

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH DAVID SIMON

SUBJECT: DAVID SIMON, JOURNALIST AND CREATOR OF THE POPULAR HBO DRAMA, THE WIRE, WILL ADDRESS THE FUTURE OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM AT A NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON ON MONDAY, JUNE 8.

MODERATOR: MARK HAMRICK, MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MARK HAMRICK: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon and welcome to the National Press Club for our speaker luncheon today. My name is Mark Hamrick of AP Broadcast. And I'm membership secretary here at the National Press Club.

We are the world's leading professional organization for journalists and we are committed to the future of journalism by providing informative programming and journalism education and fostering a free press around the globe. For more information about our club, please visit the website at www.press.org.

And on behalf of our 3,500 members around the world, I'd like to welcome our speaker and our guests in the audience today. We'd also like to welcome those who are watching live on C-Span. We also provide our broadcast over iTunes for podcasting.

We look forward to today's speech, and afterwards, we'll ask as many questions from the audience as time permits. I would ask kindly that you please

hold your applause during the speech so that we have time for as many questions as possible.

For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you do hear applause, it is from guests and members of the general public who attend our luncheons, not necessarily from always neutral working journalists.

I'd like to first introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called. Beginning on this end of the table, Sam Hussein, communications director with the Institute for Public Accuracy. He assured me that I got his name right, which is important when you're with the Institute for Public Accuracy. Thank you. Andrew Schneider, associate editor of Kiplinger Washington Editors, and chair of the NPC book and author committee; Cheryl Arvidson, executive director with the Fund for Investigative Journalism; Jeffrey Bartholet of the-- *Newsweek* Washington bureau chief; Marilyn Geewax, senior business editor with National Public Radio.

On the other side of the podium, Angela Greiling-Keane. She's will Bloomberg News and chair of our Speakers Committee. Moving over the speaker for just a moment, Lori Russo, organizer of today's luncheon, and the new managing director of Stanton Communications. Congratulations. Valerie Jackson, associate editor with Platts; Ira Allen, public affairs specialist with the Fogarty International Center and the National Institutes of Health; Skip Kaltenheuser, he is independent writer and author of *Letters From Washington*. That's a column and international magazine. Rick Dunham, Washington bureau chief, one of our former presidents here with Hearst newspapers. And glad to have Rick here as well. Finally, Rem Rieder, he's editor and publisher with *American Journalism Review*. And now you can give your applause. Thank you. (Applause.)

Well, it may come as a surprise to some of you here today, as you've watched our speakers luncheons over the years that we do not tend to invite members of the press to speak at the podium. For one thing, it'd get way out of control if we started letting those doors open. Right? But we have a special cause to do that today, because our speaker is truly a special individual.

But generally, we think that journalists cover the news and we try not to perhaps put them in a spotlight that they might otherwise feel uncomfortable in. But as I said, today's guest is an exception.

David Simon, a longtime journalist for *The Baltimore Sun*, honed his skills reporting on the streets of one of the most dangerous cities in our country. And after years of reporting the realities of inner city life, it wasn't the murders, drugs, or other horrific crimes that drove him out of the journalism industry; he left, he told the Baltimore city paper in the year 2003 because, "Some sons-of-bitches

bought my newspaper and it stopped being fun.” Did we have that right? Is that an accurate quotation? Okay, sorry about that. Okay.

He took a leave of absence from the paper, and for a full year, shadowed the detectives of Baltimore’s homicide unit. And the result was the Edgar Award winning book, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, which became the basis for NBC’s *Homicide: Life on the Street*. Now, he worked as a writer and later as a producer on that award winning drama.

He went on to take a second leave of absence from *The Sun* to research and write *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner City Neighborhood*. It was a book about Baltimore’s drug trade. And that work inspired an Emmy Award winning HBO miniseries. *Homicide* and *The Corner* then paved the way for *The Wire*, his most critically acclaimed and commercially successful television venture. That HBO drama, which ran for five seasons, depicted Baltimore’s struggles with drugs, corruption, schools, and finally back to where we started, the media.

In addition to his sometimes unflattering depiction of the media in *The Wire*, he continues to vocally criticize the state of contemporary American journalism, taking aim at the producers and consumers of news. And last month before a Senate panel, he said that he believes nothing can save high end professional journalism.

Now, despite all of that, he is doing what he can. He continues to work as a freelance journalist and author, writing for *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic*, and *Details* magazine, among others I’m told. Ladies and gentlemen, please give a nice National Press Club welcome to David Simon. (Applause.)

DAVID SIMON: Thank you. Well I don’t know if it’s going to be clear on the C-Span channel, but I managed to get some salad dressing on my shirt. I did it because my credentials as a journalist were now suspect. I’ve been out of the profession since ’95. But I felt that if I could leave a little of my lunch where it could be seen, you know-- Would that it was Chinese food and I had my feet up on the rewrite desk, it would be perfect. So this is for you right here.

Thank you very much for inviting me. I’m flattered. You know, it’s funny. I feel better knowing now that journalists are not invited to do this, because the funny part about my critique of journalism, such as it is, is that when you are an expert in this country, meaning when you’re in the game, when you’re dealing with it every day, you know, when you’re living and breathing it, you’re not an expert. But you get a few years away and you have a television show or-- You know, I mean, I’m an expert in television production now. But all of a sudden I’m an expert in the media, so. There’s something strange about that. People keep

coming up to Ed Burns, who is now a television writer (that's my partner) and asking him about education, which is-- He was a former schoolteacher in Baltimore. He said the same thing, you know? "When I was an expert, when I was teaching, nobody wanted to hear from me. And now that I have a television show and I'm not teaching," you know, "...I have all the opinions in the world, and everyone wants to hear them."

So I'm a little suspicious of my own voice on this. But I did agree to speak-- You know, I've written on it. I do care about where newspapers have gone and where they're going. I'll correct the introduction in only one way. I think I did say that I worried that it was too late for high end journalism. I'm a little more open-ended about it than to say I don't see any future for it. I certainly don't see any future for it in the current economic model.

And I certainly don't see any future for it as long as the journalism community continues to pretend that-- to a certain martyrology, to a sense that we were doing our jobs, that we were heroic in our pursuit of our jobs, that we were out here clearing the path for democracy, and then technology shifted and the paradigm changed, and now we're stuck. And it's not through any fault of our own that we've been caught behind the Internet.

I would believe that if I wasn't in journalism for 15 years prior to the arrival of the Internet. But it wears thin with me because I actually saw what we did to our own product. I come from that portion of journalism that was affected first and most by journalism's abdication of its own ambition. I worked at a chain newspaper. When I went to work at *The Baltimore Sun*, it was family-owned. A couple years after that, in 1985, we were bought by Times-Mirror. And we congratulated ourselves on being bought by the good chain. "Thank god we're not Gannett," we said. "Thank god we're gonna be all right." Then they were bought by the Tribune Company subsequent to that.

I left journalism in '95 after 13 years. I was the third buyout at my newspaper. I was maybe reporter number a hundred or ninety to leave as *The Baltimore Sun*'s newsroom rolls went from 500 down to 400. For those of you keeping score, the Internet was not even a whisper in '95. *The Baltimore Sun* was a monopoly paper. Its profit margins, we now know because of the Tribune bankruptcy filing, were 37.5%. So they were willing to pay for 500 people in order to run the Hearst paper out of town, in order to run the *News American* into the ground, which folded in '86, and then to sustain an evening edition of the paper for long enough to get as many of those viewers to cross-- ("Viewers" — sorry. You know, I'm in another world entirely now.) --enough of those readers to come over to an evening paper. But then they folded *The Evening Sun*, too.

They also ran zoned editions in four of the surrounding counties to try to get as much circulation as they could in the growth areas of Baltimore. And they did that until they figured out the easier thing to do, which is to buy the regional papers in those counties and make that part of their monopoly. So they were willing to have 500 and then even 400 reporters when the pursuit that they were after was a monopoly. They were not willing to do it to make a great product or even a good product.

And that's what our industry discovered. They discovered this in the 1980s. And they went to Wall Street and Wall Street rewarded them handsomely by basically saying, "You know what? We can make a lot more money putting out a mediocre newspaper than we can putting out a great newspaper, or even a good newspaper — more wire copy, less reporters, less coverage." You know, this was the bargain that we made.

And ultimately the people who were making this decision had less and less to do with the newsroom and more and more to do with the boardroom. Two years before I left, the fellow who had taken over the reigns of the Times-Mirror company came to speak at my newsroom, fellow by the name of Willis. And he gave a speech, talked for 45 minutes about cost centers and profit centers, and never once mentioned news or journalism or the mission of *The Baltimore Sun*. He talked about product. And this made perfect sense because before he was selling newspapers, he was selling cereal for General Mills. And he'd done a bang-up job of improving General Mills's standing and its price per share in the market. And so now he'd been given the reigns of a newspaper chain, even one of the better newspaper chains.

And I remember walking away from that 45-minute talk which concluded with him suggesting that, "Would it be so bad if reporters could, when you're doing a story and you see the potential for advertising, if you could maybe throw a call to the advertising department?" I remember taking the elevator back to the newsroom with a guy named Mike Littwin, who was one of the best reporters. He was a columnist at our paper. The first two floors were in silence. And then when the door opened on the newsroom, I remember Mike saying, "This is over. This is over." And that was early '90s. And, you know, two years later, I was taking the third buyout.

We cheated ourselves. We destroyed ourselves. We did it at the behest of Wall Street. We did it for cash on the barrelhead. The people who did it are now on the golf course down at Hilton Head, probably bemoaning what happened to the wonderful industry that they once helmed, you know, on the business side. On the editorial side, the ambitions were stunted in another way, which is to say, the same editors that would later stand up at a later point and sacrifice themselves rather than make cutbacks at *The L.A. Times* did not stand up at *The Baltimore*

Sun because there were still worlds to conquer and there were still places to go within the chain and there were still personal ambitions to be achieved.

No one stood up when *The Baltimore Sun* started emptying its doors. And ultimately, we didn't stand up at *The Baltimore Sun* and scream bloody murder when it was happening to the Gannett papers five and ten years before us. To use a historical phrase or misuse a historical phrase, when they came for the Gannett papers, I said nothing because I didn't work for Gannett. Eventually they came to the Tribute papers. And now the only people left that have any potential ... (inaudible) in journalism are the national papers, are *The Post* and *The Times*. The chains have been eviscerated. And they've made incredible profits.

And yet what's happened is, pure unencumbered, raw capitalism is never the answer for anything that involves a public mission. It's certainly not even the answer for American industry. If you look at the way Wall Street and its analysts and big money investors have played with American industries and have, you know, depreciated the actual mission of those industries in order to achieve profit, I mean, there'll be somebody making money until the day they close the door of *The Baltimore Sun* and *The San Jose Mercury*, you know, and *Denver Post*. Somebody will figure out a way to make profit to the very day that they decide to close the doors.

But they'll be doing less and less journalism. And that would be my critique, is that we did this to ourselves. And so that when the Internet came along, all of the R&D money, all that research and development that was supposed to be spent in the '80s and '90s so that we knew what the Internet was and what its potential was, and so we had placed the industry in a situation where it could thrive, where you could charge online and where you could deliver more product, not less, and therefore justify charging online, that money went to Wall Street. It didn't go back into the newsrooms. It made for an inferior product. You know? *The Baltimore Sun* now has 160 reporters covering a metro area that's only larger. It's only grown. And there are still people getting up in newsrooms saying, you know, "It's all right. We're going to do more with less."

No, you do less with less. That's why they call it less. You know? The hyperbole-- You know, and when the Internet landed, the head editors at my paper, five years after I left, when the Internet clearly was affecting American life in every framework, the editors who were running my paper still regarded it as advertising for their product, rather than the product. They made that mistake. They said, "You know, these youngsters, they'll surf the 'Web' — in quotes — "...they'll surf the 'Web' and they'll see our product and they'll realize they really want to subscribe to the doorstep version of the paper." And they were saying that until just a few years ago.

I do think there's one last hope for journalism, and it's this. They must-- We must find a way (I'll use the royal 'we' even though I'm not entitled to it) we must find a way to charge online. We must create a new revenue stream for the product. Now, would this have been easier before we eviscerated the product, before we made it mediocre in most of the markets in America? Yes. It would have been a lot easier when the product was something substantial and something you couldn't get anywhere else.

It now doesn't resemble that in many markets. It will be easy, I believe, relatively easy--- I think it'll actually be harder than if we had not let the horse out of the barn door. But it will be easy for the national papers to do so. And my prediction is, within the next year, you're going to see *The Washington Post* and *New York Times* go to an online subscription pay model. And after they do it, you're going to see Murdoch do it. And then you're going to see some of the regional papers do it. And some of them might have enough substance to squeeze through the hole and create a new dynamic. And that's the only hope there is. And with every day that you delay, another 30 reporters are bought out somewhere or laid off, you know, another previously proper newspaper decides they can do without a copy desk or a trained city editor. Every day of delay brings us closer to the abyss.

But I think finally the big boys get it. It would have been nice if they'd gotten it five years ago or even longer, but we are where we are. And that's the only hope I have left.

Now the scary part, I think, is this. If *The Times* and *The Post* wait long enough, eventually you're going to see national newspapers like in Britain. And you're going to see *The Washington Post*, St. Louis edition, *The Washington Post*, Baltimore edition, *The New York Times*, Denver edition. And they're going to hire ten or twelve people to create a sort of-- an advanced *USA Today* version of a local zoned paper. Where *USA Today* gives you a couple of paragraphs of what your local news is, they'll give you a couple pages, maybe a page and a half of the local metro coverage.

And because they're offering you *The Times* or *The Post* international and national coverage, and because you can't get that online anymore for free (because they're going to finally back up on the aggregators like Google and Yahoo and reach a new accommodation with The Associated Press and Reuters) you're going to see this sort of modern version of the zone edition replace what were previously substantive full-blooded metro dailies. That's the worst case scenario. I'd rather see locally-owned newspapers survive. And I'd rather see them try for this model sooner rather than later. But I don't know that it's going to happen.

You know, I do think though that journalism has a value, that eventually that value will restore itself. You know, if newspapers can't make the transition, you're eventually going to see somebody do startups. You're going to see Baltimore.org and they're going to hire ten or fifteen reporters, then twenty or thirty reporters. And they're going to pay for it with online subscription.

Because here's the thing that we also missed. In my whole time as a journalist, you lost money on subscriptions. The gas, the trucks, the printing presses, the wood pulp, you lost money there, and you accepted that and you got it on your display ads. That made it harder for us to see the future.

The truth is, if somebody pays for a third of what it costs *The Baltimore Sun* to get it to your doorstep now, even less than that actually-- It's \$22 dollars a month to get *The Baltimore Sun*. For eight dollars, for nine dollars, you get it online, that's all profit. There's no trucks. There's no gas. There's no printing press. That's a revenue stream. You know, if you scratched it out on the back of a notepad, you'll find out, you know what? You can generate \$300,000 dollars, \$350,000 dollars a month if you get a tenth of *The Baltimore Sun*'s subscriptions online to commit to you. And with that, you can hire about 30 reporters. And that's about the size of a metro desk.

Now, the scary part of that is that a lot of our citizens are not going to get it because they're not online. And so the delivery model is not as democratic as newsprint. And that's something to content with going forward. But I do think there's a future. But it begins with content. We're going to have to start believing in content again. We're going to have to pay for content to provide it, to hire back the talent that we've leeches out. And then we're going to have to make other people pay for it. And if we don't do that, then, you know-- If you put out a product and nobody's willing to pay for it, you know, any freshman business major will tell you, you don't have a product and it's time to stop pretending. So I think that's ultimately where we're going. And I think finally some people are going to get there, but it's way late in the game.

And on that happy note, my shirt has dried. So I think--

MR. HAMRICK: Yeah, we'll find some questions. We have several questions, essentially survival skills for those that are still working in daily journalism. People want to know, what about young people? What is your advice to them? Maybe the question would be asked, should they continue to strive for a career in journalism? What about those of us who still work in newsrooms, all these dynamics that have to do with shifting sands, not only in the industry, but the pressures of many people having to work more with fewer resources in the newsroom, a little practice advice for people who are still in the trade or thinking about coming aboard?

MR. SIMON: You know, I really don't consider myself an expert on what to do if you're still in the game right now. The one thing I'll say that worked for me, and I think worked for me in sort of a multimedia sense, where I had sort of a marketable skill and I didn't even know I did, was I managed not to get promoted for my entire career. I started on the police beat. I ended on the police beat. And in some perverse way, I've parlayed the police beat into something in a completely different medium.

There's something in this, which is this. When I was in journalism school, what they told us (which was the lie) was that newspapers were going to become more sophisticated, more complex. Beats were going to be more specialized. You know, you were going to be assigned to cover something and you were going to need to cover it the way a good magazine writer might cover it. They used to tell us, we're going to become more like magazines, and magazines were going to become like, you know, literature. That's what they said in the '70s.

You know, Ira Allen was one of my journalism professors. I don't know that he went this far. He worked for UPI at the time, but-- you know? But I did have-- I had a feature-- you know, this is where we were going. We were going to cede the ambulance chasing to television, and we were going to become more sophisticated.

Well in truth, it became more generalist. I mean, I lived through that moment where *USA Today* showed up and everyone at *The Baltimore Sun* said, "You know what? We should stop jumping stories. If you're jumping a story, it's too long." You know? You know, newspapers needed to become more sophisticated, more adult, more essential on every beat. And they didn't.

And there's something that I would argue. If you're a young reporter now, make yourself an expert in something. Stay put. You know, get to be aware of something. Because it may translate-- If you're not at a newspaper tomorrow, there's somebody that wants to know about that, whether it's "transpo", whether it's crime, whether it's politics. Make yourself essential somewhere. For god sake, don't be a generalist. We've seen what generalism has done to newspaper. It's made them irrelevant. And that would be my big argument there.

MR. HAMRICK: So unfettered capitalism, not good for the industry as you described it in your speech? There's discussion of possible non- or not-for-profit model. Do you see any future for that working?

MR. SIMON: Well, I mean, I see that-- You know, if the chain newspapers in these second tier towns, which have been so eviscerated and are providing such mediocre product, if they don't get it together, if they don't turn

the corner and pull themselves through the keyhole of a pay model online, it's going to fall to startups. And yes, I think a non-profit startup in Baltimore, in San Jose, in any of these cities that are now underserved journalistically, is going to work. You know, you're going to be able to hire the cream of the bought out/laid off crop of journalists. And if you're committed to putting the money back in, I think you'll actually grow it. I mean, if you do the math on the-- You know, pull out a cocktail napkin there and do the math of six, seven, eight dollars a month for ten percent or fifteen percent of what the newspaper's prior subscription base was, and realize that all of that money, all that is now profit. It's not circulation cost.

Again, circulation was a cost center. We didn't see it. But that's been transformed. And I think on a small scale basis, where everybody is committed to just covering the regional area, you know, there's no room for-- A lot of things are not relevant anymore to the local paper-- you know?-- the comics, the crossword puzzle, national coverage, you know?

But there is still a market in these regional areas for journalism. And I think ultimately, it will be a non-profit or a very modest profit, that somebody has to say, "You know what? Five, six percent growth is okay. Let's put everything else back into the product." And nobody's said that in journalism for 25, 30 years. And nobody was compelled-- Nobody stood up and said, "What are we doing to our own ambitions?" So here we are.

MR. HAMRICK: Somebody asked, how can reporters keep this from happening to the industry again? That presupposes that they can, I guess.

MR. SIMON: Well, in a way, the non-profit model is the only way you can do that. Because I believe that some of these chains, you know, the Tribune Company and its ilk are so badly run that if they do manage to pull through the keyhole and create a new revenue stream out of online subscriptions, they'll run right back to Wall Street, rushing their profits in to try to boost their share price and try to appease the analysts. I see no suggestion that suddenly leadership in journalism has turned a corner. So I worry about--

You know, even if the model changes and gives them some breathing room, I worry that they won't have-- You know, in this country, politically and financially, nobody plants an olive tree. You know? They all plant annuals. They plant flowers that come up real pretty in the form of quarterly profit statements and price per share on the financial side. Politically, it's the same thing, you know? Nobody cares about what the economy is going to look like six, seven years from now, which is why we're in the state we're in.

You plant an olive tree, you're not going to get an olive for seven years. But, you know, we need some olive trees. You know, I worry that even if you create this new revenue stream, they'll butcher it. They'll screw it up again.

MR. HAMRICK: I guess there was some back and forth, either through the media, or maybe it was in an actual public setting involving you and Arianna Huffington about blogs.

MR. SIMON: That was at the Senate.

MR. HAMRICK: Okay, right. I guess you were sort of quoted as saying that, you know, you'd like to see a blogger cover a city commission meeting or something to that effect. Can you go over the difference between the traditional journalism outlet and the blogs, and what you see as the challenge in, let's say, migrating the quality of content there?

MR. SIMON: I don't believe in unprofessional journalism. I'll call it that. I don't believe in citizen journalists. I don't believe in bloggers as anything other than an additional resource that can provide raw information that can then be synthesized by professional journalists. I believe that journalism is a craft and a profession and that you pay people. And then you pay people to edit it.

And the failings of the Internet to provide a professional product are myriad and obvious to anybody who's actually been in journalism. But I'll give you just one of them. The best editor I ever worked with, one of the best editors, one of the two best editors I ever worked with was a guy named Steve Luxenburg, who some of you may know from *The Washington Post*, really great guy. Steve could make the story disappear with three questions. He could make it go into the metro advance basket and never come out again because it didn't deserve to come out because it had premises that seemed plausible, and yet, you know, when you scratched the reporting, there was a hole so big you could drive a delivery truck through it.

And that was an incredible gift, the ability to destroy a fraudulent piece of journalism before it was published. No such thing exists on the Internet. You know? People sit in a room and they put two facts together, and goddamn it, it'll equal four, you know, whether it does or not. And there is some great stuff being done in the realm of commentary, because there's a lot of smart people who blog. And for commentary, which sells itself cheap on the Internet, it's completely worthy.

But to cover a beat as a reporter is-- You know, I would not have done it for free or to inform my blog or for some, you know, sense of civic duty. I did it because *The Baltimore Sun* paid me a salary that I could support a family on and

that I could-- You know, it was a living wage that they paid me to go to the Baltimore police department, you know, and kiss enough desk sergeants' ass every day to find out what was going on, and then to kiss somebody else's ass to find out where I was being lied to, and then to compare one lie to the other, and then to take them out for drinks afterwards to find out, you know, what else wasn't in that day's story that might make a follow-up story. It was 14, 15 hours a day. Nobody does that as a hobby.

And the vanity of the Internet, having sort of approached the very edge of what journalism is, the vanity of it thus far, of this very immature medium, is to say, "We're already doing journalism. Look," you know, "...I went to a council meeting," you know? "I reported on this." Yeah, you went to the public-like, kabuki face of politics, which was the council meeting, you know? But later on, if you actually knew anybody in the bowels of the city administration, you might have actually reported on what's really going on. But for that, you would have needed to be a full-time-- And you deserve to be paid.

Well, journalism has done so badly at that. And that's what we've-- Listen — while the guys at my paper were pursuing this Pulitzer and that Pulitzer and, "We're going to do a project on this. And we're going to report on how good our reporting is. And then we're going to try to get the governor to schedule hearings. And then we're going to report on the hearings. And then we'll put it all together. And, by the way, we care about this from January to December because after that, it's another Pulitzer submission, so we won't care about this issue after December 31st," while they were doing that and pouring resources into that because that's their resumes, *The Baltimore Sun* ceased to have a labor reporter in a city where the unions were being eviscerated. It ceased to have a poverty reporter in a city where half the adult black males are without work. I mean, that's not an economic model that is viable. That's a model for unbelievable poverty.

You know, it ceased to have a court reporter covering the city courthouse for a year and a half because all they did was generate copy, you know, for a news hole that was shrinking. So, you know, what do we do? Let's just stop covering the courthouse, because that way, you know, we'll fit. You know, the beat system was the first thing they eviscerated because, you know what? Nobody wins a Pulitzer Prize, and nobody gets promoted, and nobody gets to be the editor-in-chief of *The L.A. Times* because they covered the hell out of their city. You know? Journalism has its own false statistic, the editorial side. And that false statistic is the Pulitzers.

You want to fix journalism on the editorial side? If the Pulitzer Prize committee started saying, "You know what? We're going to give out five Pulitzers for beat reporting every year, but you have to cover the beat for three

and a half, four, five years”-- That’s right. I mean, when you’ve actually covered it long enough to actually have an impact in terms of, you’re all over this, whatever agency or whatever issue you’re-- You know, you’ve been a medical reporter four or five years. Now submit your stuff for a Pulitzer. The level of sophisticated in newsrooms would have gone up and not down. And it wouldn’t be about juking(?) some project and making it sound like you really hit a homerun when you basically hit a single over the second baseman. Instead, you would actually be increasing the paper’s capacity for doing great journalism. But, you know, the gamesmanship of our awards-centric profession is such that that’s just not going to happen.

MR. HAMRICK: I’d just like to note, I’ve never won one of those awards. Just helps my credibility--

MR. SIMON: Me neither.

MR. HAMRICK: Is it your view that one of the turning points had to do with the concentration of media among shareholder-driven companies? Was that really what changed in the timespan that you’ve been referencing?

MR. SIMON: Yeah. The chains and publicly-owned newspaper companies run by businessmen, not by people who’d come up through the newsroom, completely divorced journalism from its original mission and made it a profit center for Wall Street. And they very quickly came to the conclusion (and they were correct) that we can make more money in the short-term by putting out a lousy product than by putting out a good product. Let’s cut the news hole. Let’s cut the staffing. You know?

Think about the idea of buyouts. Buyouts were the operative way in which we reduced ourselves as a profession. That shows you the contempt we had for our own product. You need a reduction in force because somebody at the head office says so? Layoffs. Do layoffs. Seniority-- Most of these are guild papers, or a lot of them are guild papers. Or even if they’re not, just do it by seniority. Take the young guys who haven’t covered that beat for eight, nine, ten years. Don’t take the institutional memory of the paper.

By the way, the guys who can take the buyouts, you know, they’re jerks like me. They got an option. You know, somebody’s saying, “Come work on the TV show.” Somebody else is giving them a book option. *The Washington Post* is saying, “Yeah, we’ll hire you if *The Baltimore Sun* offers you a buyout.” The people who took the first four, five, six buyouts from *The Baltimore Sun* had options. Not all of them — there were some good people who stayed because they really wanted to stay, because they were committed, because their kids were in school. But by and large, when you go with buyouts instead of layoffs, you’re

saying, “We want to take the most expensive reporters. We want to take the ones who have the most benefits. We want to take the ones who are making the most money. All we care about is the bottom line. We know that what’s going to happen is, the buyout ranks are going to be filled with the people who were the best people, who have other options.” But we went with buyouts, not layoffs. That tells you what was going on back in Chicago and L.A. and everywhere else. They just didn’t give a damn about the product. All they cared about was that, you know, “Five percent, ten percent, fifteen percent? Not enough. Gotta make thirty, thirty-five, thirty-seven and a half percent.” It was shameful. I mean, we destroyed ourselves.

MR. HAMRICK: One member of the audience asks, given how badly the big media outlets performed on huge stories with a ton of resources like the Iraq war, why should the public trust them at all?

MR. SIMON: Because the alternative is even more miserable. You know? Yes. Listen — kudos to the Pulitzer this year for not giving anything out for financial reporting. They got that one right. And Iraq was pretty much a systems failure by most mainstream media. But ultimately, I don't believe that any other framework--

Listen — it doesn’t matter whether-- I do believe that bringing dead trees to your doorstep is now anachronism, that whatever else happens, you know, we’re in a path where every-- you know, more and more subscriptions are going to be going online. The issue is whether people will pay for them.

But given that I do believe that that is-- You know, the future of journalism is people who are paid to do this job. If more people are paid more to do this job, if the salaries improve, you’re going to get a better class of reporter. If you're able to hire more editors, not less, and if the editors have more experience, you’re going to get a better class of product as well.

But until that happens, I just don’t see any merit to the idea of a thousand bloggers, you know, equals, you know, a hundred paid reporters, and because there’s so many more of them, they’ll be in so many-- I just don’t buy it. I mean, I read a lot of blogs, you know, everything from commentary to arts criticism. You know? There are things that are at newspapers now that are irrelevant. Criticism, television criticism, film criticism is basically irrelevant, you know? There are better sites for film criticism than there are film critics at newspapers. That’s just true. I mean, there’s no reason why you can’t watch films and comment on them as a hobby. That, you can do.

But journalism, covering something as self-sustaining as self-protecting as an American institution, be it a police department or the State Department, I don't

see it happening except if people are paid to be in an adversarial stance against that institution in terms of trying to acquire information that they institution doesn't want you to have, and get it out. And I don't see that being done in any other way than with mainstream media model.

It could be a mainstream media model where it's directly to the Internet. It could be the equivalent of an I.F. Stone newsletter that just covers one aspect of American government, you know? You know, it doesn't have to be-- But the thing that will make it consistent is, whoever's working for whatever framework, they'll be paid, and they'll be paid enough to make it worthwhile. And they'll be paid enough to bring people into the profession who can do that job. And until that model is restored and people are paid, I don't see any-- You know, as bad a job as we've done over the next ten years, watch what happens without us.

MR. HAMRICK: Someone asks, assuming that you would, how do you propose greater stakeholder involvement in improving journalism?

MR. SIMON: I'd have to ask what a stakeholder is.

MR. HAMRICK: My guess is, yeah, someone who is a consumer of news, which is just about--

MR. SIMON: You know, this is going to sound really wrong. But I never really cared about what the readers thought. I'm the worst marketing guy in the world. They used to tell me that, "The readers want shorter stories. The readers want really localized news. The readers want this. The readers want that. The readers want punchier headlines. The readers"-- you know? I can't. I'm on C-Span. (Laughter.) I was going there, but I'm on C-Span.

[side remarks]

But in a way, you know, I've come to believe and I came to believe as I was a journalist that I don't write for those people, if they exist. I wanted to write stories for the people who, if they had intimate knowledge of what I was writing about, they would say, "Yeah, that guy caught it." So if it was a detective and I'm doing-- You know, I wanted a homicide detective, not just in Baltimore but-- And not that he would like everything and he would be mad about stuff, and he wouldn't like it when I, you know, ranked on a cop who I thought deserved to be ranked on, but that-- You know, I didn't want him to say, "This chump doesn't know my job."

And I figured if I got it right for him, and if he was able to get through the story and not, you know, be disgusted, then readers would follow. And I've sort of proceeded on that basis since I began writing, like, longer articles. I mean, you

know, at some point, that became what I actually thought newspapers should do. Again, I'm really against generalists. So the idea that you can cover something well enough to explain it to the mythical seventh grade educated reader-- That's the guy they told us about in journalism school: "Your reader will have a seventh grade education." You know, to hell with him then. I don't want to write for that guy. No, really. Who does?

But eventually-- I mean, they published a whole newspaper to write for that guy. It's called *USA Today*. And the guys at *The Baltimore Sun* stood around and went, "You know, they're onto something there. No jumps," you know? "Twelve inch stories, that's it," you know? We went through that phase. I want to write stories for the people who are living that event. And then I believe other people will follow it because then you're writing with interior knowledge that says, "I'm worth reading. I really know this beat," you know?

It took years-- You know, I wasn't a good police reporter for the first two, three years. I mean, I had all the headlines. I didn't get beat, you know? But there's nothing there that I would save for-- You know, it was only after I'd been on the beat four, five, six years and eligible for a buyout that the journalism started getting worthwhile.

I mean, I just believe if you tell a story that people don't know, you come to the campfire with the best story, people will follow you and they'll sit down and they'll listen, you know? Trying to anticipate what readers want, that's what got us into this mess. Just, you know, go out, get the best story.

MR. HAMRICK: Now I know why our president of *USA Today* was kind enough to ask me to host today. I wanted to ask you about that creative process.

MR. SIMON: Best box scores in the business.

MR. HAMRICK: Sure they appreciate that. That's a good jumping off point to go into what you've been doing in more recent years. Do you take a different approach in creating content for your television audience in terms of trying to please them?

MR. SIMON: No. I'm just as indifferent to them as I've always been. But it's a different model. I mean, I don't get my nose out of joint from journalism and say, oh, *The Wire* is in any way comparable to journalism. *The Wire* is-- and *Homicide* and *Generation Kill* and-- I mean, *Generation Kill* is based on journalism. And so it's a little different. But it was drama. And journalism shouldn't get its nose out of joint by trying to compete with-- You know, when you can make it up, you can shape the story and make it as graceful

as you want the arc to be. And you get to make choices. And you don't get to do that in journalism, nor should you.

So I wouldn't compare the two. It's a different skill set. When I left journalism, the first thing I had to do, I walked into this writing room on *Homicide* and everybody was a playwright. They'd all come out of the Yale Drama School, and they'd had a lot of success on the stage. They said, "Read Chekov. Read Pirandelli (sic). Read all these guys who"-- you know? At best, I'd read one or two Chekov plays. You know? Pirandelli, I don't even think I had the Cliff notes. You know?

But they basically said, you know, you're in another realm now. You're doing something else different. And so it's not the same gig. You know? The best I can say about *The Wire* is that the impulse behind doing that show was in journalism, but just the impulse, not-- You know, it was being strained through something that has a totally different purpose.

MR. HAMRICK: Well, you've done remarkably well for someone who you might suggest is ill prepared for it. How have you done so well in making that transition?

MR. SIMON: I had one good skill set which did come from journalism, which is, I had a pretty good ear for dialogue, you know? I'm not an Irish or a German or an African-American cop. And I'm not a drug dealer. But I found I had two things which could translate, which was-- One is a good ear for dialogue. And, you know, 60% of writing drama is dialogue. And the other 40% is pacing. And I had a good teacher teaching me the other part, which is pacing, which, you know, strip it down, every line justifies itself. You know, it's really even more ruthless than journalism in a way.

But the other thing that I had going for me is-- Does anybody know who Homer Bigart was? I see a few nods around. Okay. When I became a journalist, Bigart became my hero very quickly. My dad told me about him. He was a New Yorker and so he remembered Bigart from his time at the *Herald Tribune* and at *The Times*.

Bigart's great skill set was that he didn't mind being a jerk or an asshole-- not an asshole, but, like, a goof, you know? I'm serious. Journalism is supposed to be an innately curious profession. I can't tell you the number of people I worked with that didn't want to be seen asking a stupid question, or didn't want to be seen asking any question, or didn't want to ask a question where it wasn't clear they already knew the answer, and they were trying to catch you.

The idea of a journalist asking-- so, walking into a room and saying, "Gee, I don't understand any of this. Help me"-- There's a great story about-- Bigart had a terrible speech impediment. And they didn't let him be a reporter until his thirties at *The Herald Tribune* because they thought, "He's an idiot. He's a copy boy." And finally they let him be a reporter, and he was great. I mean, he was just pulling back things as a metro reporter that nobody else was getting. He won the first Pulitzer. He went up in the elevator with LaGuardia. He sort of was like the nebbish who, in the back, they didn't realize. He went up the elevator at the Empire State Building when they had a plane hit the building. And he won a spot news Pulitzer, because, you know, he was the guy they didn't notice, you know, going up with the mayor. And he went up to where the plane hit the building.

But his great skill was defined in this one story where-- I forget who it was, but it was some captain of industry who was talking to Punch Sulzberger and said, "I can't believe the reporter you sent to interview me." And Sulzberger said, "Why? What was the matter with him?" He goes, "The guy was a complete idiot. I had to explain everything to him." Well, try to imagine a white, 30-something guy standing at Monroe and Fayette Street and saying, "You guys are selling drugs? How does this work exactly?"

Because it was not a lot more sophisticated than that. And ultimately, years later, the 15 year-old kid who was at the center of the book, De'Andre McCullough, when he was about 22, 23 and we were sort of reminiscing about the book when I met him, he said the reason he decided to start talking to me is that-- You know, one day he was selling on Vine Street, selling ground stash(?). And he's running back and forth from a corner to where he's hidden his drugs. And he sees me up on his grandfather's steps, watching him. And he said, "Man, David, you just looked like you didn't know anything. You looked so pathetic. And I just decided I had to help you," you know? "It was a wonder you weren't getting robbed every day."

And, you know, that was my skill set, was, okay, I don't know anything. And those two things made it really easy to learn. And it also made it real easy when I walked into that writers room and saying, you know, "How do you do this?" And to this day, I mean, we have guys who come in and they're doing spec work or they're going to write a spec script. And they're, like, you know-- They want to act like, "Well, I know how to do *The Wire* because I've watched the show and I've done this. And I've written three-- And I did this. And I did three *Law & Order* episodes." It's, like, I know they're going to-- You know, it's, like, they don't come in terrified and with, you know, 20 questions on their sleeve, they're doomed. You know? And I think journalists-- You know, it's amazing how many people got into this profession are just not curious or are terrified of being curious.

MR. HAMRICK: A question was, what kind of relationship do you now have with the rank and file in the Baltimore police department? And how have they reacted to some of your criticism of the department policy of not releasing names of police officers involved in shootings?

MR. SIMON: The detectives and patrolmen who are still there-- I mean, you've got to remember, it's been a lot of years, but-- The ones who are still there, up to maybe the rank of lieutenant are fine with me. And the ones who are in middle management, it can kind of go either way, up to the rank of maybe major. And colonels or above hate my guts. By the way, that's the way it should be if you cover a beat. That's the best way to cover a beat, is that the bosses can't stand you, middle management sometimes will talk to you if it's in their interest, and, you know, everybody who's below that is just somebody to buy a beer for and listen to them rant. You know? That's always the way it's been. And that's kind of where-- You know, I can't imagine covering a beat any other way that would work.

MR. HAMRICK: I know people are anxious to hear about some of the other projects that you might be working on. Can you talk a little bit about your project that you're now working on in Louisiana and how that's coming along?

MR. SIMON: Well, we're filming a show called *Treme*, which is about New Orleans after the storm. And it's really not *The Wire* with a soundtrack. It's not a crime show. It's about people trying to find their way home and reconstitute their lives in this city that was very ill-treated in the wake of the storm. And I don't mean just the immediate wake, but in all the years that have followed. The national response to what New Orleans has gone through is an embarrassment.

And that'll probably air-- The first season will air in 2010.

MR. HAMRICK: It's on HBO?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, on HBO. Yeah, potty mouth can't write for anything else but HBO. Doesn't know how to write clean dialogue that his parents can listen to.

MR. HAMRICK: Somehow I feel like it's going to be on A&E without the language in there one way or--

MR. SIMON: Well, it may be. By the way, if you're on an airline flight and something comes up and my name is on it, you know, just turn in the headphones. Don't-- you know? It won't make any sense.

MR. HAMRICK: --especially with the children. Did I read that one of the intentions of you working with that subject matter is you wanted to use Katrina as a bit of-- making an analogy to the Federal government's performance with, let's say, regulating a head of the financial crisis? Is that correct?

MR. SIMON: Man, that sounds so didactic as to be a room-clearer. But--

MR. HAMRICK: I'm still here. Is it true, or no?

MR. SIMON: Well, I mean, I think there is an analogy to be made. But if any character were to say anything that directly, it would be cut out of the script. But it is true. You know, New Orleans was hit with a category two, a high category two, not even a category three hurricane. A hurricane, if you tell people from New Orleans that their city was drowned by a hurricane, they'll get very angry with you, and rightly so. Their city was drowned by the Corps of Engineers and by shoddy workmanship and stuff that wasn't built to code and bad decisions in terms of transportation policy, and the ineffectiveness of Congress in terms of dealing with Mississippi River issues.

You know, this is our country. And, you know, you compare it to the Dutch who've managed to keep most of their country out of the North Sea for generations, it's humiliating. And if you think about those canal walls, how badly they were built, how much corruption went into the poor maintenance of them, the poor planning, and you think about the SEC and all of the attendant regulation that wasn't there so that you couldn't sell crap and call it gold on Wall Street, you know-- Selling crap and calling it gold eventually comes home. And it came home to New Orleans about four years before it came home to the rest of the country in a very literal way, not in a metaphorical, financial way.

So in a way, New Orleans, what I really admire about people there is they're trying to find their way home. Because it is one of the great places in America culturally. And they're trying to find their way back. And they're doing it on their own. And there's been a real loss-- You know, if you look at everything from the way The Road Home money was administered to the way FEMA behaved, you know, and not just in the immediate aftermath, but in the months and years since, and to now, in terms of the state and local government and what they're doing in terms of everything from zoning issues to the hospitals, that city is enduring and trying to find its way home on its own and without illusion anymore about what the country is, how hollow America actually is when it comes to certain things.

And I find that to be interesting and admirable. And it's kind of what I want to pay attention to now, because I think we're kind of all in that boat. A lot of the things that we believed were there to keep certain parameters and certain

standards inherent in everything systemic in our lives really weren't there. And they have been eviscerated over the course of decades. And so now, you know, we're where we're at. And, you know, New Orleans is looking at us now, I think a little bit, like, "Well, what did you expect? We've been there," so.

MR. HAMRICK: Well, if you just allow me for a moment, we're almost out of time. But before asking the last question, for those of you who have been here before, you know the routine. We have a couple of important matters to take care of. I'll talk about upcoming speakers first of all.

On June 11th, General James Conway, the commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, will be here. On June 25th (this should be interesting) Stan Kasten, president of The Washington Nationals, will be here. I don't know if they're going to put chicken wire in front, but we'll see what happens. June 26th, Robert Herz, chairman of the Financial Accounting Standards Board will address regulatory reform in the financial markets.

And secondly, if you'll-- wouldn't mind just coming up here. As is our tradition, we'd like to present you with a traditional NPC coffee mug.

MR. SIMON: Thank you.

MR. HAMRICK: There you go. Thank you. And one final question, and that is a simple one. To what newspapers do you currently subscribe?

MR. SIMON: I subscribe to *The New York Times*. And again, it's delivered in Baltimore for about the same price as *The Baltimore Sun*. But it still has some news in it, so. What are you gonna do?

MR. HAMRICK: That's great. Well, let's offer a great round of applause for David Simon. Thank you. (Applause.) I'd like to thank you for all coming today or for listening at home. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members, Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, JoAnn Booz and Howard Rothman for helping to organize today's lunch. And thanks to the NPC Library.

The video archive of the luncheon is provided by the Press Club's Broadcast Operations Center. Our events are available for free download on iTunes, as well on the website. Non-members may purchase transcripts, audio and videotapes by calling 202.662.7598 or archives@Press.org.

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That's it for today. Thank you so much. We're adjourned. (Gavel sounds.)

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