

Service Journalism Versus Hard News Reporting

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Abstract

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Service Journalism Versus Hard News Reporting

James A. Autry

Last year, a journalism class from Iowa State University visited the Meredith offices, for one of the class' periodic exposures to the "real world of journalism." We usually try to accomodate journalism students from many universities, and feel that part of our responsibility is to show them around and answer their questions. We make quite an effort to work with them, because I feel they get so much theory in school that they need the business exposure. I usually take the opportunity to bring a little hard reality into their professional expectations.

On that particular day last year, I hit them with the realities of circulation, both subscription and newsstand. I talked about the costs of paper and printing and postage, and I discussed the vagaries of the advertising business. I described the growing need to convince advertisers that editorial quality—and not just syndicated audience research and cost-per-thousand statistics—has an important place in the selection of an advertising medium.

At the end of that session, an attractive co-ed said to me, "You sound like a businessman, not a journalist."

That was a little hard to take. Particularly for a guy who in his student years was denounced in the Mississippi Legislature and

Autry is editor in chief of Better Homes and Gardens, a leading magazine of the Meredith Group which publishes Successful Farming. Autry presented these views at the North Central Regional meeting at Iowa State University, Ames, in April, 1978.

nearly booted out of school for editorials condemning the political manipulation of the University. In those days I supported racial integration of Ole Miss—and that was almost 25 years ago, even before the Supreme Court decision. I figured a Pulitzer Prize was waiting for me just around the corner.

My first journalism job (both in and out of school) was with the Commercial Appeal in Memphis. My first boss was a very tough little man named Eugene Rutland. Mr. Rutland's main feeling about my having been named a distinguished journalism graduate, was that he would try not to hold it against me. All those years in school and for quite a few years afterwards, I defined journalism in a very narrow way. Unfortunately, my old definition of journalism is the definition still put forth by a lot of journalism school people and members of the working press.

Picture if you will this image—the hard driving, soft-spoken but aggressive young man walking the streets in rumpled, threadbare clothes and rundown shoes, ferreting out corruption in high places. Romantic—but it is largely a contrivance of the entertainment media. I say **largely** because there are quite a few of those dedicated news people still alive and well in our profession. Woodward and Bernstein and other reporters of the Watergate mess proved that—and I thank God for those guys.

But few of us are involved in that type of journalism. That does **not** mean we are involved in a less important or less ethical journalism. Indeed, we are in a field of professional journalism that is becoming more vital every day—let's call it **service journalism**.

Service Journalism Defined

What is service journalism, as opposed, say, to news journalism? I can give you only a rough generalized definition that doesn't fit all situations, I suspect, but I'd call it: the delivery of ideas, information (and in some cases inspiration) through words, illustrations, design, and various mechanical formats, intended to produce on the part of the reader a positive action.

Service journalism that goes beyond the delivery of pure information, includes the expectation that the reader will do something as a result of the reading. In some cases, that means making something that will somehow enhance the reader's life. It may mean buying something that will enhance the reader's life; it could be using a product to better advantage; or trying a different approach in the rearing of the children or in the day-to-day relationship with the spouse. It could be trying harder on the job because of a new pride gained or a new understanding felt; it could be voting more knowledgeably at the next stockholders meeting or credit union

Autry: Service Journalism Versus Hard News Reporting
Service journalism is action journalism. **Not because of the terrific award winning actions of the journalist**—but because of the **action we expect from the reader.**

I'm bothered by the lack of acceptance of our role by journalism school faculty and by our fellow journalists in the news field. In fact, it's even stronger than that. Often, this lack of acceptance borders on supercilious disregard.

Generally, *Better Homes & Gardens* is thought of as a women's magazine. And in the past the *Columbia Journalism Review* which is supposed to know everything about media had grouped us with the women's magazines. We are not. We have 7 million men readers. Even a casual perusal of our book will prove it to be involved with the roles of all family members, not just the wives.

In the past few years, we have run an editorial calling for the control of all-terrain vehicles; we have spoken out on the shoddy state of service in this country. We discussed in a very controversial article problems of helping your son face military duty; we ran an eight-part series on pollution (for which, incidentally, we won a University of Missouri J.C. Penney Award). We ran a two-part questionnaire on the state of family life in America, followed with a series of analyses and strong editorials supporting women's rights; an unusual look at divorce; and an examination of materialism. We dealt in a most liberal and anti-censorship way with the problems of pornography and its effects of families; we did a thoughtful series entitled "Where does your food dollar go." We have recently done a very strong antidoomsday series on the future of the single family home in America; we have just completed a five-year follow-up on the Family Questionnaire; and we currently are planning an energy series.

That's not ferreting out corruption in high places, or reviewing the economic policies which brought us to the present state, or publishing the Pentagon Papers, or exposing Mr. Rockefeller's gifts, or Mr. Lance's checking account or even commenting on Wilbur Mills and the Argentina firecracker.

But I submit to you that it is good service journalism, and does not in any way fall into that particular category of pap aimed at fuzzy headed ladies trying to figure out what to do till the husband gets home.

It is time that we in service journalism stop trying to live up to someone's theoretical notion of a classic journalism role, and carved out our own definition of journalism—with its own role, its own demands and disciplines, and indeed its own standard of ethics.

The information explosion has become a cliché, but like a lot of clichés, it's true. It's with us. We are experiencing information future shock, and it has led us into a crisis of believability. Notice I say

The measurement then is one of rewards—whether those rewards be monetary or whether they are simply a matter of power.

Role of the Editor

Carrying that a step farther, let's talk about visibility and the need for it. Let's include involvement and our roles as leaders. We have to speak to, with, and for our readers. We have to be visible in industries about which we report. We often have to be involved and serve in those industries—volunteer work if you want to call it that. If you think it's bad for an editor to participate in industry functions—whether they be “free trips” or on committees, etc.—**I can tell you it is a lot worse to be considered such a minor communications force that you are not even asked to serve or attend.**

If you want to think of it this way, there's a “new journalism” aspect to this, because I'm talking about an activist role within the definition of service journalism. The notion that a journalist's only role is in what he publishes does not apply to service journalism. Of course the direct service of what we do is found on the printed page, and of course any influence or position we may achieve in areas other than the publication itself—be that the travel business, building industry, Agri business, or whatever—derives from our printed pages.

But the role of the contemporary editor goes well beyond that of writer or reporter. The service magazine that simply reports trends to its readers is on the wrong track because we are also in the business of interpreting trends as well as creating them. Our readers place a special trust in *Better Homes and Gardens* and our other magazines. That trust and those reader expectations impose upon us more than the simple requirement to report. They impose upon us the responsibility to guide, lead and advise.

The expanded role of editor in service journalism also includes a sense of the magazine business, its disciplines, its pressures, and the editor's job in that business.

First, start with this simplicity: we are all in commerce. Journalism, almost by definition is a matter of commerce first and literature (if any) second.

As long as I'm kicking journalism schools today, not one of them that I've heard about offers decent courses in the economics of publishing (except for a few weekly newspaper management courses). I know that the traditional job definitions put the business responsibilities in the publisher's lap. This leaves the editor free to study his navel, communicate with his muse and generally be “creative.”

We could count on our fingers the number of magazines that have gone under while their editors indulged in intellectual navel-watching. Their original fact base still around which are ripe for that fate.

The contemporary editor has a sense of **business** of magazine publishing—and here again, his sense of ethics must dictate the way he performs in that role.

Circulation

In a sense, we are all salesmen for the magazine, in that we are creating magazines which hopefully sell themselves. We employ a variety of journalistic techniques that we hope result in readership. We hope further that the material we have provided is judged to be so **necessary** that the reader renews his subscription. The ethical concern, obviously, is to use all the techniques at our command to **sell the reader on paying for the information we provide—without** allowing ourselves to cater to nothing but low-common-denominator subject areas (which of course is what television does). It is a different sort of ethical balance for you: not just to provide the most for the most but to selectively serve every audience segment, no matter how small and seemingly insignificant from a pure hard-nosed business viewpoint.

Publishing

The role of the editor in publishing includes participation with the publisher in basic business decisions involving the cost-quality ratio. The contemporary editor is the custodian of quality. He is concerned that the magazine not reduce quality for the sake of short-term economic gains. That quality is measured in weight of paper, number of color pages, editorial ratios, and other such basic publishing areas. If the publisher also happens to be your boss—which is not our setup but which happens frequently—then your sense of ethics will get a real test as you go up against him and argue for spending what it takes to do the best editorial job for the reader.

Advertising

The editor's role in dealing with the **advertising director**, and by extension, with the advertisers seems to give people a lot of hang-ups. But I believe the contemporary editor must involve himself with the advertising department. He does this both to the benefit of the advertiser and of the reader.

I'm not talking about selling advertising. That's the advertising department's problem, and I **am not** talking about the rather unworthy practice of **pre-selling editorial, or pre-announcing editorial articles.** I am talking about interpreting to the advertising department the editorial rationale for every article you publish. In making this interpretation, you can help the advertising salesman to do a better interpretation job and in the long run, help yourself. The

relationship with the advertising department must be a give-and-take proposition. Furnish them with information, with interpretation, with rationale. On rare occasion, make a call with one of their people, to help out with a particularly tough account. In that case, you simply extend your role as interpreter. Often you would be amazed how much good a simple conversation with the right guy can do for your publication. No give-aways, just a good explanation job.

On the other hand, the editor must again represent the reader against any practices which will not work to the reader's benefit. That includes pre-selling, the disguising of advertising as editorial material, and the acceptance of advertising which you the editor feel does not fit the goals of your magazine.

My attitude about the advertiser in Better Homes and Gardens is that most of them are highly ethical people offering good value in products and services. And they do it in attractive ways. There are a few advertisers—mostly mail order—to which I object vehemently and regularly. And the advertising department knows it. We've eliminated a lot of those products from our advertising columns, and we are still doing it.

Research

I think because our editors **have** established their credentials as business-oriented people, they are able to involve themselves more fully in the total business of our magazines.

And it is all in the name of the readers. Which begs the question: How do we **know** what our readers want? Answer: A combination of scientific research, horseback research, and gut feeling.

There basically are two measurements of reader involvement: research and response.

We do several types of scientific research, using projectable sampling techniques, etc. Perhaps the research with which we garner the most topical information is our cover blurb testing. This technique involves sampling newsstand buyers who are shown various title versions of various articles in a specific issue of the magazine. From this we learn what subjects are of relative high interest and what wordings work best.

We've also experimented with several types of cover research and are now planning some rather extensive testing in which we may even go so far as to split-run separate covers on the same issue of the magazine.

We also do major article pretesting, in which we do mailing pieces to a scientifically selected list of subscribers, asking them their interest reactions to various articles.

As for post-test, we "hitchhike" on the starch studies. Magazine

editors must be very careful about post-testing because the pure high-readership statistics can lead to a low "common denominator" mentality in the selection of articles.

Perhaps our most dramatic research comes in the form of in-the-magazine questionnaires such as Family Questionnaire mentioned earlier (302,000 responses, etc.).

In the category of "horseback research" our staff is very heavily traveled. During one six-month period last year, our Kitchens Editor visited 700 homes, talking with 700 family people. I daresay this is **more direct contact with our basic customer—the reader—than any other consumer product person generally has.** We learn a lot from these visits in our readers' homes; it really keeps our feet on the ground.

In the response category, we frequently publish coupons asking the reader to do something. For instance, we supported Senator Brooke's Young Family Housing Act last fall by asking our readers to send in coupons to **Senator Brooke and to their own Senators** expressing their support of this important piece of legislation. Last week in Washington, Senator Brooke told me that, though only half the Bill was passed, **Better Homes and Gardens was the force which got it through.**

We also sell and give away patterns, sell kits, house plans, etc. Including all of that—plus requests for more information, etc.—we receive over a thousand pieces of mail a day **not including** subscription mail.

I feel strongly about service journalism. The test of how we do our jobs is, how do we represent the reader and for what rewards. if we put the reader first and not ourselves; if we're concerned with the reader's benefit from whatever activity we're involved in; if we are dedicated to the principle that we in service journalism are fulfilling the reader's needs and expectations for a publication which he considers not only necessary but vital in his decision-making and problem-solving process; then we will have succeeded. I honestly believe that.

It sure isn't simple, but if we persevere we will end up doing a lot of good for a lot of people. We may have to let those long-dreamed-of Pulitzer Prizes fly away to the man in the threadbare clothes and rundown shoes, the man who fits a more traditional definition of—journalist.

