist. I may sue him.” Massey was subdued when approached by Miller for the story, telling him, “I don’t think Ned Chilton is a communist.”

Rae, the *Dominion Post* owner/publisher, told Miller that he admired the *Gazette’s* fire, but he said Chilton was clearly biased and protected certain institutions while going after others. He cited his own fight to get public records involving the move to change WVU Hospitals from a public to a private institution. He noted Chilton refused to join him: “This story hasn’t gotten a lot of support from the *Gazette*. It shows the *Gazette* is biased.”

Like Haught, Berg was drafted to resume the series several weeks after its conclusion when Chilton felt the state press again ignored an important *Gazette* revelation. Tucked inside a box of documents requested by *Gazette* reporter Paul Nyden through the state’s Open Records law was a bill from the upscale Greenbrier Hotel showing Governor [Arch] Moore had spent $2,084 for a one-night stay that included dining and cocktails for forty-seven coal executives.”
state's Open Records law was a bill from the upscale Greenbrier Hotel showing Governor Moore had spent $2,084 for a one-night stay that included dining and cocktails for forty-seven coal executives. Berg was not happy. Chilton had repeatedly tried to direct the series and Berg continually resisted: “The whole thing was really a pain in the butt; there was a lot of clashing with Chilton. I was trying to do it with some [reporter] integrity, not just what Chilton wanted me to do.” He reluctantly agreed to do the story, reporting that both wire services—AP and UPI—had picked up the revelation, but only three state newspapers chose to run it. Keith Walters, the executive editor of the Herald-Register, noted the omission was a thoughtful one: “Frankly, the Gazette has a poor reputation for credibility and accuracy. Just because the Gazette runs a story doesn’t mean it’s news.” Berg noted that the Register-Herald, while passing on the governor’s hotel bill, ran two wire service stories on its front page on that day: one from Appleton, Wisconsin, about Harry Houdini failing to show up at a séance and another about a Milwaukee couple hijacked by escaped prisoners.

A Gazette editorial on January 17, 1987, summed up Berg’s efforts. It singled out the reviled Daily Mail for failing to report outrages uncovered by the Gazette, including one from three years before that Berg did not mention: a paving company owner who had bilked taxpayers out of $232,000 by having its weighmaster put his foot on the electronic scale that weighed the trucks:

In response the Charleston Daily Mail expressed dismay saying the Gazette “has Bob Orders in its sights” and wants to get on with the “hanging.” Finally, the mess is over. President Orders pleaded his company guilty. The people were consistently robbed. Yet the Mail’s only comment was to complain about a call for accountability. That’s what “The Insipid Press” series was all about. If newspapers ignore governmental outrages, the state will continue with outrageous government.”

“The Insipid Press” failed to draw the reaction that Haught’s did six years earlier, although the Gazette did run a request for a correction. Ruth Holmberg, publisher of the Chattanooga Times, sent Chilton a personal note, which he published at the top of the letters column. She believed she had been misquoted. “You have me saying we are not in a position of evaluating each other’s newspapers, which is not even very good English. What I said was, ‘We’re not in the business of evaluating each other’s newspapers. That’s quite different.’”

Though insistent on what he wanted the series to examine, Chilton never questioned or challenged Berg on what was written about him. Berg, however, did not escape unscathed when he lost patience with Chilton’s next request to investigate yet another press failure in the state. He refused and was reassigned on that same day to do a series of “canned stories” on the good works of the local Salvation Army.

There seems little doubt that Chilton intended to continue his tirades against his fellow publishers. During thirty-five years of working at the newspaper, the last twenty-five as publisher, he had honed his keen sense of outrage and a growing conviction that the press could not divorce itself from its constitutional responsibilities and that newspapers—if they were to be papers—should investigate and report press failures alongside the failings of government and business. However, he did not get the chance to order further investigations. Berg’s story on the Greenbrier Hotel was the last to use “The Insipid Press” logo because Chilton died of heart failure on February 7, 1987, during the quarterfinals of the sixty-five and older division of the 28th Annual Woodruff Nee, a national squash tournament in Washington, D.C. In the 1982-83 rankings, he had been ranked eleventh in the nation in the sixty-plus division.

His death was greeted with shock in liberal quarters, with The Nation saying those who followed “his colorful career judged him to be the best newspaper publisher in the United States. Certainly, there was none other like him.’ Consumer advocate Ralph Nader praised him as a defender of the true role of the press: “All people who believe in an independent and free press that concentrates on community issues, as well as global subjects, will mourn the passing of Ned Chilton.” The sheriff of West Virginia’s Kanawha County, a Democrat, told the Gazette: “If it had not been for Ned Chilton, the politicians would have carried away the Statehouse, the Courthouse and City Hall.”

West Virginia publishers were less kindly. Raese, the Dominion Post owner/publisher, believed Chilton ran a “vicious” paper: “When you’re that vicious and that blind, you lose credibility.” F. Page Burdette, the editor of the Martinsburg Evening News, resented Chilton’s presumed role as the conscious of the state press.

The West Virginia House of Delegates quietly passed a resolution honoring Chilton. When it came time for Senate Majority Leader Si Boettner to schedule a similar vote, he started checking with other senators. What he found was that many were not only quietly opposed to the idea but might vote against it. Therefore, he never brought the resolution up for a vote.

Berg was working a weekend cops reporter shift, not yet fully back in Chilton’s good graces, when he learned of the publisher’s death:

“I went out for lunch and I came back. I was working with this guy named Fergus—there was always a lot of joking around in the newsroom, some of it pretty mean—and he told me Ned Chilton had died. I said no he didn’t. He said he died playing squash. Then [Gazette Editor Don] Marsh came in and he said, “You know, Berg, you and that goddamn series—that’s what killed him.”

Between 1984 and 2003, 305 newspapers across the nation
ceased daily publication, 111 of them shuttering their plants for good. Economic scholars note that sixty-three dailies started operations during that same time period, leaving forty-seven markets “without service.”81 Chilton lived well on the economics of the newspaper industry while at the same time understanding that the First Amendment protected only the content of the printing press, not the flow of money that sustained its operations. That function was left, as it always has been, to the owners and editors responsible for sparking and nurturing connections between readers, their leaders, and a negotiated vision for society.

Chilton’s blind rage at corrupt and inefficient government often overshadowed his deeper fealty to journalism as the engine of democracy, the wellspring of public discourse. His screeds at his fellow owners and publishers came during a period of rapidly declining circulation even while newspaper profits rose, and he saw more clearly than nearly all others the inevitable result of those trends. Thus, he called in 1982 not for protection of an industry that he concluded had lost its way among the moneychangers, perhaps without redemption if not without hope, but to preserve First Amendment values during a time of rapid technological and societal changes.

Chilton has largely been forgotten in scholarship and in the industry. Yet, his insistence on the press fulfilling its First Amendment obligations and his willingness to put his reputation and fortune on the line for his fervent beliefs could serve as an apt framework for today’s core debate: how will free expression and the watchdog role of the press be continued without strong journalism leaders with the power and autonomy to enforce their vision?

NOTES

1. Text of Chilton’s prepared speech, William Edwin Chilton III papers, A&M 3020 Addendum, box 4, file 8, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Library, Morgantown.
2. “Gazette Publisher Reveals Net Worth,” Charleston Daily Mail, May 13, 1974. The tax returns listed $91,413 in income of which $51,000 was salary from the Charleston Gazette as publisher. The other income was a variety of investments. An accountant’s statement showed Chilton and his wife, Elizabeth, had a net worth of $593,000. Chilton acknowledged to Editor Don Marsh, who was writing a story for the Gazette on his tax returns, that what had been reported was highly misleading because it did not value his 24 percent interest in the Gazette, which was worth millions. See Don Marsh, “Chilton Discloses Figures on Income,” Charleston Gazette, May 13, 1974.
3. Don Marsh, “Higgins and the First Amendment,” Charleston Gazette, Oct. 24, 1980. Marsh, a longtime reporter and editor for the Gazette, while acknowledging reporters may occasionally have been overzealous, defended the essential truth of the reporting and noted that Moore, in a televised debate, mistakenly referred to Chilton as the editor rather than publisher of a “yellow journalistic newspaper in the state.” Marsh noted: “But then, nobody is perfect.”
11. Ibid., 22.
12. Ibid., 18. The quotation is contained at the end of a footnote. The book was a reprint of Liebling’s columns for the New Yorker in which he maintained a running commentary in footnote form.
13. Chilton Biography, Charleston Gazette microfilm, available through the Charleston Gazette newspaper library.
15. Chilton Diary, William Edwin Chilton III papers, A&M 3020 Addendum, box 4, FF2, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Library. Chilton kept a diary of his first year in the military. In his entry for Jan. 28, 1943, he acknowledged that he returned to the barracks at 3:30 a.m. after he had “killed a pint of Johnny Walker Red Label Scotch.” Court martrited on a charge of insubordination, he was fined $10 and sentenced to ten days “in the guardhouse.” In an entry on Feb. 8, Chilton wrote that he was able to slip away from the guards and “slept two hours in the latrine in the afternoon, and it was very welcome as I was tired.”
16. See William Edwin Chilton III papers, A&M 3020 Addendum, Salinger, box 1, file 4, and Buckley, box 2, file 7b. They are in the West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Library.
17. Chilton Biography, Charleston Gazette microfilm.
20. U.S. Senate. Committee on Privileges and Elections. Report No. 1206. Feb. 13, 1913. The allegations involved a statement by a West Virginia state senator, who said he was given $1,000 and promised more if he voted for Chilton and the other Democratic candidate, Clarence Watson. He later retracted the statement, and the Senate committee, concluding there was no evidence to move forward, dropped the matter. By the time Chilton came up for re-election in 1918, the U.S. Constitution had been changed to mandate direct election of U.S. senators, and he ran and lost the seat.
23. Eustace Chilton to William E. Chilton Sr., [1937], William Edwin Chilton III papers, A&M 3020 Addendum, box 3, file 28, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Library. Eustace Chilton held an unspecified position in the company. In his letter, he declared the Charleston Gazette was free from “intra family” and external debt and all shares were now back in the family. The letter may refer to an earlier episode in which Chilton Sr. had used Charleston Gazette shares to secure a bank loan that went into default.
24. U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Action, No. 2:07-0329. The federal government filed a complaint against the Daily Gazette Co. in May 2007, alleging the Gazette and Elizabeth Chilton violated antitrust laws when they purchased the assets of the Daily Mail and contracted with its former owner, MediaNews Group, to run the Daily Mail newspaper.
26. Interview, Rick Steelhammer, Jan. 29, 2009. Steelhammer has been a reporter and columnist at the Charleston Gazette since 1976. He got his popular Sunday day life and humor column when Chilton called him to his office in 1984 after reading his frequent contributions to the “common queue,” a file in the newspaper computer system to which everyone had access and which was used as an electronic message board. Steelhammer often wrote amusing parodies of Chilton, which were popular reads among the staff. Chilton told him, “If you’re going to write that on company time anyway, you may as well put it in the paper.” Unfortunately, Steelhammer’s “common queue” pieces were lost in subsequent computer systems.


Haught, Fascinating West Virginia, 109-17.

Interview, James Haught, Jan. 29, 2009.

Haught, “Superslick Production Hides Cult Atmosphere at PTL Club.” Jim Bakker was later caught up in a sex and financial scandal, which was largely uncovered by the Charleston (N.C.) Observer and toppled his church empire.

Interview, James Haught, Jan. 29, 2009.


Interview, James Haught, Jan. 29, 2009.

Ibid.


James Haught, “Impact of Scandal Cost Sprouse,” Charleston Gazette, Sept. 25, 1980. Sprouse sued the Daily Mail for libel and won a $750,000 jury award that was reduced by the state Supreme Court to $250,000.

Haught, Fascinating West Virginia, 103-05.


Interview, Elizabeth Chilton, Jan. 29, 2009. See John D. Rockefeller IV to William Chilton, April 27, 1964. William Edwin Chilton III papers, A&M 3020 Addendum, box 1, file 17, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Library. Chilton and Rockefeller had a long, enduring affection. Wealthy by inheritance from his Standard Oil ancestors, Rockefeller came to West Virginia in 1964 as a VISTA volunteer as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty.


Franklin, “Battle of Two West Virginia Dailies on Politics Seems to Be Expanding.”

James Haught, “The Insipid Press,” Charleston Gazette, Sept. 3, 1986. Though Haught did not write the series, he authored the promotional copy that was used to tease readers about the investigation before it began running in the paper. The logo wording used with the “The Insipid Press” series said: “How well do West Virginia newspapers perform their watchdog role to keep local government clean and to correct social wrongs? Do they improve their communities—or merely seek profits? This series explores these questions.”

Telephone interview, Martin Berg, Feb. 26, 2009. At the time of this study, Berg was a columnist for a Los Angeles legal newspaper.

“Martin Berg, Powerful Have Little to Fear from Papers,” Charleston Gazette-Mail, Sept. 6, 1986.

Ibid.


“Berg, “Cheapness Apparently Wins out over Journalism in Ogden Chain.”

Ibid.

“Berg and Brown, West Virginia, 287.


Ibid.


“Editorial, The Nation, Feb. 21, 1987, 205. The editors quoted one of Chilton’s editorials as a sort of eulogy: “If free enterprise is the wave of the future in the world, then the Lord help the world. What is increasingly becoming clear about this economic system is that it placed greed over all other concerns.”


Dave Peyton, “Chilton Resolution Goes Unintroduced,” Charleston Gazette, March 11, 1987. This was a reprint of Peyton’s column, which had run in the Huntington Herald-Dispatch.

