In the aftermath of last month's mass murders and this past week's anthrax assaults, a lot of people seem to be mad at "the media." This newspaper took heat from some readers for leaving out details of a presidential speech and allowing a letter writer to be unsympathetic to a radio announcer. "The media" as villain has many facets.

One area radio station reported on anti-war protests in a foothills community, and the announcer concluded that large numbers of people -- perhaps a majority of the community -- oppose the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan. The broadcaster added for the benefit of his audience: "But you won't hear this on Big Media."

Big Media is usually identified to that audience as corporate-controlled, pro-business media, and that generally includes all networks and most newspapers and magazines.

By that definition, The Bee is probably Big Media.

Then there is a different view of the media, as a tool of the "liberal left." That's a view espoused by people also fueled by radio stations and Internet sites (all part of the media). One Internet site based in Fresno encourages folks to verbally attack people they disagree with. One recent, unsuccessful campaign was to force "liberal" Rep. Gary Condit to resign. Another campaign was directed at The Bee's editorial page cartoonist.
The Ombudsman:

The Bee met the Website's definition of "leftist liberal media." People expressing differing points of view regularly appear in the newspaper. One recent letter writer criticized Rush Limbaugh, and last week other writers criticized the letter writer and the editors. "Don't give us that freedom of speech shield," one reader scolded Bee editors who allowed the opinion to appear.

At mid-week, columnist Molly Ivins described such polar views as representing, "a class difference in information," a divisive split between people who depend mostly on talk radio and those who have broader information sources.

Sensitized editors at the Washington Post, presumably one of those broader sources, explained why they ran a recent story to which the White House objected. The editors demonstrated that administration officials had revealed similar information earlier. The administration blamed unnamed congressmen for leaks. The White House later backed down, but the point was made.

The media-scape is a bit confusing, and doesn't always fit into categories such as "patriotic" or "disloyal." Left, right or middle? Most Bee readers won't fit into categories described above either. Most describe themselves as somewhere near the middle.

Research supports that. Surveys through the years indicate Bee readers are indeed moderate in their views of most events, news, politics and media. They also are better educated and average higher incomes than the general population.

Most readers understand that a newspaper is located somewhere between events and the public, between actions and perceptions, and the paper serves as a descriptive conduit of sometimes conflicting information.

Journalists are rarely participants, but always messengers.

Writer Ray Bradbury once described writers as cavemen too puny to join the
mighty hunters brave enough to chase the mammoth, so they stay behind in the
cave and scrawl stories on the walls. Not a very flattering picture, but true
enough.

The assigned duty of newspapers in America is not to filter out unpopular views
and opinions, or to parrot government positions, but to allow a range of opinions
to be expressed in an appropriate context. Newspapers don't allow folks to yell
"fire" in a crowded movie theater, but they do allow people to call politicians and
editors idiots.

All this doesn't mean that large numbers of readers in the middle trust
newspapers. The average readers have doubts and express them often. They
worry about missing details and wonder if they get context and balance. They see
sloppiness in a mistake in the TV lists or the weather forecasts, no matter who is
really at fault.

This past week one reader wrote that, "The Bee needs to understand that the
media is Mr. bin Laden's greatest weapon...." The reader, along with a handful of
others, felt The Bee overplayed news of the anthrax scare across the nation, even
while acknowledging it "is certainly newsworthy," and probably deserved to be
on Page 1. But he was worried about the sense of hysteria he perceived in big
headlines.

His letter was written before the anthrax scare shut down Congress but seemed a
reasonably stated concern about the newspaper's decision-making.

Another Bee reader wondered why The Bee left out details on President Bush's
plea for contributions to help the children of Afghanistan, which was part of a
major speech.

The answer was simple. That information was published in early editions but was
bumped out of the paper to make room for other breaking stories late in the
evening. The information was published again later in the week.
The Ombudsman:

It wasn't politics but space and the ticking clock that dictated that decision.

Worried about security

Other Bee readers expressed concerns that military information in the newspaper was too specific. The Defense Department provided those specifics. Your government decided getting that information to the public was in the interest of the nation.

Most of the time, the media cooperates with government's requests, particularly when national security issues are raised. White House correspondents routinely know more about the travel plans of the President than they publish.

For some people this all becomes a simple question: Do you want your newspaper to become an extension of your government? And others question the patriotism of any newspaper that allows views they disagree with to be expressed.

But most readers simply want enough information to make their own decisions, and don't want news edited to satisfy an individual point of view.

So, who gets to decide what is good or bad? The answer is easy: You do. Sure, editors make the decisions late at night when weighing the value of different stories. But readers, listeners and viewers of news always get to decide what they think is appropriate.

One Bee reader this week cancelled her subscription because she decided The Bee was "giving away secrets to the enemy." Another reader bought more issues than normal because he wanted to know more about what was going on.

Editors, frequently battered by loud voices from all sides, have to decide whether to hide in a bunker and duck the shots fired in the direction of "the media," or
The Ombudsman:

keep the lines of communications open and listen closely to all the voices.

So far, the lines remain open, but the war has just begun.

Madeleine Bunting, writing in The London Guardian last week, made this observation in response to readers who objected to criticism of American foreign policy appearing in her newspaper: "Because we are at war, we do not have to abandon our capacity for humility and self-criticism, nor the search in other cultures for the inspiration for new thinking." Not a bad thought from our ally in the war against terrorism.