

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH HARRY SHEARER

SUBJECT: MEDIA MYTHS IN MAJOR NEWS COVERAGE

MODERATOR: MARK HAMRICK, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MARK HAMRICK: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. I'm Mark Hamrick, I'm a broadcast journalist for the Associated Press, and I'm the 104th president of the National Press Club. We are the world's leading professional organization for journalists committed to our profession's future through our programming, events such as this, while fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, I'd ask you to please visit our website at www.press.org. And to donate to programs offered to the public through our Eric Friedheim National Journalism Library, you could find that information on our website as well.

So on behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and those of you attending today's event. Our head table guests include guests of our speaker, as well as working journalists who are club members. And if you hear applause in our audience, we'd note that members of the general public are attending, so it's not necessarily evidence of a lack of journalistic objectivity.

I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. Our luncheons are featured on our member-produced weekly Podcasts from the National Press Club available through iTunes. You can also follow the action on Twitter using the hashtag #NPC Lunch. After the speech concludes, we'll have Q&A and I'll ask as many questions as time permits.

Now, it's time to introduce our head table guests. And I'd ask each of you here on the table to stand up briefly as your name is announced and we begin from your right.

Dana Ritter, White House producer for CBN News, and I'm told the second baseman on the NPC softball team. And I don't know if it's only the softball team in attendance today, because Mike Diegel is public affairs communications consultant and first baseman. So you have the double play combination in place there.

We have Matt Freeman, he's one of my colleagues at Associated Press as an online video producer and he's also a new member. So, welcome Matt. Mark Hannon is managing editor for Public Safety Communications; Spencer Joynt, who's Harry's godson, freshman at Georgetown University and a guest of the speaker. John Domen, who's an anchor reporter for Westwood One/Metro Networks; David Corn, Washington bureau chief of *Mother Jones* and an analyst for MSNBC and also a guest of the speaker.

Skipping over the podium for just a moment, Melissa Charbonneau, Newshook Media, chair of the Speakers Committee; we'll skip over the speaker for a moment; Patti Giglio, communications consultant and Speakers Committee member who organized today's event; Bill Schneider is former CNN political analyst, now teaching public policy at George Mason University, guest of the speaker and also with Third Way, which is a Washington think tank; Tim Young is a freelance journalist and himself actually a working comedian. He's chair of the National Press Club's Young Members Committee, which he's leading very well; Rachel Ray is U.S. television reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph* of London; and Charlie Clark, another new member here at the Press Club. He's senior correspondent with *Government Executive* magazine, and now how about a round of applause? (Applause)

So those of you who are familiar with our luncheon speaker series here at the National Press Club probably know that the format calls for this to run about an hour in length. Well, this is particularly difficult and challenging today for the simple reason that getting through a proper introduction of our speaker, reviewing all of his accomplishments, accolades and activities, could probably take up the entire hour. But that would be not what you're here for.

Our guest is an actor known for, among other things, the many character voices for "The Simpsons" including Mr. Burns, Smithers and Principal Skinner. He's been a regular cast member on "Saturday Night Live," and his many movie credits include "The Right Stuff," "The Fisher King," "The Truman Show," "This is Spinal Tap," and "The Mighty Wind," among others. He's an author, director, a satirist, a musician, a radio host, playwright and a record label owner. He's a Los Angeles native who began his acting career during his childhood making appearances on "The Jack Benny Program." It was then that he got to know the great Mel Blanc, who did a few voices in his day as well.

He appeared in the pilot of "Leave it to Beaver," in the role that would eventually morph into that of Eddie Haskell. True story. Got a lot of applause on that. Very well remembered. For the past few years, though, he's been writing about the causes and aftermath of the 2005 New Orleans flood. On this subject and others, he's a regular contributor to Huffington Post. He also made a feature length documentary titled "The Big Uneasy."

I was fortunate enough to meet him last fall during a screening of that movie here in town, and that's when we discussed having him here today. Before that, some of the stories, titled "Crescent City Stories," told about the hurricane's aftermath via online video, were very compelling, they're still there. You can see those on the website, mydamnchannel.

Harry's focused a fair amount of attention on the news media's handling of the Katrina story. And as some of you may know, one of my priorities this year is to use our luncheon series to focus more on journalism; that's something we did just a week ago with Vivian Schiller, who at the time was head of National Public Radio. (Laughter) As we know now, she's since resigned. While some of the subjects we're going to discuss today have serious themes, I know we're all looking forward to enjoying the unique sense of multifaceted humor that's just one of the many gifts that our guest speaker has been blessed with. Please give a warm National Press Club welcome to Harry Shearer. (Applause)

MR. SHEARER: Thank you very much. Good afternoon, good morning central time. I'm honored and delighted to have been invited to appear here at the National Press Club today. In fact, just to get this out of the way right at the top, I'd venture to say that this whole occasion is excellent. (Laughter) And I do want to pledge to you that, unlike another recent guest at this podium, nothing I say today here will be contradicted by one of my executives in two days in a video sting, mainly because I have no executives. All right, so I've ripped off Rupert Murdoch and tossed a brush back pitch at Vivian Schiller, we can now get down to the business at hand.

First, I want to say as a New Orleanian, my heart goes out to the people of Japan. People of New Orleans know a little bit about what you're going through right now. Ladies and gentlemen, as much as I was bewitched and besotted by comedy at an early age, I was also fascinated and seduced by journalism. I can remember at age five, or whenever it was my parents first trusted me with blunt little scissors, cutting out and collecting the mastheads for all the different sections of the two daily papers we subscribed to, the main criterion for which was whichever papers in L.A. were still publishing and weren't *The Times*.

When my moment came to be interviewed on TV by Art Linkletter, I confessed to my habit of making my parents take me to the out of town newsstand in Hollywood whenever possible. And for years, our mailbox was filled with dailies from Fergus Falls, Minnesota, and other far-flung locales. A couple of days later, but didn't seem to matter.

When I entered college at the tender age of 15, my first stop was at the office of the student newspaper, where I ended up as a senior editor. Thank you. Our only source of income as a publication was, if we had the job of putting the paper to bed at night, which involved working in a noisy old letterpress print shop where the entire staff except for the foreman was comprised of what we used to call deaf mutes. My chance at the editor-in-chief role was ruined by my refusal to disclose to the student council the

identity of an anonymous grad student whose gentle satire on fraternity life I'd run on the op ed. page. I was suspected of being anti-Greek.

I watched CBS reports and to David Brinkley reporting. I listened to BBC World Service and to NBC's riveting radio reporting on Hungarian revolution, riveted and moved by the slow dying out of the voices calling for help. I was, and still am, a news junkie. This is all by way of explaining that what I'm about to say comes not from hatred of journalism, but from love of it. I've had zero nasty news stories written about me. There's still time, but up to now. The only time I was in a tabloid involving sex, it was all benign and all true. Details on request.

In short, no way am I here to bang the poor, put upon celebrity drum. I spent much of my youth around journalism and journalists, I like their smarts and their dark sense of humor. And yeah, you're right, now here come about a hundred paragraphs of but.

In my youth, I worked for a while at the L.A. bureau of *Newsweek*. Now, I know I'm conflating journalism and *Newsweek*, but give me a break here. Parenthetically, you may have noticed that *Newsweek* recently listed my adopted hometown of New Orleans as America's number one dying city. I'm proud to report that New Orleans has reciprocated, honoring *Newsweek* as the nation's number one dying magazine. But back to the story.

One day while I was working at *Newsweek*, I got a call from the life and leisure editor in New York asking for examples from bureaus around the country of what he called rooftop living. Clearly, this fellow had returned to his 53rd floor office after a somewhat bibulous lunch, stared out the window, noted some potted plants on nearby rooftops and sniffed out a trend. Trends are what people like the life and leisure editor of *Newsweek* had to sniff out before they started being listed hourly on Twitter. So, I dutifully called the dean of L.A. helicopter traffic reporters, Captain Max, who told me the obvious. "Son, L.A. has plenty of land. Nobody needs to put anything on their roof." There were a couple of exceptions, including a guy, John B. Zerlow, who had installed a swimming pool and some Greek columns on the roof of his office building on the Sunset Strip. So I interviewed Mr. Zerlow, wrote it up, leading my file with the cautionary note that this behavior was exceptional in L.A. And then went off to cover a space shot.

A few days later, back from jet propulsion labs, I got the tentative version of the whole rooftop living story from New York. The paragraph with my quotes began, "Typically cutting edge, La-La land burgeons with rooftop living." In those days, burgeon was one of *Newsweek's* favorite words. La-La Land was equally common and equally unforgivable usage. Anyway, I called up the fact checker, a young Vassar girl, to remind her of my cautionary note. "L.A." I said pointedly, "was not filled with rooftop living." "Got it," she said. The following Monday, the story appeared in a magazine and La-La Land still burgeoned.

I used to tell this anecdote just out of simple amusement at the way a story conceived in New York became a template and we reporters on the ground were basically quote machines to fill in the blanks. Nowadays, it seems to me this behavior has, if anything, spread to far more serious parts of the news whole than the life and leisure section, and with apologies, it is burgeoning there.

I should point out that the press release for this talk says I'm accusing the media of myth making today. I'm actually saying something a bit different. Myths, I think, are manufactured out of whole cloth. What I'm calling a template is based on facts, some facts, a partial collection, the first dusting. It then becomes adopted as the narrative; the mental doors lock shut, and no further facts are allowed in.

Maybe you read Peter Maass' remarkable article in *The New Yorker* in January reporting on the icon story and image of the Iraq War, the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue. What caught my attention about this meticulous piece of journalism was recollections of reporters and photographers in Baghdad who kept trying to sell New York editors and producers on the idea of turning around and looking away from the statue, seeing the crowd of perhaps 300 people in the square watching U.S. Marines doing most of the toppling. New York wanted none of it. The iconic image was the story, and any reporting and photography which undercut its salience was less than unwelcome.

Here's Maass, "a visual echo chamber developed. Rather than encouraging reporters to find the news, editors urged them to report what was on TV." He quotes NPR's reporter in Baghdad in an oral history that was published by the *Columbia Journalism Review*. "Anne Garrels recalled telling her editors they were getting the story wrong. There were so few people trying to pull down the statue, they can't do it themselves. Many people were just sort of standing, hoping for the best, but they weren't joyous." Maass also quotes a news photographer in Baghdad, Gary Knight, who talked with one of his editors on his satellite phone. The editor watching the event on TV asked why Knight wasn't taking pictures. Knight replied, "A few Iraqis were involved, and the ones who were seemed to be doing so for the benefit of the photographers. It was a show." The editors told him, "Get off the phone, start taking pictures."

The past few months, we've seen something similar with regard to the State Department cable leaks to WikiLeaks. A staple of most of the stories written about this matter is the plain assertion that WikiLeaks dumped a quarter of a million cables on the public record. It's become a mime, a trope, a cliché, a lampoon of a travesty of a farce. And as those who can count will attest, it's wildly counterfactual. Last time I looked, it was less than five percent of the cables provided to the website that have actually been published. Your figures may vary slightly, but that's at best a micro dump. Yet data dump has become the template and whether you admire or despise Julian Assange, your story is probably going to include him. If not when you're finished with it, then when your editor or producer is.

Then, there's a little matter of Katrina. As noted earlier, I'm an adopted New Orleanian. When the big, scary spiral appeared on weather maps whirling across the Gulf

of Mexico, I was in Los Angeles preparing to appear in a comedy film, “For Your Consideration,” on DVD now. Gotta do it. But in every spare moment, and when you're acting in a film, most of your moments are spare, I was glued to television, the internet, my own sources, devouring the news from New Orleans, Google Earthing (sic) my home, calling friends to make sure they were safe. The day after the movie wrapped, November 6th, I flew into a town where the only vehicles on the streets were Humvees. The sidewalks were lined with tens of thousands of thrown-out refrigerators, and there was a two mile long city block-wide three story tall mountain of flood debris on the median of the main boulevard in a once-fashionable neighborhood. Hot water had just been restored to the French Quarter. Daily mail service was months away.

In the weeks that followed, the local newspapers and TV news broadcast and radio talk shows were understandably focused on every detail of the city's near destruction. And so they were filled with, among other things, constantly updated interim findings from two independent scientific investigations into the catastrophic flooding of New Orleans. Now, you probably remember the bold post-Katrina proclamations that CNN and NBC and God knows who else, were establishing bureaus in New Orleans, and the people assigned to those bureaus were, I'm sure, good folks, people who may have seen unimaginable distress and suffering and horror in a modern, well almost modern, American city.

Why, then, were those correspondents unwilling or unable to pass on what we were seeing in our local media confirmed beyond dispute when the two investigations released their final reports, both concluding that the flooding of New Orleans was not a natural disaster, but a massive, manmade engineering failure, the greatest since Chernobyl. By the way, the Pulitzer people noticed. The *Local Daily* won two prizes for its flood coverage, much of which focused on those findings.

So, answering my own question, editors and producers in New York saw that ominous spiral. They saw the hurricane slam into coastal Mississippi where Katrina undeniably did major storm damage. They saw the windows of the Hyatt blown and the Super Dome roof damaged. And then they saw New Orleans flood. And they saw, as everybody except President Bush did, the video of the crowds at the dome and the convention center. They put those first facts together and a template was born. Big storm, city below sea level, poor black victims.

Now, almost nobody who covered Katrina was from or familiar with the peculiar geography of New Orleans. I realized that on day one when I saw a CNN reporter on Girod Street in the central business district begin his standup with the words, “I'm here in the French Quarter.” Which then, as now, was a quarter mile away. Logistics had its own allure. The convention center and dome were a short drive from the major off ramp of Interstate 10, a largely flooded Lakeview and Gentilly and Broadmoor neighborhoods, the one majority white, the others racially mixed, were farther away spread out over a confusing grid where parallel streets intersect.

Farther still, the eastern suburban county, St. Bernard Parish, had its entire housing stock, 100 percent, flooded out, its white working class residents on roofs for four days without food and water in the searing heat. But strangers didn't know where St. Bernard was, or how to get there, if they even knew it existed. So the people on the roof in St. Bernard never were on television.

Sea level, Dr. Richard Campanella of Tulane University, did an exhaustive study and released his findings two years after the disaster. Even now, half of populated New Orleans, that excludes the wildlife refuge within the city limits, is at or above sea level. Areas that flooded in 2005 were below, above and at sea level. In short, sea level did not determine whether you still had a home or a pile of sodden debris, perhaps, with a drowned parent in the attic. Your main guarantee of protection was maximum distance from the structures of the hurricane protection system. Okay?

To the cause of the flooding. Those two investigations, headed by eminent scientists and engineers, reached strikingly similar conclusions. Pervasive design and construction flaws over 4 ½ decades under administrations of both political parties, in that so-called hurricane protection system, mandated by Congress and assembled under the exclusive jurisdiction and control of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Had the system been competently put together, one of the authors of the report from UC Berkeley said, the result of Katrina in New Orleans would have been quite different. “Wet ankles.”

But by the time all these facts were on the public record, the strangers had long since moved on. The correspondents in the New Orleans bureaus were busy covering stories in Houston and Birmingham and Miami, almost as if the New Orleans bureau was just the Atlanta bureau downsized and moved to a lower rent neighborhood. And a template had hardened into a granite-like lobe in editors and producers brains.

There is one other facet in all this. In 2006, in June of that year, I asked Brian Williams why, despite his obvious concern for the city, his viewers still didn't know why New Orleans had flooded. He told me this, “We just think the emotional stories are more compelling for our audience.” But a bias towards sob stories is as old as William Randolph Hearst's first hard on for an actress. (Laughter) The tendency of the template to rule over facts, even when those facts as in the case of the statue toppling or the city flooding, come from your own correspondents or from eminent independent authorities when the facts don't even require expensive investigations, but merely paying attention to the public record. That tendency is only increasing in the face of dozens of daily deadlines and ever-tighter budgets. You can't stay on a story for very long; and when you come back, as everybody did to New Orleans for the fifth anniversary last fall, there's now corporate institutional ego involved in defending the template against the assault of new information.

After all, the networks, cable and broadcast, bragged big time about the ballsiness of their Katrina coverage. Anderson Cooper actually wagged a finger in Senator Mary Landrieu's face. Exactly how do you go about retracting a boast? This would all be just interesting fodder, perhaps, for a CJR forum were these templates not so powerful in

shaping public understanding of major events. The notion that thousands of Baghdadis were toppling the statue of the tyrant served as the metaphor for an administration's claim that the invaders would be greeted as liberators. By the time everyone realized the mistake, a little insurgency was going on.

The template's version of the New Orleans story, a manmade disaster transformed and triply marginalized as a freak weather event happening down there in that wacky, corrupt town and mainly victimizing poor black people meant a rapid withering of political will to tackle the real problem before the creator of the disaster, the unreconstructed Army Corps of Engineers, had been handed \$14 billion to do a bigger version of the system with, we are learning, some of the same flaws. It's interesting to note in that context that no official or engineer within the Army Corps suffered any negative career consequences, not even so much as a month's docked pay, for causing this disaster, but that the heads of the two independent investigations, and a whistle blower inside the corps, have had very unpleasant consequences for standing up and being lonely truth tellers. As Republicans used to say during the Clinton drama, "That's a good lesson for the children."

And, of course, the template forged in this country influences coverage and understanding around the world. No less than the BBC World Service introducing a feature on the reform of the New Orleans police earlier this year, led with a sentence that said, "Hurricane Katrina tore through New Orleans." I sent an email advising them of the factual weakness of that language. Two weeks later, the same feature ran on the BBC's domestic radio network, Radio 4, and in that intro, Hurricane Katrina still tore through New Orleans. Must have been all the rooftop living.

The good news about what I'm saying is I think that the usual debate about mainstream news coverage can, as the practitioners assume, be dismissed as moot. There are political pressures on both sides. Most journalists are vaguely liberal; most media owners are not so vaguely conservative. The far more pervasive biases, I suggest, those of logistics, of parachuting in and asking cab drivers, "What's the mood here?" and of templates formed in far away offices are subtler and far more intractable. PolitiFact, after all, isn't every fact and it probably can't ever be.

A brief digression. A few months ago, a State Department source talked to the *Washington Post* about the problem of coping with corruption in Afghanistan. He complained of an endemic attitude there, what he called a culture of impunity. When I made my documentary about the flooding of New Orleans, what I found was the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which undergoes no meaningful Congressional or outside oversight, so it tends to repeat its mistakes always at a higher price point. I came to conclude that the corps operates in its own culture of impunity.

Now back to our topic. Journalists don't always shrink from criticizing their colleagues from sins of commission, two words, Judy Miller, but the sins of omission, of editors and producers filtering out facts that interfere with the narrative, the template that they've adopted, are rarely called out by colleagues. Peter Maass needed ProPublica to

fund his reporting on the Saddam statue toppling. Aren't the editors and producers who insisted on the news-free repetition of the story they were seeing on TV as culpable for misleading the country about the war as Judy Miller? And I had to come over from the comedy world to tell the story of what really happened in New Orleans. Anderson Cooper still insists he's keeping them honest. So where's the accountability? If I understand the system correctly, readers and viewers are supposed to vote with their dollars and their remotes for the superior sources of information; market forces at work. So that means the very people whom the template robs of information are somehow supposed to know what they've been deprived of and to enforce market discipline against the editors and producers responsible. You know what that sounds like to me? Like a culture of impunity.

And now I take off my scrubs and my reflector. I'm no doctor and I don't even play one on TV. I do play an insanely greedy industrialist and political manipulator with major media interests, but that doesn't seem relevant.

Returning to the medical metaphor, maybe I can diagnose correctly, I sure can't prescribe. If you ask me what I would suggest to solve the situation I've outlined, let me point out that except for certain lapses into magazine writing and documentary filmmaking, I chose to leave journalism several years ago. That was my solution to the problem. Something tells me it probably won't work system wide. As to that larger situation, I do want to conclude these remarks with a cogent, three-word suggestion: release the hounds. Thank you very much. (Applause)

MR. HAMRICK: Thank you for that. A few questions from our audience as well as maybe a few that I've devised on my own, and we hope to have a pleasant mix of those two, sort of transparency offered for you there. Early this morning, I was sent an email that alerted me about the *Washington Post* story which sort of wasn't necessarily a setup of today's speech, but it did maybe put some things in context, particularly with respect to a timeline. And it talks about you going to Capitol Hill to sort of do the legislative piece, I guess, to this. Can you talk about what that involves and what your hopes are there and what kind of reception either you've had in the past in talking about as it described, I think, decommissioning the Army Corps of Engineers?

MR. SHEARER: Oh, decommissioning is what you do with nuclear plants, not with a federal agency, and you need guys with masks to go on and decommission. This is a first. You know, I'm not a lobbyist, I'm not an activist, I'm a passivist (sic); not pacifist, passivist. I like to sit at home and watch TV. I have some people who are arranging some meetings with me on the Hill. We explain in the movie, thanks to those who've studied the corps far more than I have, including a wonderful journalist who used to work in this town, is now in Miami, Michael Grunwald, who did a fabulous five-part series in the *Post* in 2000 on the corps. The corps is the creature of Congress. The corps is the way it is because Congress likes it that way. The corps in its civil works projects here in this country, not its military projects, is basically an earmarked driven institution. So congressmen appropriate for a specific project, coincidentally, in their district and the corps builds them.

The corps has now been hollowed out to the extent that they don't do most of their own work, so private contractors are engaged. So you have this sort of iron triangle of contractors who give money to elect congressmen, they get corps contracts. Everybody's happy except the recipients of the projects.

Me personally, I'm delighted to go to the Hill and talk to members, but personal opinion of a guy from the comedy world, I don't think anything's really going to change until serious effort is expended by the executive branch.

MR. HAMRICK: So your documentary's been out, I don't know what, about five months, something like that?

MR. SHEARER: Yeah, it was just shown for one night, now it's really out.

MR. HAMRICK: So the substance of that material has been released to the public and now I guess you're going to engage in a series of screenings around the country. What kind of traction do you feel that essentially this thesis has been gaining?

MR. SHEARER: Close to the vanishing point so far because of what I was talking about in my remarks, the desire of-- you know, the major media came to New Orleans, we were there. Hey, come to talk us, we've got an interesting story for you, the other side of what you've been reporting for the last five years. Very few of them took the bait. Brian very kindly made a remark in passing on the panel on *Meet the Press* about the film, but didn't say much about what it contained. Katie did nothing, Diane did nothing, NPR did nothing. Bye-bye, Vivian. PBS did a nice piece on "Need to Know." That's about it. So we're still trying to get attention.

This is not a career move on my part, you know, this is about changing the country's awareness of what happened to a major American city. And also because this is not just a New Orleans story, as we point out in the film. The corps doesn't single out New Orleans for special treatment. They do a little bit, the New Orleans corps district is worse than most. But, there are more than 100 cities in this country where the corps has levee systems that are protecting them. Several of them know they're in trouble. Dallas, they've been told that their levees are built on sand. Sacramento, California, it's well known inside the corps, if not in the area, that that levee system is not in the greatest of shape. And, of course, Sacramento sits atop the entire California water system. So, it's going to be a big story when that happens. I'd make your plane reservations now.

MR. HAMRICK: So someone here is asking who are the reporters that you admire and respect who have covered New Orleans, if there is one? They're putting it in plural. And who and what news organizations are getting it right, closes the question.

MR. SHEARER: I think John Schwartz and the *Times* have done some really good work in New Orleans. Cain Burdeau at the AP from time to time has done good stuff. Mark Schleifstein and John McQuaid of the *Times Picayune*, those are the guys that

won the Pulitzer's. That's the gold standard for me. There's also a local newspaper, weekly, in New Orleans, the *Gambit Weekly* that does good work. Those are mine.

MR. HAMRICK: So you've talked a little bit about, and the movie I think depicts this, about how Congress isn't, in the way you view it, set up to sort of act as the appropriate intermediary for the American people in policing this problem. What about local and state officials in New Orleans and Louisiana? We hosted Governor Jindal here a couple of years ago. He was certainly very vocal, I recall, after the BP oil spill about some stuff he thought should be done. What's your view of how the locals view the problem and what should be done?

MR. SHEARER: He got some good TV time during BP, didn't he? The problem is locals can scream and shout, but the corps has exclusive jurisdiction over this, was given it by the Congress when Congress mandated the building of the system after Hurricane Betsy. The corps has something else going for it. In 1927, Congress passed the Flood Control Act, which gives the corps blanket immunity from any legal consequences of flood control projects that it builds. That's why there has not been a race to the courtroom following the flooding of New Orleans. Because in most cases, lawsuits have been thrown out because the corps has blanket immunity.

There is only one case that has proceeded. Interestingly, there's been a little bit about it in the national press, I think both the *Times* and the *Post* wrote about the verdict when it came down. A federal judge ruled in 150-page opinion that the corps was criminally negligent by failing to maintain a navigation canal that it built for the Mississippi River delta outlet which was responsible for the majority of the flooding of St. Bernard Parish and the lower 9th ward. That came to trial only because that was a navigation project and it was not covered by the Flood Control Act.

But I've wandered away from your question.

MR. HAMRICK: That's quite all right, we have time.

MR. SHEARER: I'm sorry. I forget what the question was, I wandered away.

MR. HAMRICK: It was the responsiveness of local and--

MR. SHEARER: Oh right, yeah. So they scream and shout. There's been, I should say, given the amount of obloquy, thank you very much, that has come New Orleans way in the wake of the disaster, a remarkable amount of civic action in the post-flood period in New Orleans. People of New Orleans reformed the levee district, they reformed the tax assessor's office, they reformed the district attorney's office, they did a lot of the heavy lifting to reform their city government. That's what they could do. They could not make the corps, just to take one example, impose a factor of safety, that's engineering speak for cushion, on the urban levee system that was as high as the factor of safety the corps uses for rural dams. That's one of our little problems, is the corps has a much lower factor of safety for a levee system that's supposed to protect a major

metropolitan area than for a dam in the middle of nowhere. Nothing we can do about that from the local level.

MR. HAMRICK: Here's a specific question about the core, and this questioner obviously knows more about this particular subject than I'm able to interpret. What do you think of the corps' work in channeling the Mississippi River?

MR. SHEARER: You know, the channeling of the Mississippi River is an almost classic corps success story because in terms of the task they set for themselves, they accomplished it really well. The Mississippi River levees have never failed, at least in New Orleans. They may have failed upriver, I'm not aware of that, but they've been great in New Orleans. It's done what they set out to do. It is a classic corps success story in that there have been untold, unintended negative consequences that the corps has been either obvious to or late to arrive at.

So for example, when you levee the Mississippi River, you prevent it from flooding. Well, that's a good thing. But the flooding in the Mississippi River distributed every spring flood water and sediment over the delta, building the coastal wetlands of Louisiana; the most verdant and fertile home for seafood and other creatures of that environment in the entire North American continent.

When you levee the river, you begin starving the wetlands and they begin shrinking and you have the first ingredient in the long term, slow motion disaster that is enveloping southern Louisiana, the erosion of the coastal wetlands. Why is that important, aside from if you like shrimp? Every mile of wetlands between the Gulf of Mexico and the city of New Orleans bats down hurricane ferocity by a known quantity. The wind coming over water, pick up energy. As the winds go over land, they lose energy. We lose the wetlands, we lose one of our major protections.

MR. HAMRICK: Questioner asks how has the local New Orleans community responded to the documentary?

MR. SHEARER: It wasn't made for New Orleans. I assume the people in New Orleans knew this stuff, so I was startled. The picture was supposed to play there for one night, and it played for weeks. The major local radio talk show host, I saw him watching the movie the first night and he couldn't sit down, steam was coming out of his ears. He said, "You're going to be on tomorrow for the whole three hours." He says, "Everybody in the city has to see this movie." People have been startled, I think-- they did not know the story of the whistle blowing. The New Orleans media did not cover her, but they knew the rest of the story. But it was in day to day drips and drabs. And nobody had ever before come and put it together into a 90 minute package.

And in a way, I felt badly because last year was the first year of what everybody around town thought of as the post post-Katrina period. We had gotten over the post-Katrina period, we were now in the new era. We had a new mayor of the city. The Saints

had won the Super Bowl, the city was almost levitating until the BP oil spill. And now I come along and say, “And by the way, we're not as safe as we think we are.”

MR. HAMRICK: So this person says, and this is writing in the first person. “I truly appreciate your informed opinions and stance on New Orleans and media. But do you feel that more, or let’s say, more or fewer celebrities should be voicing their opinions on issues of the day?” And I guess that gets to the question of if you look at the news media in general, you could ask a broader question of do you think it’s fixated on entertainment too much as well?

MR. SHEARER: Charlie Sheen, Charlie Sheen, Charlie Sheen, Charlie Sheen, Charlie Sheen, Charlie Sheen. Charlie Sheen, Charlie Sheen, Charlie Sheen. (Laughter) Thank you. Charlie Sheen, Charlie Sheen, Charlie Sheen. We could go on that way for the rest of the hour.

Look, I'm very careful. I was really scared when I made this documentary because a guy from “The Simpsons” and “Spinal Tap” talking to me about engineering? Really? I need to pay to see that? So what I say is not my opinion. I have no opinion. I have no basis for forming an opinion. I go to the people in the movie and in my life who know what they're talking about, they're leaders of these two investigations, this whistle blower, John Barry, the author of *Rising Tide*, the seminal book on the 1927 flood. I pay attention to what they say. I try to distill it so I can understand it, and then when somebody asks me a question that's basically what you get. The building I walk fastest past when I was going to college was the engineering building, for God sake, lest something rub off.

But the good news is that these people that I mentioned who are in the film and in my life to some extent, are really good communicators and teachers and they made it clear to me, made it comprehensible to me so that I could turn around and-- you know, I'm not an opinionator (sic), I'm a passer-through. As to other celebrities, I think other celebrities are like anybody else. If it seems like they know what they're talking about, then they should be in the public sphere and maybe have a moment of attention. If they seem like they're crazy and out of control and don't know what they're talking about, they should get hours and hours of prime time coverage. (Laughter)

MR. HAMRICK: I did catch your radio bit, though. I think last week you said something like it's more interesting to hear crazy people than sane people, something like that?

MR. SHEARER: Yeah. Well look, I mean we didn't invent this, the English did. They charged money to see the crazy people at bedlam, so we're the same folks.

MR. HAMRICK: So the next question, as a follow-up to the last one, asks are you concerned about any potential repercussions about taking a political stance, I suppose, on the receptivity of the audience toward your entertainment work?

MR. SHEARER: Well, “The Simpsons” is kind of on its own there, you know? I don't think I'm hurting it by doing this, I hope not. I try to make what I'm doing in this context nonpolitical in a sense, nonpartisan, because I think both parties bear responsibility for what happened to New Orleans. Presidents of both parties have now clearly sent a signal that they're not going to lift a finger to prevent what happened from happening again. So, it's easy for me to say I'm-- don't one side get mad at me because I'm not picking on you. I think one reason, and I'm speculating here, so you can ignore this as comedian opinion, I think one reason that the story about New Orleans, aside from the habit of mind that I pointed out in my talk, hasn't gotten the traction it might have is that the very fact that both parties have their oar in this water. Neither side gets any political juice out of saying, “It's their fault.” And that's what makes our system go, both politically and journalistically. You can't get a Democrat and a Republican to argue on cable news that it's your fault, and no it's your fault, because it's both their fault and they'd rather just talk about something else.

MR. HAMRICK: And so you're doing essentially a tour with the movie. Now, tell us where that will be and how long until it is released on DVD?

MR. SHEARER: We're going around the country, it opened in Dallas on Friday night. I got to sit in the seat that Lee Harvey Oswald sat in when he was arrested, so my butt is part of history. And it's in the Texas Theater all week in Dallas. And then we're opening up around the country throughout the spring and early summer. Thebiguneasy.com website front page has a list of all the places where the film is showing and when in theaters around the country.

And then we will make a DVD and COD and DVD deals, all those initials and it'll be out on line and maybe even on cable if they've got room for it, although HBO said, “We've done New Orleans.”

MR. HAMRICK: Okay, so obviously people want to talk about your creative work a little bit, have you talk about that a little bit. One person says, “You have said that you think “The Simpsons” has declined in quality.” Could you just address that? Is that true? Obviously, some episodes are better than others. Where does it stand now?

MR. SHEARER: That was a private communication (Laughter) that was leaked to the *New York Post* owned by Rupert Murdoch, who also owns “The Simpsons” in advance of a salary renegotiation. It's a wonderful show, I love being a part of it.

MR. HAMRICK: How does Fox TV react to being mocked on “The Simpsons?”

MR. SHEARER: You know, they love it. Rupert loves it. Powerful people seem to love the humanizing effect of persuading the public that they have a sense of humor. I'm reminded of George W. Bush joking about the search for WMDs at the Radio and TV Correspondents Dinner. I personally, when I see powerful people showing off their sense

of humor, I hide under the bed, but that's just me. No, Fox is perfectly fine with it, Rupert is perfectly fine with it. I think they think it's great for business.

MR. HAMRICK: At the 1992 Republican National Convention, President then H. W. Bush, said we're going to keep trying to strengthen the American family to make them more like the Waltons and less like the Simpsons. So 19 years later, "The Simpsons" has spawned numerous books, and even college classes on-- I guess it's in its 22nd season now. How do you think "The Simpsons" reflects the American family, or does it?

MR. SHEARER: You know, I'll take that question and move it a little bit to one side because of an observation. I feel better making an observation than some conclusion based on my limited knowledge of American families. When "The Simpsons" started, we were roundly criticized by Christian groups, in particular. Bart is a bad role model, they said, as if the lead comic character in any show is a good role model, you know. Fifteen years later, I play both Ned Flanders and Reverend Lovejoy, the two avowedly Christian characters on the show, total coincidence. And I found myself being interviewed for cover stories in Christian magazines, discovering after 15 years that this was the only show on American prime time television where a family regularly went to church, where there are avowed Christians as members of the cast.

What that told me is it took an awful long time for certain people to discover the actual shape of the elephant.

MR. HAMRICK: The questioner says, "My son," the questioner's son, "embraced the philosophy of Bart Simpson. He was in the sixth grade, and he still embraces it at age 28." We don't know if he's still at home or not.

MR. SHEARER: It sounds like it.

MR. HAMRICK: Yeah. "To what do you attribute that remarkable longevity?"

MR. SHEARER: Well, I think you fed him well. Oh, you mean the show. (Laughter) Well, first of all, in all honesty the fabulous, fabulous, fabulous acting. Seriously, I think I will mention two factors that I think don't get recognized often enough. Number one, I would invite you to look for half a second, if you can, at any of the major, or minor, animated shows on television in the last 20 years. And I think maybe two of them visually tell you in a half second what show they are. I can think of "Ren & Stimpy" and "The Simpsons." I think it was Matt Groening's genius that he couldn't draw very well, he says that himself, and he adopted this very iconic style. He chose the color yellow, which was the closest he could come to flesh, and he just chose a drawing style, a visual style for the show, that is immediately recognizable that in the modern parlance brands it on first and every site.

And secondly, and more significantly I think, again not very well known, when Fox first put "The Simpsons" on, Fox was a fledgling network, to say the least. You may

recall it was on mainly UFH channels, you needed to attach a wire coat hanger to improve reception. And so, it was important for them to have the legitimacy of having well-known Hollywood talent aboard. And Jim Brooks had a wonderful movie career, and so he had the leverage to be able to say, "We'll do the show. No network interference, no creative interference by the network." And so for 22, now 23 years, we're just starting our 23rd season, there has never been a time, as far as I know, not in on the meetings, but as far as I know, where the network has told, "Couldn't Mr. Burns be just a little bit less evil? Up his queue rating a little bit?" That doesn't happen with us.

Now, you'd think in a culture that supposedly loves and emulates success, other television networks would try this little technique. But I remember about four or five years ago, ABC was having a down period and the then-programming chief of ABC was speaking to the advertisers at the Up Front luncheon. And she said, talking about the new fall schedule, "We got a great slate of shows and we have a whole new layer of network supervision to insure that they--" and I'm going, "Great. That'll do well." So much for emulating success.

MR. HAMRICK: As a writer yourself, are you ever tempted to work on the scripts, or have you?

MR. SHEARER: No and no. I've been tempted, but the television writing process is not conducive to me, to the way I like to write. I like to write with maybe one or two chosen mutually selected collaborators. The television production process dictates that you will be collaborating with 16 people that you may never have met before in a room with a lot of cold pizza. And that something that has your name on it will probably two-thirds of it had been written by somebody else. It works great for the show, but it's just not what I choose to do.

MR. HAMRICK: Question about Kent Brockman on "The Simpsons."

MR. SHEARER: Yes, sir. Kent Brockman in the house.

MR. HAMRICK: There you go. Who did you, if anyone, base him on? Someone says he reminds the writer of this question a bit of Howard Beal, the anchorman in "The Network," yes. And what goes through your head when you act as him?

MR. SHEARER: Well, what goes through your head is supposed to be what goes through the character's head. So in the case of Kent Brockman, it's nothing. Too cheap, too easy. I kind of based him-- we were talking before we started here about Mark's last name and the fact that in years past, there were a number of people with similar names anchoring local news around the country, the Hambrick brothers. And I guess a little bit of one or another of the Hambricks rubbed off on old Kent. I don't know, seems to me there's a little bit of Hambrick in all of us.

MR. HAMRICK: Wow. God bless you all. With all the projects you've worked on in your career, which have you found to be the most rewarding?

MR. SHEARER: Surely you don't speak financially. "This is Spinal Tap." (Applause) It was four guys sitting around thinking up an idea, banging on doors all over Hollywood getting a succession of rejections, finding one fluke that allowed the film to get made in a company that didn't want to release it. We just kept hearing guillotines slam right behind us as we escaped the platform. Getting it out there, having it become adopted and beloved by generations of audiences. Having the same people who told us, "No, we don't want to make your movie," the same individuals, come running up after us eight years later and offering us money to make a sequel and getting to say no to them.

MR. HAMRICK: I think everybody loved the movie. Did you not say on "Letterman" or is it not true, that that is what people ask you to do most, is a line from that movie, as opposed to something else?

MR. SHEARER: It's sort of different. I mean, I can never tell what people are going to-- people ask about "Spinal Tap" about "The Simpsons," about my radio show. I think the good thing about having a varied career is that it keeps you on your toes with the audience because as people come up to talk to you, you can't play in their head what they're going to say, you can't anticipate. It's not going to be the same thing over and over again.

I should say the other reward of "Spinal Tap" is we've actually been able to play nationwide and worldwide and don't let anybody ever tell you it's not fun to play dumb music loud.

MR. HAMRICK: Someone asked, "Did you write any of the songs on either "Mighty Wind" or "Spinal Tap?"

MR. SHEARER: Yeah, Michael McKean and I wrote a lot of the songs in "Mighty Wind," and we all wrote the songs in "Spinal Tap," Chris Guest, Rob Reiner, Michael and myself, were all together writing the songs for that movie. That was part of the fun. I mean, the fun was-- that was a movie that we got to make start to finish, a totally handmade project. We're all involved in every facet of it beginning to end as opposed to being part of an industrial process which some big budget movies are. Being part of a handmade process is what I love best.

MR. HAMRICK: So I had to ask, because I set it up a little bit in the introduction, did Mel Blanc really play a formative role in your ability to come up with characters?

MR. SHEARER: Probably by osmosis. I worked on "The Jack Benny Program" for eight years, and Mel Blanc was a member of the cast. He had a son the same age as me, so took a fatherly interest. I should point out in modern America not a fatherly interest as in the Catholic Church fatherly interest, just a benignly paternal interest. But it was never a matter where he said, "Here's how I do Bugs, and here's how I do Porky." It

never got to that level. It was just being around a genius like that, I guess, something rubbed off maybe.

MR. HAMRICK: Very good. Okay, stay here. We're almost out of time, but before asking the last question, a couple of housekeeping matters to take care of. First of all, for our audience and you, I'd like to remind about our upcoming luncheon speakers. The next one will go from humorous today to dead serious April 6th. That'll be the commissioner of the IRS.

MR. SHEARER: Ah!

MR. HAMRICK: We'll make sure you're out of the building.

MR. SHEARER: Yeah, please. I wasn't here, I wasn't here.

MR. HAMRICK: April 19th, Ted Turner and T. Boone Pickens. Turner will discuss renewable and alternative energy, solar projects across the nation, climate change. Mr. Pickens will address his crusade to reduce the nation's dependence on OPEC, which he regards as a threat to the U.S. economy and national security.

MR. SHEARER: Ask them both for money.

MR. HAMRICK: Absolutely.

MR. SHEARER: We could use it, we could use it.

MR. HAMRICK: Well, and our tradition here for every guest speaker, it's our truly token way of saying thank you, is to present you with the traditional NPC coffee mug. Thank you very much. (Applause) And our final question of the day, and that is we talked about him earlier, if Kent Brockman were with us here today, how would he have reported on your speech?

MR. SHEARER: Simpson star ignores what most people want to hear about: details at eleven. (Applause)

MR. HAMRICK: Thank you, Harry, that was great. Thank you all for coming today. I'd like to thank National Press Club staff including our library and our broadcast center for helping to organize today's event. And finally, here's a reminder that you can find more information about the National Press Club on our website. If you'd like to get a copy to today's program, check it out at www.press.org. Thank you, and we're adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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