

Challenge The Story



By Reid MacCluggage

THE ISSUE: Our biggest weakness is not the occasional dishonest reporter. Our biggest weakness is unchallenged information.

A reporter in Owensboro, Ky., says she fabricated five columns about her struggle with cancer to hide the fact she really has AIDS. And now she says she doesn't have AIDS, either.

Two newspapers in Colorado get a press release claiming a sexual harassment lawsuit is about to be filed against two local radio stations. They write a story about it and find out later it isn't true. The press release is a phony. Then the editors blame the reporters for doing a sloppy job.

Someone slips the television program "60 Minutes" an official-looking document about drug-smuggling on the California-Mexico border, and Mike Wallace has another exclusive. The problem is, it isn't true. The document is a fake. So is an earlier document used to support another "60 Minutes" exclusive on drug smuggling from Colombia to England. Maybe "60 Minutes" should just say no to the next drug story.

Frogs in the United States, Central America and Australia are found with extra deformed legs, and the predominant speculation in our newspapers is that ozone depletion or pesticides are to blame. Now we find out the culprit might be a tiny worm parasite.

Congress and the president have plans to use the surplus to save Social Security. Do any editors see the irony in those plans? Without Social Security funds, there is no surplus. It is Social Security that is saving the surplus.

Deep flaws

Whether it's the reporting of child abuse at day-care centers, the burning of black churches in the south, the dangers of second-hand smoke and silicone breast implants, or the extent to which children are kidnapped in America, some of our reporting and editing has been deeply flawed.

And I haven't even mentioned last year's fiascos at some of America's most respected newspapers, magazines and television networks. But you already know the details, and they are why we are in this situation in the first place.

One of those fiascos happened at The New Republic where a colorful writer decided to make up nearly everything he wrote. He got away with it for a long time before he was caught and

fired.

His editor, Charles Lane, was introspective.

"I've searched my soul and asked, why didn't my bull... meter go off?" he said. "I have to learn a lesson from this: Edit more skeptically."

Edit more skeptically

Sometimes it takes a fiasco or two to remind us that skepticism is a big part of the editing function.

It's our job to challenge information reporters bring back to the newspaper, and to question conclusions drawn from that information. It's our job to battle assumptions or preconceived notions and provide the scrutiny needed to make certain that all stories are fair and accurate.

Our biggest weakness is not the occasional dishonest reporter, although there have been too many of them lately. Our biggest weakness is the unchallenged information we put in our newspapers every day that turns out not to be true.

Sometimes these stories slip into the newspaper because we don't have time to check them out. Sometimes they get in because we believe them to be true. Sometimes they get in because of sloppiness or incompetence. And sometimes we just get caught up in the public frenzy of a story and forget to step back and question, question, question.

We forget to practice what Sissela Bok calls "a good, old-fashioned editorial virtue" -- incredulity. It requires, she says, "that we not be quick to grant credence to what we read and hear."

Tighten standards

To tighten standards, I believe we need to take the following steps, among others:

s We need to train editors and reporters in critical thinking -- the art of asking the right questions, the art of obtaining the right facts, the art of pinpointing the real issues.

s We need to make certain our editors and reporters understand The Scientific Method. Scientists are much more comfortable with uncertainty than are journalists and are less likely to jump to conclusions or to make black and white out of gray.

We need to introduce editors and reporters to the mysterious world of mathematics. Numbers. Averages. Percentages. A rock review in my newspaper had this to say about Gregg Allman: "He devoted probably two-thirds of his playlist to material from 'Simplicity,' another third or so to his own past recordings and another third to classic Allmans."

We need to develop reporting and writing skills to present complexities in an interesting way. Journalists often are uncomfortable with ambiguity. But some stories are mysteries, like the one about the frogs with the extra, deformed legs, and the politically-charged global warming hypothesis. We don't know what causes those extra frog legs, and we don't know whether Mother Nature or Mankind is causing the earth's surface to warm, although much of the

reporting would suggest that we do know.

I think we also need to re-examine the relationship between editor and reporter. Too often they are on the same team, working toward the same goal: publication. The editor is the coach, a supporter, someone who helps the reporter get the story in shape, protects the reporter from outside pressure and moves the story into the newspaper -- all essential goals. But sometimes it can be too cozy.

Prosecute the story

To strengthen the editing function I propose we develop training of editors and sub-editors in the craft of prosecuting the story.

Law school students are taught how to cross-examine a witness. Editors should be trained in a comparable skill. Put the story on the witness stand and cross-examine it. Tear it apart. Expose its weaknesses. Raise all the unanswered questions. Cast doubt on it. All major stories should go through a process similar to a rigorous cross-examination.

Stories don't need advocates. They have plenty of advocates by the time publication nears. What stories need are adversaries. Stories develop a life of their own. We need to become involved in their lives right from the start because that's when most of the important development happens.

Reporters and sub-editors become advocates of stories very early in the process, and are a powerful force in the decision to publish. If skeptics aren't built into the process right from the start, stories will slide onto Page One without the proper scrutiny. If stories hold up on the witness stand, under the rigorous cross-examination of tough editors, they will hold up under any assault.

Assign a naysayer

To accomplish this, I propose we assign devil's advocates to every major story -- someone to play the role of naysayer. It would be the devil's advocate's job to cross-examine the story -- to try to shoot it down.

The benefit of a designated devil's advocate is that it provides an opportunity for someone who wants to disagree with the group. Sometimes it takes a brave person to take on the group. The pressure is to go along, even among editors. Appointing a designated devil's advocate gives that person the freedom to ask the tough questions without being overwhelmed by the others.

Try it. Appoint an editor to be the designated devil's advocate on the next big story and see whether there isn't a more thorough examination of the premise, the facts and the tone. Appoint a different editor on the next story. It would be a good training experience for many sub-editors and a device to sharpen their questioning skills.

Create a diverse editing team of journalists from different backgrounds and interests. Hire and develop editors and reporters who can bring diversity of opinion and life experience to our newsrooms. And then use them to improve stories.

As Bob Steele, associate dean and director of the Poynter Institute's Ethics and Diversity

Programs, says: "I think we make our best decisions when we make them with people who are different from us in the newsroom."

Reid MacCluggage participated in the Gannett Newspaper Division brainstorming session that developed the Principles of Ethical Conduct for Newsrooms. The following is excerpted from his speech at the 1999 company-wide Gannett editors meeting.