

CASE STUDY 1.1

The Columnist's Brown Bag

Imagine yourself as a student attending this seminar: How would you have recognized what was going on?

An editorial columnist from the *New York Times* was asked to participate in one of a series of brown-bag discussions hosted by a Department of Journalism at a large university. Faculty, students, and journalists from the community attended these noon-hour seminars. Although some speakers in this series of talks gave formal presentations and then left a few minutes for questions afterward, this columnist said, at the outset of his talk, that although he had prepared comments on a

number of different topics he would rather spend the entire hour responding to questions.

Within a few minutes after the session began, a climate of open communication prevailed. The speaker responded to a wide range of questions. People asked about national economic policy, press coverage of news events, politically based indictments of the press, and the use and misuse of the term "the media." Despite the potentially controversial nature of many of these issues, there was an expectation set in the group that the questions would seek information or opinions from

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the columnist, who had more than thirty years of experience at the prestigious newspaper. In his initial answers, the speaker told amusing anecdotes, gave background information about recent news events, and offered unmuted commentary on key issues. The atmosphere was relaxed, almost reverent, and the speaker himself continued to eat his brown-bag lunch as he spoke.

During the last ten minutes of the question-and-answer discussion, a student sitting in the back of the room sat up and leaned forward in his chair. Speaking more loudly than anyone else during the previous forty-five minutes, he said he had a question about editorial responsibility. He said that the *Times* ran a story about atrocities in an African nation, but the paper made no editorial comment on the killings until three years after they had occurred. He wanted to know if the paper had an editorial responsibility to comment on this event at the time it happened. It soon became clear that both the student asking the question and the columnist knew, as the question was asked, that American arms had been used in the killings. The student did not, however, explicitly mention this when he asked the question.

Almost immediately, a journalism professor, who had introduced the speaker and was instrumental in getting him to visit the campus, defended the paper's policy before the guest speaker had a chance to respond. Neither this professor nor anyone else in the group had previously interrupted the question-answer-question format that the group had adopted; no one had previously made a comment in response to any other question. The professor

was visibly upset by the student's question, said he had worked on the paper himself at the time the story broke, and contended that the editorial decision was justified because insufficient information was available about the incident for quite some time. The student responded with a pointed declaration of mistrust in the paper. The columnist then took the floor and commented that, although the paper had made several editorial blunders during the years he worked at the paper, he could not accept the accusation that editorial comments were withheld because U.S. arms were involved. There were, he said, too many editorials to the contrary in the paper.

As this exchange occurred, others in the room seemed uncomfortable and tense. Some turned to look back at the challenger, some engaged in side conversations, and a few smiled uncomfortably at each other. A second professor interrupted the columnist and said, in a somewhat self-conscious tone of voice, "We had better leave the seminar room because another class has to meet in it soon." ■

Discussion Questions

- There was a noticeable shift in climate in this discussion. How did the shift come about?
- How did the shift in climate affect the interaction in this seminar?
- Suppose the seminar had begun with a confrontational climate. What kind of event might cause the climate to shift toward a more relaxed direction?

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