

grassroots editor



*A journal
for newspeople*

Published by the
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**Weekly journalism offers
excitement, bizarre situations,
sense of community**

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By Dr. Chad Stebbins, editor, *Grassroots Editor*

As part of a community journalism course I teach, editors and publishers of weekly newspapers are invited to share their experiences. Several are mom-and-pop publishing teams, but others have worked for such newspapers as the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* and the Louisville *Courier-Journal*.

My students always come away believing that community journalism isn't a euphemism for second-rate journalism. Still, many of the anecdotes brought to their attention cause a raised eyebrow here and there. But such tales separate the rural newspaperman (no sexism intended) from his colleague at the city daily, where routine is the norm.

Where else except in community journalism would you:

- Be called out to take a photo of a two-headed calf?
- Receive this request: "Grandma's going to die if she sees my speeding ticket. Can't you leave it out?"
- Be able to live in the back of the newspaper office because an apartment came with your purchase of the building?
- Get as many inches out of a spelling bee as a dead sheriff?
- Relieve your stress by playing with two dogs — a beagle and a basset hound — in the back yard of the newspaper office?
- Take this call from the local high school: "It's FFA day. All the kids drove their tractors. Can you come out and take a picture?"
- Take this call from the local high school: "It's the 100th day of school this year. We're having a celebration. Can you come out and write a story?"
- Continue to run the "chicken dinner" news, with minimal editing, from the country correspondents?
- Want to be scooped by the daily newspaper in the next county so you don't have to be the one to break a painful story about a neighbor?
- Have to institute a policy regarding birth announcements that if the parents aren't married, the father must sign a form stating that he really is the father?
- Receive complaints after a funeral because it occurred before you could publicize it?
- Compete with the local diner for the latest news?
- Regularly publish photos taken by one of the school's bus drivers?

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Dr. Chad Stebbins serves as executive secretary-treasurer for the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors. He is director of the Institute for International Studies at Missouri Southern State College in Joplin, Mo., where he teaches journalism courses and advises the college's award-winning student newspaper, *The Chart*.

- Have to repair a toilet, or crawl up on the roof to fix a leak?

The drawbacks of owning your own newspaper surprise many of my students, particularly the long hours and the low pay. The editors and publishers who speak to my class have pointed out that:

- You might have to sell your paper if you want to take more than a four-day vacation.
- You might have to work several years before you reach the same salary as an entry-level elementary teacher.
- You would pay \$500 more than market price to buy a used mini-van from your local car dealer, but only if he advertises with you.
- You might have to throw away a \$207 membership bill from the National Newspaper Association because you have only \$200 in your checking account.
- You might have to take your chances of publishing without libel insurance because you can't afford the \$1,500 annual premium.
- You would acquire a strong dislike of offset printing because it has caused the rapid increase of shoppers.
- You would eat at home only twice a week, on Wednesday nights and Sunday nights.
- You could build a room for your children at the back of the office so you can keep an eye on them during those long days.

Despite the bizarre situations a weekly newspaperman might encounter, the long hours and the low pay, a majority of my students come away believing that a job at a

weekly newspaper offers excitement, opportunities for ownership, and a sense of community. Among the other advantages:

- The opportunity to raise your family in a Mayberryesque environment. You can turn your children loose at the county fair and have little difficulty finding them later because everyone recognizes them.
- The cost of living, i.e. housing, utilities, and taxes, is often considerably less in a small town.
- A job in community journalism carries a considerable amount of prestige, because you're automatically viewed as a community leader.
- You won't be "pigeonholed" at a community newspaper; each day's tasks will vary. If you're ever bored, it's your own fault.
- You can't pry a weekly newspaper out of a reader's hands.

As the new editor of *Grassroots Editor*, I hope to convey to all its readers a sense of the pride that weekly newspaper editors have in

their work and a sense of pride that all true newspaper journalists have for those editors. In most ways, they are the truest practitioners of that journalism that all of us believe in — the kind that *fears God, honors man, and is stoutly independent*. Those were the words of Walter Williams, the founder of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, in his *Journalist's Creed*.

These editors, by their words, and by their deeds, represent the strengths and virtues and the courage of this nation.

As the new editor of *Grassroots Editor*, I hope to convey to all its readers a sense of the pride that weekly newspaper editors have in their work and a sense of pride that all true newspaper journalists have for those editors.

Please send your *Grassroots Editor* submissions to:



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DEADLINE

Friday,
December 3,
1999

Anatomy of a libel suit against a community newspaper

By Dr. Paul Parsons, Kansas State University

The news was bad that day. A small plane had crashed over the Labor Day weekend in 1992, killing all aboard including a family from Osborne, Kansas.

Sandra Trail, news editor of the weekly *Osborne County Farmer*, was writing this lead story on deadline when Police Chief Floyd Bose came into the newsroom. His office had solved a car theft, and he wanted the newspaper to know. As was his custom, the police chief gave the information to the editor orally. She scribbled the notes and, after the police chief left, resumed gathering information for the plane crash story.

The lead story that week was the plane crash, and below it was a story on the stolen car being recovered and the suspect — Jim Pfannenstiel, a young mechanic at an Osborne garage — being apprehended in Arkansas.

But that was wrong. Pfannenstiel was the victim, not the criminal. He hadn't stolen the car; his car had been stolen. The editor learned of the error when the investigating officer called the newsroom. The paper immediately placed a correction tape on its Telenews phone line. Both Mrs. Trail and publisher Dale Worley spoke with

Pfannenstiel, apologizing for the error. In the next issue of the weekly newspaper, a front-page correction was published as the lead story. In addition, Trail wrote an apologetic piece entitled "Anatomy of a Mistake" that explained that she must have misunderstood the information given her by the police chief. She wrote, "Jim Pfannenstiel was put through needless pain and anxiety. I cannot forgive myself for having caused that, even if it was unintentional." She did note, however, that

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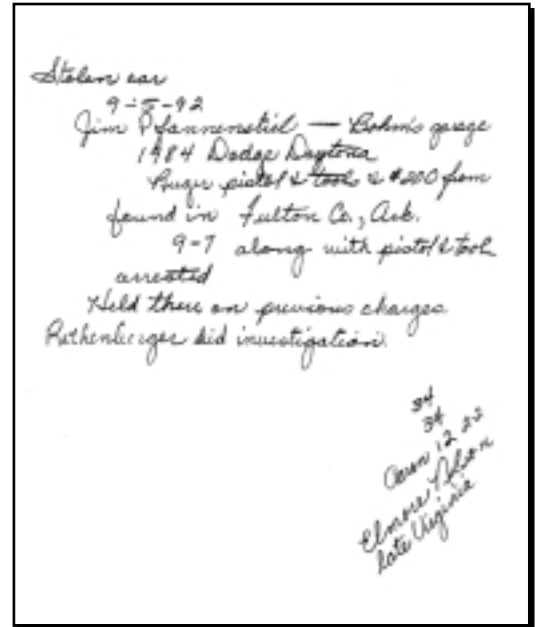
the mistake would never have occurred had the police department allowed her to read the police report instead of giving her an oral summation, as was its long-standing practice.

Life moves on, and the incident faded away — until three days before the one-year statute of limitations expired for filing a libel suit in Kansas.

Pfannenstiel and his attorney filed a \$4 million lawsuit

against the *Osborne County Farmer* alleging defamation, false light, and infliction of emotional distress.

I entered this lawsuit about a year later when a local attorney in Osborne, population 2,100, called to ask if I would serve as an expert witness on behalf of the newspaper. A University of Missouri journalism



The editor's notes from her conversation with the police chief. Scribbled at the bottom of the same page are the ages of the couple and son killed in the plane crash, with grandparents' names

professor had signed on to be an expert witness on behalf of Pfannenstiel and had opined that Trail "did not observe proper journalistic standards of care" and "acted in reckless disregard for the truth," thus the newspaper was guilty of "actual malice."

The Missouri professor was paid for his opinion, so a colleague and I offered to be expert witnesses for the newspaper for free.

Libel law has evolved into a highly complicated legal arena that requires the plaintiff to prove six elements. Here is my analysis of these six elements in this case:

Publication. The *Farmer*

disseminated the offending article to its readers.

Identification. The article identified Jim Pffannenstiel by name.

Defamation. The article said that Pffannenstiel had stolen a car and had been arrested. An accusation of criminal activity is a defamatory statement.

Falsehood. These published statements were false. Pffannenstiel was the victim of the car theft, not the perpetrator.

The plaintiff easily establishes these opening four elements. But a plaintiff must meet all burdens of proof to win a libel suit. To discourage a person from suing each time a mistake is published, courts require the plaintiff also to prove that the mistake caused personal damage and that the newspaper was clearly at fault.

Personal damage. Pffannenstiel must prove damage to his reputation that is definite and substantial, not imaginary or presumed. The Kansas Supreme Court specifies that defamation must concern injury to reputation, not injury to one's personal sensitivities. Was Pffannenstiel shunned by co-workers because of the erroneous article? Was he compelled to leave town because of his emotional distress? The threshold for proving damages is a high one. Because our society values the free flow of information (even though we know some

error inevitably creeps into the flow), we look skeptically at those who would inhibit that flow, absent a showing of genuine personal damage emanating from publication of a defamatory falsehood.

Fault. As a private person, Pffannenstiel must prove that the newspaper defamed him through an act of negligence, defined as a lack of ordinary care. To determine whether negligence occurred, courts are told to compare the journalist's conduct with that of the reasonably careful journalist in similar communities. In addition Pffannenstiel would have to prove "actual malice" to recover punitive damages in Kansas. Actual malice is defined as deliberately publishing a falsehood or showing a reckless disregard for the truth. To win his requested \$2 million in

punitive damages, Pffannenstiel would have to show that the newspaper was "out to get him" or simply didn't care about the truth.

A key issue, then, is how the mistake occurred. Both the police chief and the editor agree that only one name was provided in the conversation. The editor contends that Pffannenstiel's name was given as the person arrested, and that she asked the police chief if Pffannenstiel was related to a prominent family by that name in a larger nearby community, but the chief didn't

know. Trail contends the chief "misspoke" the information he held in his hand. However, the police chief (whom Pffannenstiel sued for slander) contends he properly identified Pffannenstiel as the victim and that the editor "misheard."

For the sake of argument, let's assume that the editor "misheard." Is that journalistic negligence? Whenever I am unsure about the facts, I ask for reverification or I repeat back what has just been said. In hindsight, the editor no doubt wishes she had done so. But at the time, she believed she had it correct the first time, from a reliable source whom she had dealt with many times before.

In the eyes of the law, the publishing of a mistake is not necessarily an act of negligence. At what point, then, would I declare a mistake to constitute an act of negligence? Here are two examples. I would not defend the editor's actions

had she written the story from memory without taking notes. Similarly, I would not defend her actions had she received the information from the police chief and botched what was clearly written and available for her perusal. Both of these examples, to me, constitute a lack of ordinary care. But publishing, on deadline, what she understood to be true, from a reliable source who came to her with the information, should not constitute lack of ordinary care.

Now, it's important to remember that the young mechanic was an innocent victim of an erroneous story, and he undoubtedly sustained some embarrassment at being falsely portrayed in the news article. But in a small town like Osborne, news of the mistake and its prompt



The front page with the erroneous information

correction gets around quickly. And the law is clear: A libel plaintiff must show he has suffered substantial personal damage caused by a reckless disregard for the truth or a lack of ordinary care.

The case started in state court, but stymied. Months later, Pfannenstiel left Osborne. He started a business in the Kansas town of Colby, but established residency in a Colorado border town. As a Colorado resident, he could file a federal lawsuit that potentially would be heard by a big-city (and often media-hostile) jury in Wichita instead of in a rural-based state court. As the skeptical attorney for the newspaper put it: "He was wanting a jury to make him a lottery winner."

But the case never went to a jury. After two years of legal wrangling by Pfannenstiel's contingency-fee-based attorney, a federal judge in Wichita dismissed the lawsuit on the grounds that Pfannenstiel failed to prove personal damage. The plaintiff listed a number of witnesses whom he said could testify about the damage to his reputation. But when these witnesses testified in deposition, none said they read the offending article and believed it, causing them to think less highly of Pfannenstiel. One person did testify about teasing Pfannenstiel about the article and said the plaintiff became upset and did not respond with good humor. With no evidence of clear personal damage, the judge wrote:

"Plaintiff has not sought professional attention for either mental problems or physical symptoms attributable to this incident. He has not missed any work. His social relationships are unaltered.... The court does not

doubt that plaintiff was unhappy and upset about the mistake in the article, but there is no evidence he suffered such genuine and extreme emotional distress that no reasonable person would be expected to endure it. On the contrary, this 'outrage' claim represents precisely the type of triviality for which summary judgment [dismissal of the case] is appropriate."

The judge also said Pfannenstiel failed to show that the editor's conduct had been outrageous, writing: "There is no evidence that defendant Trail knew her article was erroneous at the time she wrote it. The court concludes that regardless of whether Trail met the standards of good journalistic practices, her conduct was not so extreme and outrageous to permit recovery."

Pfannenstiel appealed the decision to the 10th Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals in Denver. That's when a settlement referee for the court pushed hard for a resolution — and both sides agreed on a \$1,000 settlement to Pfannenstiel, with no admission of liability by the newspaper. The city of Osborne, to settle the complaint against the police chief, also paid \$1,000.

Early on, publisher Worley had offered a \$1,000 good-faith settlement as a demonstration of regret over the error, regardless of whether the police chief had "misspoke" or the editor "misheard."

But reflecting back, publisher Worley speaks the fear of many weekly newspapers: "Something like this could cripple a small operation like ours."

THURSDAY
SEPTEMBER 17, 1992
16 PAGES
PLUS SUPPLEMENTS
35¢

FOR OSBORNE COUNTY

Correction on stolen car report

A story in last week's paper incorrectly reported the theft of a stolen car from Boban's garage in the Industrial Park.

Instead of being stolen by Jim Pfannenstiel as stated, the car, a Dodge Dreyton, was owned by Pfannenstiel. The car was located in Salem, Ark., in the possession of Michael Joe Cantrell who was taken into custody.

Also in Cantrell's possession were a gun and tools believed to have been taken at the same time.

Although the gun was apparently taken by Cantrell from the Boban garage, owner Pete Boban said it does not belong to anyone there. It was found several weeks ago and the owner has not been determined.

Two hundred dollars in cash, also missing after Cantrell's disappearance, was taken from Wayne Pierce, not from the Boban garage, Boban said, so money is kept at the garage.

The Osborne County Farmer staff apologizes for the mistake and the problems it caused Pfannenstiel and anybody else involved.

Val Gang's annual flood runs.

aves school questions

Every and special education center at the end of the grade school will be in the kindergarten building. The kindergarten building should be remodeled with one large room on the main floor rather than

The correction on the front page of the next issue

As the newspaper's attorney put it in a 1995 conversation: "\$4 million? We think more like \$4. It took a bit of intestinal fortitude for my client to offer the \$1,000 settlement. But the continued cost of defending is more than the settlement."

The newspaper's attorney added in a 1999 conversation: "From day one to the very end, it was sort of like the Iranian hostage crisis. We put in probably 250 hours defending the newspaper at all stages of the judicial process. I did not elect to bill my client (the newspaper) for all of that. But certainly the cost of defense did exceed the value of the settlement."

The legal nightmare is finally over, and the *Farmer* has continued covering its community. But reflecting back, publisher Worley speaks the fear of many weekly newspapers: "Something like this could cripple a small operation like ours."

“Ah, that a man should live so well”

Remembering Jim MacNeill, publisher, editor, iconoclast



By Adrienne Hurst

At last spring's convocation for the University of King's College, the keynote speaker was the 62-year-old publisher and editor of the Prince Edward Island weekly *Eastern Graphic*: a man renowned for journalistic bravery, who forbade his reporters to attend press conferences, regularly scooped the dailies and insisted on paying his interns. On May 14, 1998, Jim MacNeill exhorted the graduating class not to trust what they read in newspapers or be intimidated by those in power. He concluded with a loose translation of the mock-Latin motto of an old Nova Scotia newspaper, the Cape Breton *Highlander*. *Nulle illigitim carborundum*: “Don't let the bastards get you down.”

It was not the first time MacNeill had spoken to King's students — he visited the university's journalism school annually to talk to and drink with the aspiring journalists — but it was the most auspicious. At that ceremony, MacNeill received an honorary doctorate in civil law. Sadly, this address would be his last: two days later, on board the ferry that was to return him to the Island, MacNeill suffered a heart attack and died.

MacNeill was a newspaperman in a small town on a small island. Colleagues admit that he was not a great writer — he used plain English, mixed his metaphors and tended to

rant — but they also agree that he exposed inadequacies and even corruption in his community, his county, his province. For MacNeill, “the bas-

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tards” was an all-purpose term to describe people in power, no matter what their position or political stripe. It's hard to be a scrapper in a small town, where a potential friend could be a neighbour, advertiser and elected official all at the same time — MacNeill could have written himself into a very lonely place. But over 35 years, Jim MacNeill developed a

sympiosis with the people in his community: he needed them for stories, they needed him for news.

Graphic columnist Jack MacAndrew describes P.E.I. social politics in this way: “On the Island, people like to pigeonhole you so they know what to avoid in conversation.” Islanders consider it their duty to know everyone else's business but never discuss it with them. That tacit agreement never sank in at the *Graphic*. MacNeill not only wanted to know everybody's business, he wanted to print it. MacNeill did the unthinkable when he published the salaries of Island MLAs; readers were both outraged and ecstatic.

Graphic practice is to print the story and let the offended party respond the next week. P.E.I. Premier Pat Binns puts it this way: “Jim liked to be harsher than the facts might suggest. But normally you would have the opportunity to bring the pendulum back to centre.”

Not everyone accepted the *Graphic*'s after-the-fact style of verification so quickly. Over 20 years ago, Montague entrepreneur Jimmy O'Halloran owned apartments in the area. After O'Halloran tried to collect back rent from a problem tenant, the woman went to the *Graphic* and said her apartment had rats. The story ran in the next issue. O'Halloran marched over to the newspaper office and said, “Mr. MacNeill, we need to talk.”

Adrienne Hurst is a freelance writer in Toronto, ON. She has an Honours B.A. in English Literature and Film Studies from Queen's University in Kingston, ON, and an Honours B.A.A. in Journalism from Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto.

After that, the two men's worst disagreements happened over games of pool, and O'Halloran, among other things, is now proprietor of the Dr. Jim MacNeill Memorial Pub. Most people couldn't seem to stay mad at Jim, no matter what he printed in the *Graphic*.

But there were a few grudges. Albert Fogarty, a former MLA and now the executive director of the P.E.I. Institute of Adult and Community Education, dismisses the *Graphic* as a sensationalist publication and calls its hard news coverage "a joke — not balanced, and the opinion of the publisher." Fogarty believes MacNeill wrote his stories "to sell papers [rather] than represent facts." Fogarty insists he just ignores the *Graphic's* harsh coverage, but his emphatic dismissal suggests something more than indifference.

Provincial Opposition House Leader Robert Morrissey says MacNeill didn't see any reason to show politicians in a flattering light. After 17 years in P.E.I. politics, Morrissey should know: in spring 1994, the *Graphic* ran a story Morrissey says implied that he was peddling influence in the allocation of hospital beds. Morrissey sued for libel, but the jury found in favour of MacNeill.

"We've never been a paper to put issues in perspective," says Paul, MacNeill's younger son and the *Graphic's* current publisher. "It takes time, money and staff to call for comment." This justification rings hollow in journalistic ears, but somehow, rightly or wrongly, on the Island, in the *Graphic*, the approach seemed to work. Which is not to say that the paper was ignored: angry responses to controversial, even one-sided, stories were expected. In competing with established regional media, the *Graphic's* outrageousness helped more than it hurt — controversies sold papers. But whatever else they did, these stories opened eyes and prompted discussion.

Jack MacAndrew, quoting the American humourist Finley Peter Dunne, likes to say that MacNeill wanted to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." But his writing was not malicious. "MacNeill was never a 'gotcha' journalist," says Michael Cobden, a professor and former director of the journalism program at King's. MacNeill raked more than his share of muck, but never with the intent of burying anyone. He was an equal opportunity critic, always the official opposition, no matter which party was in power.

James Joseph MacNeill was born on January 18, 1936, in Glasgow, the youngest of six children. Seumas, as MacNeill was known as a child, spent his early childhood on the island of Barra in the Hebrides until his family returned to Glasgow when he was seven. Wee Seumas spoke only Gaelic when he began at the city

school, but he proved a quick study in English and an exemplary student.

At 18, MacNeill began his national service in the Royal Navy and later worked as a bouncer, a brush salesman and a building surveyor in Glasgow before emigrating to Canada in 1958 with a suitcase and \$100. Arriving in Toronto, the 22-year-old MacNeill worked on a road crew and sold insurance. As a volunteer at the Catholic Information Centre, instructing new Catholics, he met Shirley Nicholson, a native Prince Edward Islander. Within three weeks of their first date, MacNeill proposed. They married in Charlottetown on August 26, 1960, and the Island became home.

After much pavement-pounding, MacNeill found a job selling newspaper advertising for the *Summerside Journal-Pioneer*. He made sales, but because he had a gift for talking to people, he also returned to the office with story ideas and news tips. It had never crossed MacNeill's mind to become a reporter, but his news sense was sharp and, suddenly, Jim MacNeill was a journalist.

By 1963, the MacNeills had begun a family — they had two babies already, Sheila and Kevin, and were planning a third: a weekly newspaper. MacNeill had been reading up on the subject and once he made up his mind to do something, you couldn't tell him otherwise.

Warnings and admonitions only strengthened his resolve. Drawing on his reporter's wage, Shirley's earnings as a legal secretary and a \$1,000 loan from Shirley's mother, the weekly *Eastern Graphic* was born on December 11, 1963. It was the size of a church bulletin, grotesquely mimeographed and riddled with spelling mistakes. Its tag line — "Serving Kings County and Eastern Queens" — marked it as different from the outset. No other paper devoted much ink to the eastern counties; the P.E.I. dailies were based in Charlottetown and Summerside, and their coverage never strayed far from the city limits.

The second issue featured "An Editorial of Sorts," the first hint of how MacNeill would gauge his success. He wrote: "Possibly the supreme moment came when we entered a restaurant where a group of diners were discussing the new newspaper. Luckily, they did not recognize the editor, although the fact that their comments left him, at times blushing all the colours of the rainbow and, at other times, jumping ready to do battle with anyone, must have made them wonder. Now that we have calmed down, we can say that we have taken some of their remarks to heart."

By January 1964, the MacNeills had moved to Montague, a small town on the "untouristy" side of the

In competing with established regional media, the *Graphic's* outrageousness helped more than it hurt — controversies sold papers. But whatever else they did, these stories opened eyes and prompted discussion.

Island and eventually bought a house on Main Street, a stone's throw from where the *Graphic* office stands today. Both MacNeills were ever-busy: Shirley keeping the books and typing the copy, Jim selling ads and writing the stories. Even sick with the mumps, MacNeill was scribbling down copy as soon as the fever subsided. To add to the workload, baby number three, Jan, was born that year.

From the outset, MacNeill addressed the concerns of ordinary people, fighting by writing. In early editorials, he warned about unsafe bridges and ridiculed the attorney general's belief that stricter liquor laws would eliminate bootlegging. He criticized

tourist publications that left eastern towns like Montague and Souris off their maps. In the mid-'60s, MacNeill wrote on "What Montague Needs from Its Next Council," he spoke out against the "gentlemen's agreement" that saw certain political candidacies being given to Protestants and others to Catholics, writing that "a man can represent us faithfully whether he is of our faith or not."

A favourite issue was closed-door school board meetings; in a preelection editorial, MacNeill wrote, "Because of the refusal of the present board members to allow open meetings, we would suggest that there is no one among the voters in Unit Four who can judge whether they warrant re-election." MacNeill even staged a one-man sit-in, and in 1975 the meetings were opened to the public.

The paper was not all civic target practice, though. MacNeill made a special effort to print local stories that mattered to his readers: strawberry festivals, fishing derbies, fundraisers. The June 1975 story on an Alliston woman's collection of 1,000 sets of salt-and-pepper shakers, or the April

1978 half-page piece on a local boy's worm business — 11 column inches and a big photo — these were the kinds of items that would be fluff in a daily but that earned the *Graphic* a loyal following.

MacNeill culled these stories from daily discussions with area residents.

He was always out of the office, talking to people on the streets and in stores, diners and bars. MacNeill's daily ritual included a visit to his friend Tim: Tim Hortons, that is, where the drive-through line stretches to the street and chatty coffee-breakers pour in throughout the day. In places like this MacNeill discovered what people were thinking about, what affected their lives.

His best-known advice for reporters was to talk to 50 people every day. If you don't come back with a story, he used to say, you'd better rethink your career.

Personally and professionally, MacNeill was the same eccentric man: insatiable coffee drinker, champion napper, notoriously absent-minded. He even had a name for his subconscious mind: Sam. If MacNeill was planning a difficult editorial, he would tell Sam the topic and then take a nap or work on another story. When he was finished, Sam would

have written the column — MacNeill would just have to get it down on paper. When MacNeill took up curling, he credited Sam with any good shots, but his son Paul says, "Even

Dad's subconscious wasn't very good at the hit game."

MacNeill was tall, with dark hair and whiskers: the grey first appeared at the ears and worked its way around. His soft voice rumbled with a touch of Scottish brogue, and he jabbed at the air with his pen, his pipe, his coffee cup, when he was making a point. Listening intently to a story, he would look over his glasses at you and say, "Is that right?" Family friend Ann Galloway thought he didn't believe a word she said when they first met.

At a bar or party, MacNeill always drew a crowd. He was a Gaelic gad-about — he told stories, loved music and dancing, enjoyed his whiskey and bought drinks even when he couldn't afford it. "Jim was insulted if you tried to buy a round," says curling buddy Larry Dewar with a smile. "He'd sit back with a drink, put his feet up and say, 'Ah, that a man should live so well.'" MacNeill met his best friend, Denis Ryan, a Halifax investment consultant and Irish musician, in a pub in 1969. When Ryan lived in Lower Montague, MacNeill would call late on press nights and say, "She's put to bed, are you up?" They would break out the single-malt

scotch and watch the sun come up over the Strait.

In 1968 the MacNeills moved to 117 Chestnut St., where the rounded foyer is hung thick with family photographs, graduation portraits, wedding pictures and a black-and-white rendering of Jim's parents. The house on Chestnut Street was, until the mid-'70s, a full-time centre of operations. Money was tight, but the MacNeills were resourceful. The

MacNeill children — five in all — sold papers and licked and pasted address labels. Paul says, "You just prayed you didn't get the Charlottetown or Miscellaneous bags

His best-known advice for reporters was to talk to 50 people every day. If you don't come back with a story, he used to say, you'd better rethink your career.

His soft voice rumbled with a touch of Scottish brogue, and he jabbed at the air with his pen, his pipe, his coffee cup, when he was making a point.

— those had the most in them. And the black ink taste in your mouth...” Paul remembers a beer stein where Shirley kept the money. “Mom had three lists: the things we wanted, the things we needed and the things we could afford.”

For the MacNeills, having a large family and running a community newspaper weren't incompatible; in fact, Dad's job often affected the family vacation. MacNeill was involved with the Canadian Community Newspapers Association, which held a family-oriented convention in a different province every year. Over the years, the Clan MacNeill made it to conventions all over Canada. The kids not only got to travel, they also learned about newspapers. Today, three of the MacNeill children — Paul, Jan and Gail — are involved in the family business.

By the mid-'70s, the *Graphic* bore the tag line “The Lively One,” but it had settled into a stylistic groove. “Jim won a style award in the '60s and he never forgot it,” says Andy Thompson, laughing. Thompson, a stringer for the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald* and former MacNeill employee, notes that readers were comfortable with the *Graphic's* familiar look, and its profusion of spelling and grammar mistakes.

Stephen Kimber, the director of King's journalism school, says the *Graphic* has long been an example in design classes — of what not to do. MacNeill hated front-page jumps; he wanted readers to get the story without having to chase it through the paper, so whenever possible, stories would run no more

than 500 words. MacNeill favoured content over aesthetics, and it showed. The *Graphic* might be six columns on one part of the page and three on another, but these inconsistencies didn't seem to bother the readers.

The 1980s were a flurry of activity: MacNeill started two more papers, the *West Prince Graphic*, to cover the opposite side of the Island, and *Atlantic Fish Farming*, a sister publication to the *Island Farmer*, which MacNeill had launched in 1974. As the number of publications grew, so did the staff; MacNeill was soon able to leave the day-to-day operations at the *Graphic* for other projects. He served as president of the Atlantic Community Newspapers Association from 1980 to 1982 and later became the youngest honorary life member of the CCNA and the first Canadian president of the International Society of

Weekly Newspaper Editors. A less prestigious but more entertaining distinction was the 1989 Atlantic Journalism Association's Red Lobster Award for mismatched headline and photo: “Rats Invade Harbour Village” with photo at right of Brian Mulroney shaking hands with a Montague woman.

But MacNeill was most prolific when “the bastards” in Charlottetown struck again. In 1987, when the provincial government announced a plebiscite on a proposed fixed link to the mainland, MacNeill plowed through stacks of documents and wrote nearly 40 stories in six weeks,

criticizing the ministry of public works procedures and cautioning readers to consider the issue carefully. MacNeill's research and insight earned him a nomination for the Michener Award for Meritorious

Service in Journalism. Faded green and red Yes and No buttons still decorate MacNeill's office.

For all his professional success, MacNeill had human failings. In December 1990, he was charged with im-paired driving in Nova Scotia. Keeping with *Graphic* policy, MacNeill's conviction ran on the front page. For the year his license was suspended, MacNeill barred himself from writing editorials; he left that to managing editor Heather Moore and the rest of the staff. Moore, now in her 26th year at the *Graphic*, says MacNeill's decision was not unusual — he had quit editorial writing before to give

others a shot at it. In this case, MacNeill felt his reduced mobility might prevent him from gathering the information to do justice to the job.

Like the fixed-link stories, MacNeill's best work at the time sprang from something that simply made him mad. In 1991, Charlottetown teenager Michael Miller was killed by an off-duty Mountie who was driving home from the RCMP mess after having a few beers. The investigation was a disaster — evidence lost, questions unasked — and two years later, the officer was acquitted. Islanders were outraged and Charlottetown newspapers received letters crying injustice, many of which were never published.

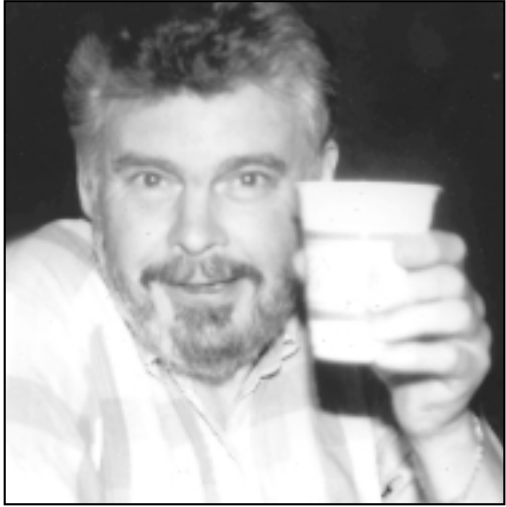
MacNeill had long denounced what he called the “two levels of justice” in P.E.I. When he got word of the Millers' case, the editorial claws came out. In his December 15, 1993, Fact or Fancy column, MacNeill wrote: “This case [must] be appealed.... If it isn't, it will simply mean that the Miller family hasn't been given justice. Neither have other Islanders — justice denied to one is justice denied to all.... Michael Miller

MacNeill had long denounced what he called the “two levels of justice” in P.E.I. When he got word of the Millers' case, the editorial claws came out.

Over the years, the Clan MacNeill made it to conventions all over Canada. The kids not only got to travel, they also learned about newspapers.

was killed by a police corporal who was legally found to be drunk. That can't be left as simply 'Not guilty.'"

The victim's parents launched a civil suit against the attorney general of Canada, and MacNeill followed the proceedings: "The Millers are claiming damages for the loss of care, guidance and companionship suffered by the wrongful death of their son. What's the RCMP response to this? Certainly not one word of



apology; not one word of condolence; not one word to ease the terrible loss and stress of the Miller family.... The RCMP, in its defense, claims that the teenager failed to look out for his own safety and that he actually walked into the path of Cpl. McGregor's unmarked RCMP car...the official position of the force is that Mike Miller was mainly responsible for his own death. That is almost obscene."

Even after the suit was settled with the Millers, MacNeill's outrage didn't abate: "This isn't a case any longer of wrongdoing by Cpl. Gary McGregor.... It's of wrongdoing by other RCMP, in superior positions, who have allowed their men to act in a totally unprofessional manner. Who haven't ensured the public scrutiny this whole case needs. The settlement may be sealed but the questions remain right out there in the open-dangling, unanswered — telling us the Mounties got their man. Clear, that is!"

In recognition of MacNeill's work on the Miller case, the International Society of Weekly Newspaper

Editors gave MacNeill the 1994 Golden Quill Award for best editorial and the Eugene Cervi Award for "a lifetime of courageous editorial writing that adheres to the highest standards of the craft...and also recognizes consistently aggressive reporting of government at the grassroots level and interpretation of local affairs." However, two RCMP officers involved in the case sued MacNeill and the *Graphic*; the case was still pending at press time.

In June 1994, seeking a new challenge, MacNeill bought a faltering weekly in Truro, Nova Scotia. At the time, the *Weekly Record* published mostly social announcements, but MacNeill intended to make it a real newspaper on the model of the *Graphic*: close to the community, but sharp and surprising. He made frequent trips to Truro and brought some of his own staff, including former *Graphic* intern Shawn Fuller, a graduate of the journalism program at Charlottetown's Holland College. Despite Fuller's youth, he was soon named editor and hired another young journalist, King's grad Andy Thompson, who would also wear the editor's hat.

The young writers practiced MacNeill's "bird-dogging" style of journalism and turned out stories of a whole new kind: a hidden camera in a Department of the Environment boardroom used to spy on employees following computer thefts; an attempt to cover up misuse of a county credit card by the CEO. Thompson recalls looking over the flats and seeing sticky notes with MacNeill's scribble on them: "Dandy story" or "Good friggin' story" — high praise from MacNeill.

At first it seemed as though MacNeill might be able to make a go

of it — under his guidance the circulation went from 1,400 to its peak of 5,300 in the winter of 1996, but the *Weekly Record* ultimately became one of his few failures. What had worked in Montague fell flat in Truro — he tried to shake up a town that preferred to be stirred. Andy Thompson explains it this way: "Truro is a very staid, Tory town, very cliquish. They never understood what Jim was trying to do."

The beginning of the end was Shawn Fuller's story on employee safety in the Sobey's grocery chain; after that, the East Coast's largest advertiser took its business elsewhere and others followed. No ad boycott had ever seriously wounded the *Graphic*, but this was a mortal blow to the *Record*. Resources dried up, bills were unpaid, and the office locks changed. On May 13, 1997, the last issue of the *Record* hit the streets, but distribution was almost nil, since the postal bill was past due, too. Four days

later, at the Atlantic Journalism Awards, Andy Thompson represented a defunct paper in the Enterprise Journalism category.

The failure of the *Record* may have disappointed MacNeill, but he didn't discuss it. He had the thriving Island Press papers, and a new project as well: the 1997 launch of *Atlantic Gig*, a magazine celebrating East Coast music. The subject was near to MacNeill's heart, the publication less so: it was run out of

Halifax and sold after MacNeill's death.

MacNeill had been diagnosed with diabetes in the late 1970s, a condition he had always managed quietly. In May 1998, he developed a foot infection: he was hospitalized for a month and doctors amputated his left big

Dr. James Joseph (Seumas) MacNeill was buried beneath a simple headstone bearing a Celtic cross and the traditional newspaper symbol marking the end of a story: -30-

toe. But rather than take it easy, MacNeill decided to walk around the Island, talking to folks and writing stories he dreamed of compiling into a book. The walks seemed natural outlets for his restless energy and curiosity. MacNeill published 17 of these stories before he died — not enough for a book, says Shirley, and MacNeill wouldn't have wanted it done halfway.

The King's College doctorate was the highest honour MacNeill had ever received. Proud as he was, MacNeill was a little unstrung. He had occasionally appeared on television and radio, but as a public speaker, *Graphic* columnist Jack MacAndrew says, "He was terrible. He didn't have the gift." He worked on his acceptance speech for weeks, rehearsing after Shirley had gone to bed.

Two hours before the ceremony, Michael Cobden, a professor at King's, asked to see MacNeill's speech and marked it with corrections. Cobden says the gesture was friendly — familiar with MacNeill's "rough" style, he wanted to save MacNeill embarrassment. Perhaps he succeeded: in the original draft, MacNeill mentioned *Globe and Mail* columnist Robert Fowler. Cobden changed it to Fulford. However well-intentioned, the incident rattled MacNeill further.

When he rose to give his address in the Cathedral Church of All Saints, MacNeill dislodged a tooth. There was a pause while MacNeill tucked the tooth into his cheek with his tongue before continuing. In the end, MacNeill gave his original speech: he had earned the doctorate by being himself and he was determined to accept it in the same way. When it was over, MacNeill was visibly relaxed, grinning, brandishing his degree. "It was the highlight of his life," says Shirley firmly.

On May 16, two days after the ceremony, the MacNeills enjoyed a leisurely morning before driving to the ferry. Noticing that her husband was restless, perhaps sleepy, Shirley offered to drive, but MacNeill declined. At the dock, MacNeill rushed to the restroom and returned looking unwell. The moment they

stopped on board the ferry, MacNeill was out of the car. Shirley last saw him alive as he dashed to the restroom.

Despite the efforts of crew members, a retired Cape Breton nurse and an Ontario pharmacist who tried to revive MacNeill, he was dead at 3:45 p.m.

MacNeill's funeral was a P.E.I. event. Cards and letters arrived from all over Canada and the United States, and guests included colleagues, competitors and a group of recent King's grads. A dram of whiskey sat atop MacNeill's coffin and Dave Cadogan of The Miramichi Leader gave a fond eulogy. Dr. James Joseph (Seumas) MacNeill was buried beneath a simple headstone bearing a Celtic cross and the traditional newspaper symbol marking the end of a story: -30-.

At the Curling Club for the

reception, Shirley approached the bartender and said "Open up — and put it on MacNeill's tab." The drink flowed freely in MacNeill's memory until the small hours. In the end, members of the Curling Club insisted on paying the tab. That might have been the only part MacNeill would have objected to.

The ironic and untimely nature of his passing would have pleased MacNeill. He was never one to rest on his laurels and it would have been hard to top his doctorate. "It was the way he would have wanted it," says Shirley. "He went out on a high."

Indeed he did. The bastards never got him down.

The ironic and untimely nature of his passing would have pleased MacNeill. He was never one to rest on his laurels and it would have been hard to top his doctorate.

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Jim and Shirley MacNeill

Public may lack knowledge to assess media credibility

By Dr. Gerald Stone, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

ABSTRACT

In a five-year study of public perceptions of the media's *watchdog* role, only 25 percent of a pilot sample of 174 said they had heard the term previously. This paper reviews the progress of the on-going research and compares those who knew the *watchdog* term with those who didn't. It suggests that the public is not being taught the fundamental principles of press freedom in a democracy, therefore it lacks the background to assess media credibility.

The media industry, its defenders and critics, are justifiably concerned with the well documented decline in the public's faith in the press in the 1990s.¹ Seldom does the industry become worried enough about its future to earmark \$1 million for research to understand and possibly counteract a threat to its existence,² such as the loss of young readers in the mid-1970s. But, like the last generation's young-adult research, today's credibility research is likely to be easier to document than it is to counteract.³

Altering public perceptions of media credibility faces several problems:

1. Defining "credibility." The precept might extend from the very specific aspects of excesses in investigative reporting⁴ to a much wider and less discernible general distrust or malaise toward the mass media messengers.⁵
2. Dealing with the dramatic change in what the elite media are forced to cover and thereby legitimate. Instead of ignoring the tabloid press as in previous times, major dailies, news magazines and network television news shows have been forced by the more sensational media⁶ to report the torrid O.J. Simpson case, the tribulations of Britain's royal family and the titillations of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.
3. Deciding if the media credibility problem can be reversed given the massive proliferation of new media technology that has vastly increased the flow of information by non-traditional news providers.⁷
4. Documenting whether the public's perception of mass media is beyond repair in an age when sensationalism seems to have replaced sensibility as an acceptable standard of media fare.⁸

One additional problem in trying to counteract the drop in perceptions of media credibility is the area of concern this paper raises. Perhaps declines in public credibility

perceptions are not related to mass media behavior but result from the educational system's failure to properly inform the public about the mass media's special role in a democratic society: the watchdog role.

If the possibility suggested here is correct, or even if it is just one contributor, media credibility concerns are not likely to be reversed by increasing media accountability or by any internal media performance changes. The current expenditures on media credibility research will go the way of those spent on increasing young-adult readability: greater understanding of the problem but little prospect of reversing the trend.

Watchdog Perceptions

The current study is the latest step in a five-year series of research efforts originally designed to determine the public's perception of the media watchdog role. The first stage was to learn if the public still supports the watchdog concept. Half of the local random sample respondents agreed that newspapers should be watchdogs; one-fourth said they should be supportive; and the remainder said newspapers should be either both, balanced or they weren't sure.⁸

The researchers concluded that the public still supports a media watchdog concept, but an analysis of those likely to support the watchdog function showed it was not associated with more frequent newspaper readership or with greater readership of hard news or public affairs. The most compelling associations with the watchdog concept were education and age. Watchdog advocates tended to be more educated and younger.⁹

The second stage in the research was designed to determine if the public perception of the media's watchdog role had broadened. Originally, the watchdog role was specific to the government-media relationship. The question being studied was whether the public saw the media's

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watchdog role as extending to issues other than traditional government-media interaction.

During stage two, public focus groups in a metropolitan and rural area produced the same results. Issues considered media watchdog responsibilities included: national public interest issues, major crime coverage, environmental issues, military operations, corporate problems, inter-national politics and consumer products. Non-watchdog issues were incidents and lawlessness involving celebrities.

The researchers concluded that the traditional government-press adversary relationship embodied in the watchdog

role may have expanded to include many other public interest issues. Investigators raised the concern that journalists may be defining their watchdog role too narrowly while the public may be expecting more penetrating coverage of issues (other than celebrities) than it is receiving.¹⁰

Although the two research efforts were local surveys and limited focus groups, they provided pilot-study evidence worth pursuing in a more direct attempt to measure public watchdog perceptions.

Current Study

A questionnaire was prepared to test the watchdog role assumptions. Intended as a national random-sample survey, funding limitations resulted in a local random-sample survey: a pretest of the instrument.

Two questionnaires were prepared and administered in 1997. Both forms were identical, except that following the introductory paragraphs Form A asked respondents, "Have you heard the term 'watchdog role of the mass media,'" followed by an

open-ended question: "Can you briefly define what the media's watchdog role means to you." Form B omitted the open-ended question, proceeding directly to a list of items about the watchdog role.

The objective of the split form was to validate respondents' initial answer: to show that a respondent who answered yes, could in fact define the term. The validation procedure is not used frequently, but it probably should be.¹¹ In this instance, the larger objective was to eliminate the open-ended question on the final telephone survey that might be administered to

1,000 respondents in a national telephone sampling.

Open-ended questions are difficult to deal with from a methodological standpoint.¹² The pilot study was supposed to show that:

1. respondents who said yes to the first question could define the media's watchdog role, and
2. no significant differences would be found among answers to the rest of the questionnaire regardless of having asked the open-ended definition question.

Had these two conditions prevailed, a case could be made that answering yes to the first question was a sufficiently valid method to identify those who understood the media's watchdog concept.

As part of a class sampling assignment, 20 senior-level journalism research methods students generated a stratified random sample of local telephone numbers using a random entry point to the white pages of the current telephone directory, with a last-digit replacement. Business phone numbers were eliminated.

The researchers concluded that the traditional government-press adversary relationship embodied in the watchdog role may have expanded to include many other public interest issues.

After an in-class coaching session, the students were required as part of their class grade to complete 10 survey calls from a designated campus site with a bank of telephones. Two 90-minute sessions were held with 10 students making calls on a Monday evening in March, and the other 10 making calls on Tuesday evening. The two forms of the questionnaire were alternated, with each student having five copies of Form A and Form B. Each form required students to ask to talk with the adult at the residence who had the most recent birthday, a method of further randomizing respondent selection.¹³

The students were closely supervised by the author and a graduate research assistant. Most finished the 10 questionnaires, although some did fewer for a class completion of 174 survey forms.

During the telephone interviewing, the only problems evidenced were corrected by the supervisors reminding students about survey etiquette and close adherence to the survey form. Of 327 eligible respondent households reached, the completion rate was 53 percent, comparable to those reported for similar telephone sampling techniques.¹⁴

Findings & Considerations

The major outcome of this study was the shockingly low number of respondents who said they had heard the term "watchdog role of the mass media." Three responses were coded for this question with these results:

1. yes, 44 subjects or 25%;
2. not sure, 8 subjects or 5%; and
3. no, 122 subjects or 70%.

Obviously, so few subjects saying they had heard the term was unexpected and disappointing. The two previous investigations leading up to this study and the vast literature of the watchdog concept contain nothing to suggest that only one-fourth of the respondents would say they had heard the term.

Of those who had, only one respondent of the 44 defined the term erroneously. Sixty-three percent defined it as a check on government

or gave an answer similar to watching out for public interest; 23% mentioned government or non-government oversight; and 10% provided other definitions that pertained to the concept. So almost everyone who answered yes correctly defined the watchdog role, but having only one-fourth answer yes obfuscated the study's purpose of learning if the first question alone validated people's understanding of the media's watchdog role concept.

Are there clues to the "don't know" factor in the rest of the study? For example, are there statistically significant differences between the two groups that might shed light on their willingness or ability to answer yes to the first question. Fourteen media use, assessment and demographic variables were used in the study (see table on page 17).

Among the variables tested, several showed significant differences. The profile of those more likely to say they had heard the media watchdog role term was: higher educated male Caucasians with self-assessed greater knowledge about and frequency of discussing current events. It should be noted that all of the media use and assessment variables are higher in the yes group, but not significantly higher.

Given these findings, it is safe to conclude that demographics dominate in predicting watchdog role knowledge, with particular emphasis on highly educated males. Experienced media researchers might have predicted that many of the other variables would yield significant differences, but they didn't.

Discussion & Implications

There is little plausible explanation for this study's finding that only one-fourth of the respondents said they had heard the term "watchdog role of the mass media." How can this finding be explained when neither past research nor the research that led to this study implied any difficulty in public understanding of the concept? Findings that fly in the face of previous research raise methodological questions.

1. The term itself is flawed. Perhaps some aspects of the questionnaire's phrase caused the startling finding. "Watchdog role of the mass media" may not trigger the same response as, say, "watchdog role of the press."

However, it is doubtful that the public would distinguish so narrowly between "mass media" and "press," as most people may consider the two terms synonymous. Also, the introductory paragraph of the questionnaires referred to "mass media" rather than "press," further strengthening the connection and reducing any misunderstanding.

2. The question is flawed. Perhaps the entire

question is inappropriate in some way. It may not follow smoothly from the questionnaire introduction; it may be too jolting. Maybe the only way to ask about the concept is to define it at the same time: "Are you familiar with the term 'watchdog role of the mass media' in which the media are supposed to protect the public by exposing excessive government power or corruption?" Of course, using this strategy would have destroyed the study's validity.

3. The question is threatening. If

asked this kind of factual question, a respondent may be put on guard that the next question is going to be a follow-up question, such as a definition. Asking a factual question might challenge respondents to validate their knowledge on a topic.¹⁵

This may be the most likely methodological explanation for the finding that only one-fourth of the sample claimed to have heard the term. Some of the demographic and media use answers in the study seem to support the idea because the profiles of those saying yes to the first question would place them among those who might risk a follow-up question.

At the very least, with virtually all of the 44 respondents being able to justify their yes answer, we should suspect that others in the sample could have defined the concept if they had risked a yes response to the first question. The question might have provided a more temperate approach to identify more of those who did know the concept. Suggestions include a prelude

statement prior to asking, "Have you heard the term 'watchdog role of the mass media'?" Prelude examples include:

- a. The media's watchdog role was discussed when the United States adopted the Constitution. . . .
- b. The watchdog role of the mass media is an issue people have debated. . . .
- c. Americans have wondered about the value of the watchdog role the mass media play in society. . . .
- d. Some people think the mass media should serve a watchdog role. Others question whether the media's watchdog role is necessary. . . .

These alternations of the questions could have offered a less threatening approach or at least helped increase the respondent's recall of the term. Their purpose would be to provide additional memory cues. If the considerations bring mulled here are accurate — if a much greater percentage of the public does understand the media watchdog role concept — the prelude approach might induce a yes answer by the suspected vast majority who actually do know the term.

However, despite the startling outcome of this survey, the obvious must be considered: That the finding is

However, despite the startling outcome of this survey, the obvious must be considered: That the finding is correct: That only one-fourth of the public has heard of the term "watchdog role of the mass media."

correct: That only one-fourth of the public has heard of the term “watchdog role of the mass media.” If the survey’s methodology is sound, the 25% figure must be believed, within the rather large +/-7% sampling error. Assuming sound methods, a researcher would have to conclude that less than one-third of the public has heard the term.

Such an astounding conclusion is especially alarming considering this survey’s well-educated sample. Though recent national studies have reported a drastic decline in public support for First Amendment rights,¹⁶ this finding shakes the foundations of faith in a democratic government as well as press freedoms. It suggests that the U.S. educational system has failed miserably in imbuing citizens with a knowledge of the special responsibilities of a vigilant, watchdog press in a democracy.

Recommendation

Obviously, if citizens lack knowledge of the media’s watchdog role, they cannot be expected to have an appreciation for investigative reporting, the adversary concept, the rationale for extending tolerance in press coverage of public figures, and many of the tactics reporters must use to expose corruption or accurately report abuses by those who wield power. Public perception of media credibility is certain to decline if the public does not understand the watchdog concept.

Herein lies the predictable fallacy of industry research to improve the public’s perception of media credibility. Research findings are likely to identify factors that the public considers media excesses. For example, the public is certain to rebuke the use of unnamed sources, intrusions into public figures’ private lives and surreptitious reporting tactics used to uncover wrongdoing. Yet these media excesses are often the only methods that can produce watchdog-type results. Their use may be the trade-off that protects society.

This study’s finding implies that the public may condone such trade-offs if citizens understood the watchdog-

role concept. Even if the study’s findings miss the mark considerably, and half the public really knows about the media’s watchdog role, the recommendation would be the same. The media industry must begin a large-scale information campaign designed to better educate the public about the role of press freedoms in a democracy.

Fortunately, the mass media are in an enviable position to initiate such a campaign. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television and emerging media are seen as the nation’s educators (not just entertainers). The mass media have been extremely effective in raising public concerns about their own foibles, such as excessive presentation of violence and sex. They should be equally adept at facilitating public knowledge about the watchdog role.

Additionally, the media have tremendous political clout. Although a campaign to promote the watchdog concept might be viewed as self-serving, it would also be recognized as a legitimate First Amendment concern worthy of support by most political factions and public interest groups. The theme might be championed by both the conservative and liberal political camps.

Perhaps most important is the influence the media wield at the local, county and state levels: those constituencies that determine public school curriculum issues. The watchdog role concept could — and should — be a continuing theme

in American history, civics, political science, social studies and international/ intercultural classes from elementary school through high school.

If the mass media were effective in convincing school boards that the watchdog role is an essential aspect of America’s democratic heritage, and one that is still virtually unrivaled globally, concerns about public perceptions of media credibility may be greatly diminished. This study suggests that the public knowledge about the watchdog role concept is sorely lacking. Reinstating an appreciation of the watchdog role may be the answer to the media’s credibility problem.

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Notes

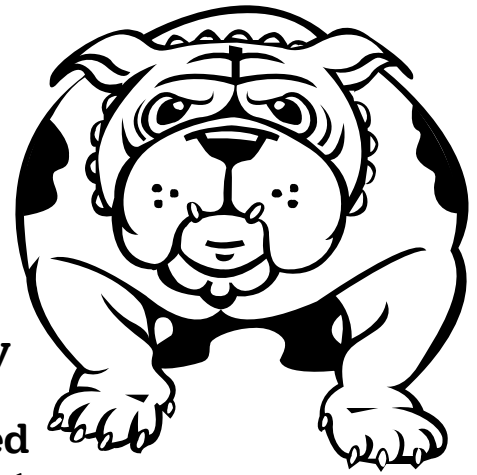
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9. *Ibid.*
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11. James H. Frey and Sabine Mertens Oishi (1995). *How to conduct interviews by telephone and in person*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 83.
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14. Completion rate figures are comparable to those reported for similar random-digit dialing sampling procedures. See Paul J. Lavrakas, (1993). *Op. Cit.*, pp. 87-91. Most researchers today use only the completed interviews, refusals and ineligible categories, placing this telephone survey's sample among the higher completion rates. Lavrakas reported completion rates for local surveys in 1991 and 1992 at 34.2 percent of all numbers. The comparable figures for this survey was 38.5 percent. A 1995 survey reported a completion rate of 57.4 percent, comparable to this survey's 53%. See: Katherine N. Kinnick, Dean M. Krugman and Glen T. Cameron (1996). "Compassion fatigue: Communication and burnout toward social problems," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 73:3:687-707.
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Respondent Characteristics Based on Having Heard “Watchdog Role” term

| | | <u>Percent or Means</u> | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------|----------|
| | | Yes | No | p |
| | | (n=44) | (n=122) | |
| <u>Media items:</u> | | | | |
| Mean days per week read a newspaper | | 5.1 | 4.5 | n.s |
| Days per week watch national TV news | | 5.3 | 5.0 | n.s |
| Mean frequency discuss current events with family, friends (“1”=more frequently) | | 1.7 | 1.9 | <.05 |
| How much news believe: | most of it | 50% | 39% | |
| | about half of it | 54 | n.s. | |
| | very little of it | 7 | | |
| <u>Public Affairs:</u> | | | | |
| Percent political leanings: | liberal | 41% | 36% | |
| | conservative | 37 | n.s. | |
| | independent | 27 | | |
| Voted in the ‘96 presidential election | | 80% | 66% | n.s |
| Voted in the ‘94 congressional election | | 68% | 57% | n.s. |
| Mean self-assessed current affairs knowledge (“1”=more knowledgeable) | | 1.7 | 1.9 | <.05 |
| <u>Demographics:</u> | | | | |
| Race: | Caucasian | 95% | 76 | |
| | other | 5 | 24 | <.05 |
| Marital status: | never married | 31% | 36% | |
| | currently married | 50 | 46 | n.s. |
| | divorced or widowed | 19 | 18 | |
| Education level: | | | | |
| some high school or h.s. graduate | | 7% | 29% | |
| some college or technical school | | 26 | 36 | |
| college graduate | | 30 | 20 | <.001 |
| post graduate schooling | | 37 | 15 | |
| Yearly family income: | below \$20,000 | 26% | 29% | |
| | \$20,000 to \$39,999 | 37 | 35 | |
| | \$40,000 to \$60,000 | 23 | 20 | n.s. |
| | above \$60,000 | 21 | 16 | |
| Gender: | male | 61% | 36% | |
| | Female | 39 | 64 | <.01 |
| Mean age: | | 40.9 | 41.8 | n.s. |

Eugene Cervi Award Nominations



The Eugene Cervi Award was established by ISWNE to honor the memory of Eugene Cervi of the Rocky Mountain Journal, Denver, by recognizing a newspaper editor who has consistently acted in the conviction that “good journalism begets good government.”

The award is presented not for a single brave accomplishment, however deserving, but for a career of outstanding public service through community journalism and for adhering to the highest standards of the craft with the deep reverence for the English language that was the hallmark of Eugene Cervi’s writing. The award also recognizes consistently aggressive reporting of government at the grassroots level and interpretation of local affairs.

Cervi Award nominations should begin with a letter of nomination, which should include the writer’s reasons for making the nomination. The nomination also should have other letters about the nominee, clippings demonstrating the criteria for the award and a biographical data sheet giving basic facts about the nominee’s career.

Nominations are open only to editors of newspapers of less than daily frequency. Daily is defined as at least five days per week in frequency. (Note: Since the Cervi Award covers a journalistic career, supporting materials are not limited by chronology. Clips can be made from any point in the nominee’s career.)

Nominations should be sent by February 1, 2000, (materials may follow by end of month) to:

Chad Stebbins
Institute of International Studies
Missouri Southern State College
3950 E. Newman Road
Joplin, MO 64801-1595.
 (Please mark the envelope:
 CERVI AWARD ENTRY.)

GENE CERVI AWARD WINNERS

- | | | | | | |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1999 | No award given | 1991 | Henry Gay, <i>Shelton-Mason County Journal,</i> Shelton, Wash. | 1983 | Homer Marcum, <i>The Martin</i> <i>Countian,</i> Inez, Ky. |
| 1998 | Jack Authelet, <i>Foxboro (Mass.) Reporter</i> | 1990 | Karl Monroe, <i>Collinsville (Ill.) Herald</i> | 1982 | Kieth Howard, <i>Yellow Springs (Ohio) News</i> |
| 1997 | Carol Wilcox & Cary Stiff, <i>Clear Creek Courant,</i> Idaho Springs, Colo. | 1989 | William Rotch, <i>Milford (N.H.) Cabinet</i> | 1981 | Edward DeCourcy, <i>Newport (N.H.) Argus</i> <i>Champion</i> |
| 1996 | Charlotte & Marvin Schexnayder, <i>Dumas (Ark.) Clarion</i> | 1988 | Bruce Brugmann, <i>San Francisco Bay Guardian</i> | 1980 | Robert Estabrook, <i>Lakeville (Conn.) Journal</i> |
| 1995 | No award given | 1987 | James Russell Wiggins, <i>Ellsworth (Maine) American</i> | 1979 | Houstoun Waring, <i>Littleton (Colo.) Independent</i> |
| 1994 | Jim MacNeill, <i>The Eastern</i> <i>Graphic,</i> Montague, Prince Edward Island | 1986 | Rollin McCommons, <i>Athens (Ga.) Observer</i> | 1978 | Tom Leathers, <i>The Squire,</i> Kansas City, Mo. |
| 1993 | Bob Bliss, <i>The Montgomery County News,</i> Hillsboro, Ill. | 1985 | McDill (Huck) Boyd, <i>Phillips County Review,</i> Phillipsburg, Kan. | 1977 | Charles & Virginia Russell, <i>Dewitt County Observer,</i> Clinton, Ill. |
| 1992 | Robert Trapp, <i>Rio Grande Sun,</i> Espanola, N.M. | 1984 | Richard McCord, <i>Santa Fe (N.M.) Reporter</i> | 1976 | Blair Macy, <i>Keene Valley Sun,</i> Kennesburg, Colo. |

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