

***PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
REPORTING:  
What Editors Expect***

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HOWARD



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### ***Ms. Ross' Remarks:***

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To demonstrate that editors can't let well-enough alone, I've edited our topic for this morning to put the emphasis not on the public affairs aspect of reporting, but on the expectations of editors and reporters.

In thinking back to when I was at your stage, what would have been most useful to me as a beginning reporter was a lesson on the most peculiar relationship between editor and reporter -- certainly one of the most unnatural linkages in the history of humankind.

As beginning reporters, we were bright and curious and hardworking and terribly in love with our prose. I mean, we had just completed four years of A's on our writing, we had labored days on a well-crafted vignette that began: "He leaned back in his chair and watched a fly do arabesques on the ceiling." We knew a metaphor when we saw it and depth -- well hell, didn't we uncover the messianic symbolism in four short stories in one semester alone?

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***"Your editor wants to know less about the symbolism of two cars coming together like lovers in a waltz and more about whose leg was broken."***

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On the other side of the relationship is the editor. Your editor is tired from 61 people an hour asking her if she has a minute. She has already seen one too many arabesques. She wants to know less about the symbolism of two cars coming together like lovers in a waltz and more about whose leg was broken. When you write: "It was a dark and stormy night," she tells you to skip the poetry and tell the reader who, what, where, when. When you write "who, what, where, when," she asks you, "but what was the night like?"

When you, the reporter, make a mistake, you say you were too rushed to double-check, and in the grand scheme of things does it really matter that you wrote Groucho Marx instead of Karl Marx? But when an editor types Groucho instead of Karl into your story, you call it incredible stupidity designed to ruin your career and the future of your children's children.

Your editor, meanwhile, will give you an assignment, then interrupt you 17 times, take your finally finished story, rearrange all the paragraphs, plan the election coverage, answer a call from a reader who complains the ink comes off in her hands, then turn to you and say, "I don't know, Johnson, this story lacks continuity."

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***"Editor and reporter...it is out of this strange dynamic I've just described that excellent journalism comes."***

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Editor and reporter. Knowing what to expect from each other is not only the key to a successful personal career, but is the key to a successful newspaper. Because it is out of this strange dynamic I've just described that excellent journalism comes.

If I were a beginning reporter again, knowing now what editors expect, here's what I'd do:

1) Before my first day on the job, I'd get a map of the region and study it; I'd know all the neighborhoods and the nature of the people living there; I'd know all the names of government officials and where all the government buildings are; I'd read back issues of the newspaper or a history of the firm I'm working for. Because your editor will forever keep in her heart your responses to those first assignments. If it's, "I'd be happy to cover city hall today, but where is it and how do I get there," you're in trouble. Know everything about your territory and be self-reliant on assignments and your relationship will begin correctly.

2) I'd edit my own copy first. All typos, misspellings, grammatical errors, imprecise language, unchecked facts and flab must be edited out before an editor ever sees them. Contrary to popular wisdom, that's not what an editor is for. An editor is for help in conceptualizing a story; for discussions about approach, and contacts for help on ethical dilemmas and balance. Ask an editor to use his experience and intellect and not a broom on your stories, and you've advanced the relationship.



3) I'd read everything I could get my hands on -- Harper's Review, Washington Journalism Review, best-sellers, political biographies, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and, of course, my own newspaper.

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***"We're now asking reporters to find out why events occur, to provide connections between seemingly unrelated events, to explore complex social problems, so that readers come away from a story with understanding rather than just information."***

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Enlightened newspaper journalism has taken a new path. It's no longer adequate to cover the fires, murders and political intrigue. We're now asking reporters to find out why events occur, to provide connections between seemingly unrelated events, to explore complex social problems, so that readers come away from a story with understanding rather than just information.

For example, a few years ago in The Pittsburgh Press, we were running sporadic Page1 stories that said one town ran out of money and couldn't pay its police department. Weeks later, another town couldn't pay its electric bill. And then another town gave up its fire department. A team of reporters was asked to find the connections between these towns and economic conditions. To do that, they had to understand the history of the Pittsburgh region; they had to know the economic connections between town budgets and an industrial revolution; they had to know which other parts of our country are undergoing similar problems; they had to know how to use the computer as a tool; they had to be able to connect the family in Freeport that can't pay its mortgage to a profound economic trend; in short, they had to be smart and learned. Not just in journalism, but in life. Be able to make connections between events by knowing what's happening around you and your editor will love you.

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***"Most young journalists coming to us don't have the foggiest notion of how to research a story; in truth, most old journalists with us don't, either."***

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4) I'd learn how to research. Most young journalists coming to us don't have the foggiest notion of how to research a story; in truth, most old journalists with us don't, either. Do you know how to use the Freedom of Information Act? What kind of information you can get through it? Do you know how to find out how many women are unemployed in your neighborhood? Do you know how to see the financial history of a private company? If your editor sent you to Canonsburg to do a story on the radioactive dump site there, would you know how to find out who was responsible for that radioactivity? Do you accept the fact that most investigative reporting is the boring and continuous perusal of records? Editors growl when a reporter spins his wheels for three days just trying to find out where to get information. But they love reporters whose research skills are as finely honed as their writing skills.

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***"There are two main reasons that newspaper writing is so god-awful. The first is the existence of the dreaded inverted pyramid. That's where we take a perfectly interesting story and then twist it all around so that it's upside down and backwards."***

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5) I'd practice writing for my mother. There are two main reasons that newspaper writing is so god-awful. The first is the existence of the dreaded inverted pyramid. That's where we take a perfectly interesting story and then twist it all around so that it's upside down and backwards. Here's the beginning of a real story. Can you imagine telling it to your mother: Jennifer Mahofsky, 57, of 1468 Jefferson Pike Road, Indiana County, and her three Philadelphia brothers, procured dynamite from a rural shed, and yesterday blew up a house on Main Street, Homer City. The owner, Mabel Magillicuddy, was uninjured.



What would you really say? "Did you hear that Mabel Magillicuddy's house was blown to smithereens?" We must throw out all the rules, and tell the story.

The second reason that newspaper writing is awful is that reporters have forgotten about people. We write stories about bureaucracies and unemployment and studies and census figures. But we forget to mention what any of that has to do with people and the quality of their lives. One of our reporters recently wrote a story about a study showing what kind of jobs will be available in 1990. Hardly compelling reading.

But then he went to a class of 6th-graders, the workforce of 1990, and interviewed them about their hopes and dreams for careers. They didn't match up with the projections. But the resulting story was truly about people. Write so that your mother will be interested in stories. Editors love reporters who can relate issues to their mothers.

6) And finally, if I were just starting out, I'd have a list of things I'd never say to my editor: "I couldn't find out." "But that's the way they do it on 60 Minutes." "I ran out of gas." "It was an unimportant mistake." "You ruined my story." "You ruined my life." "Did we already have this in the paper?" "When I get old and can't report any more, I want to be an editor." Editors hate that.

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***"If an editor routinely removes all the description from your stories, all the writing techniques that are yours alone, he is not an editor, he's a blender and should be called on it."***

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If I were an editor just starting out, knowing what reporters expect from their editors, here's what I'd do:

1) I'd read the clips of my entire staff for at least a year and try to recognize styles of writing. An editor must allow reporters to write with style and distinction. If an editor routinely removes all the description from your stories, all the writing techniques that are yours alone, he is not an editor, he's a blender and should be called on it. Allow for style and your reporters will love you.

2) Whenever possible, I'd ask a reporter to pull a chair next to me at the VDT and edit the story together, talking through the edits so the reporter doesn't think you've removed all the arabesques from the story simply because you're ticked because last night your souffle flopped. Editing is a rhetorical exercise, and an editor must be able to articulate the reasons your story was changed. The chair next to the VDT opens the way for arguments between editor and reporter. But that's okay. An editor must learn that on rare occasions, a reporter is correct. At The Pittsburgh Press, we've formalized it. Editors and writers talk about their work at our weekly Writer's Lunches. Talk to reporters about their work, teach, and they'll love you.

3) I'd recognize that reporters have a life after deadline. They have families and hobbies and other interests. Some even go to church. They probably don't want to work any more than 20 hours a day. After the 20th hour, I'd let them alone. I'd realize that not all reporters have the same degree of commitment or sense of professionalism. That some will be satisfied to run their careers as if they work in a factory -- and they are within their rights. Others will simply give and give of themselves because they believe in their stories, in a mission. As an editor, I must work with both types. For one, I will try to be a good manager; for the other, I'll be a member of the professional team.

4) I'd remember that reporters, perhaps more than anyone else with the possible exception of actors, need positive feedback, need stroking, need to be told they're doing okay. If an editor can do it six times a day, that's even better. I had this true conversation with a reporter just recently: "How'd you like my story?" "It was fine." "Fine? What didn't you like about it?" Tell a reporter that he wrote the best piece of journalism in the history of the print medium, and he'll be content for two, maybe three, hours. The psyches of news people are sponges, thirsty for affection and approval. Editors need to provide it when appropriate, without fear of creating prima donnas -- because you'll have prima donnas anyway. And if the quality of their work allows for it, a prima donna isn't the worst thing. Be a nurturer, and reporters will love you.



5) And finally, if I were an editor just starting out, I'd have a list of things I'd try not to say to my reporters: "Nobody reads long stories." "As soon as you're done with that Pulitzer, take this obit." "We need a three-part series on the history of the world...by Thursday." "When I was a reporter..." "Reporters always gripe, it's part of the business." "How about getting this story while you're on vacation?" "How about not taking vacation?" Reporters hate that.

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### *Mr. Caperton's Remarks:*

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I'd like to share with you some comments about stories, what they are, details and what makes a particular story a particular story.

I want to start with a personal anecdote that I know I've shared with every city editor that has ever worked for me and also a fair number of reporters. Sometimes I've shared it with the same reporters a number of times - - some of them have needed it several times.

This is a story about a short seminar on feature writing I took many years ago at Columbia University at graduate school. It was taught by an adjunct member of the faculty. His name was Robinson. He had been editor of a national magazine that had folded. He wrote fiction, non-fiction, poetry for national magazines and had been a copy editor on the New Yorker.

Before we went to this session, we were all enormously impressed with this man. There were about 15 of us taking this seminar and we met adjacent to the main newsroom where we all had typewriters in the conference room. It was 9 o'clock in the morning and I think most of us were surprised by him, because he was a very soft-spoken person. He came in while we were all sitting around the table, talking, and he apologized for interrupting us. He started the class and said, "You really can't start talking about feature writing without a story idea. I want all of you to take the rest of the morning and come back at 1:30. Your assignment is to have a story idea."

Well, we were all about the age of our contest winners and so we all rushed out and had coffee and drank cokes all morning. Of course we thought one story idea for a whole morning was a pretty easy assignment. At 1:30 we all came back in and sat around at the same conference table. Our mild-mannered professor looked at the person at the end of the table and said, "You, what's your story idea?" And this young man said, "I'm going to do a story on the city jail." The professor waited - - an awkward pause followed -- and he said, "That's a great area, but what's the story?" The student looked blank, as did the other 14 students around the table. The professor went on to explain that maybe if there was overcrowding at the city jail, that might be a story. Or if there