

From 1989 Annual Ethics Report of the Society of Professional Journalists

How financial and circulation imperatives can distort reporting of story

By Andrew Kreig

A Boston free-lancer welcomed her contract from a national magazine to write an article last year about the hazard to children posed by lead paint peeling from walls. She thought the topic important and the assignment a chance to break into an attractive new market.

But the completed article was rejected unless it was revised to feature white women and their children. The magazine's policy was to limit sharply photos of blacks (except for entertainers) on the theory that they undermine advertising and circulation by projecting a low-income image.

The writer was unwilling to abandon

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her work, but embarrassed to ask medical experts for the names of just white poisoning victims. She did three times the work she had planned to — and felt uncomfortable, instead of proud, of the job.

The editor who assigned the article not only verified the writer's account, but privately described her concern about the magazine's practice of livening up quotations in the belief that circulation gains outweigh risks or constraints.

The point of this anecdote is not to pillory one periodical, which I cannot name anyway because the information was provided in confidence. Instead, the tale is to suggest that ethical problems in journalism are more widespread than commonly portrayed. This is because perverse financial incentives are powerful, and the professional life of those overtly disturbed by such practices can easily become solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

A dramatic example is the fate of Har-

old Evans, once the respected editor and a director of Great Britain's most prestigious daily, The Times.

When Rupert Murdoch bought The Times and Sunday Times in 1981 his extensive holdings already included the country's biggest daily and its biggest Sunday papers. Nonetheless, Murdoch avoided hearings by the British Monopolies and Mergers Commission by formally guaranteeing both Evans' job and editorial independence.

Evans' memoir Good Times, Bad Times described how Murdoch carefully orchestrated his ouster after he resisted the owner's pressure to slant news coverage to help his government allies such as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The editor's expulsion was a minor embarrassment for the owner compared to the gain of so much media muscle in one country.

Murdoch's acquisition of TV Guide, the third-largest U.S. magazine, was a

similarly deft acquisition. The magazine provides extraordinary print synergies if Murdoch staffers are willing to use them to puff up in subtle fashion his new Fox Broadcasting network and 20th-Century Fox film studio.

Although TV Guide's executives publicly avowed that they would adhere to normal journalistic standards, the magazine got caught this summer using Ann-Margaret's body to illustrate a cover photo ostensibly portraying a scantily clad Oprah Winfrey.

The magazine's national editor David Sendler tried to justify air-brushing a Winfrey headshot onto the other entertainer's darkened publicity photo. "Ann-Margaret should be thrilled because she got another TV Guide cover," Sendler was quoted as saying. "Oprah should be thrilled because she looks terrific."

It would be comforting to imagine that such breaches in normal standards

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are relatively isolated and easily exposed.

CBS President Laurence Tisch stressed this theme in his 1987 Congressional testimony. He said that "any impropriety on the part of management or the ownership of any company in the newsroom of any broadcaster would be on the front page of the New York Times or the Washington Post the following morning." Tisch specifically reassured Congress that General Electric, the corporate parent of his rival network NBC, would never "do anything that in any way would affect the reporting of news by NBC. I think that would apply to all three networks."

Yet the notoriety of TV Guide's deceit (which made the cover of USA TODAY) is better explained by its peculiar circumstances than by the notion that eagle-eyed peer scrutiny exists in journalism outside the employee-employer relationship.

The substitution was revealed not by an in-house whistleblower or media critic, but by Ann-Margaret's publicist George Kirvay. He had incentive to describe the magazine's unpaid use of his client's photo.

As for the news organizations that reported the story? This particular tale had everything going for it, including the same shot of a lithe, curvaceous

Ann-Margaret-Winfrey that TV Guide had exploited in the first place.

It's much harder to illustrate the typical ethical dispute so well, even when it involves a major issue and a respected outlet. Among recent examples:

● Time Magazine failed to cover the Time-Warner merger when it was first announced in March, letting Newsweek break the story. Until a Wall Street Journal story in June ridiculed Time coverage of one of the year's most important financial and legal stories, the magazine ignored the outrage that its revised Warner bid provoked from many stockholders who preferred selling to Paramount for high prices than receiving assurances that their long-term interests were better served by keeping Time's existing management in office. Ironically, Time had earlier boasted in an editorial, "As the country's largest magazine publisher, Time considers its editorial independence a national trust not to be trifled with for mere coin."

● International newspaper tycoon Ralph Ingersoll II boosted the launch of his St. Louis Sun daily with identical front-page stories in his 43 weekly Suburban Journals in the St. Louis metropolitan area. "In other words," commented St. Louis Journalism Review Publisher Charles Klotzer, "all the Journals published a PR piece as their lead story."

Such events underscore the relative powerlessness of individual journalists

who want to uphold professional standards that might conflict with high stakes ventures by employers.

Magazine staffs with falling circulation have about the same job prospects as a Yankee manager on a losing steak. And an employee's sensibilities are likely to count for little with a boss like Murdoch, who once fired 5,500 London newspaper people in one fell swoop to set up his non-union printing plant at Wapping.

The basic difficulty, to be blunt about it, is that journalism is not really a profession in the ordinary sense. Jobs do not require advanced degrees or certification. Any entry requirements or disciplinary proceedings beyond those created by employers could create First Amendment problems. Furthermore, few journalists besides authors are paid directly by the public for their services, as are many physicians, lawyers, dentists and accountants.

Unpleasant though this perspective may be, it helps explain such things as the weakness of most journalistic organizations compared to parallel bodies in law or medicine. Despite their idealism, journalists tend to have less discretionary income to support strong, broad-based groups upholding standards.

Further illustrating this pattern is the contrast between free-lance and newspaper practices on junkets. Most major

news organizations would not allow a travel writer to seek a source-paid trip, then write about it.

But free-lancers — who have the greatest freedom to choose their topics and consequently do much of the important media criticism — ironically have the least ability to afford costly professional standards.

Let's look at the bright side. This diversity among journalists provides a way to bypass institutional roadblocks to better ethics. Each kind of publishing or broadcast outlet has its distinctive strengths — and problems.

I saw this repeatedly during interviews about my newspaper book. Much of the coverage paralleled the economic incentives of the outlet, with broadcasters clearly able to be more straightforward than newspaper staffers. One book review editor (a fellow SPJ member) confided that he didn't think that he could safely assign the book for review because his paper was going to be sold, doubtless to a group, and neither the sellers nor buyers would be particularly interested in focusing public attention on possible implications of the change. It turned out that he had reason to try to protect his job in every way possible. The staff was cut by a third shortly after sale to one of the fast-growing, bottom-line firms achieving profits well over 25 percent a year.

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