

Newsprint

I have this theory about newspapers. If the only paper in town disappeared overnight, few people under 50 would notice. And that's been true since I was a kid, a very long time ago. While it's true I have a theory on just about everything, I base my opinion on a short but successful career in the news business. No, I wasn't a publisher or editor or reporter. Compared to these positions, mine was much more intellectually stimulating and educational, situated where the theoretical met the practical, where the rubber met the road. I was a newspaper boy.

In the 1950's, I trudged the sidewalks and back hallways of Cornhill, witnessing what my customers read and discussed. The dish Mrs. Baldino was cooking for supper and whether young Mrs. Feffer often had a male visitor in the middle of the afternoon were of less interest to me than who was a good tipper. But I was also intrigued by my customers' lack of interest in the column after column of news copy carried in each issue. It seemed odd they would purchase the paper each day and read so little of it. Most of the readers in my part of the city perused the ads and the TV pages and little else. Had I listed the Ten Most Important People In The News, as my customers saw them, Jackie Gleason would have been at the top and President Eisenhower at the bottom. The local mayor and the Common Council would be right down there with Ike, if a customer even cared about local politics.

There were a few real news fans, of course, but they often failed to appreciate that while a free press may be basic to democracy, it is always owned by someone else. Down at the corner on James Street, a group of old men congregated in Pete's barber shop, none of them with enough hair to be very good customers. They were the equivalent of today's Internet Forum. Knowledgeably arguing the issues of the day and complaining about the "goddammed newspaper," they assumed everyone in the entire city was tuned in and debating all of the issues they believed the newspaper buried or portrayed in an unfair light. They appeared unaware that hardly anyone cared but themselves.

But elsewhere there was someone who worried about that lack of a wider public discourse, and one could often see the disappointment written on his face. Ed Wentworth, editor of The Herald at the time, was a

realistic middle aged man. He knew his opinion of journalism as a guarantor of a free society was flimsy. But he believed in its importance and he reported the issues, took time to think out his positions, argued them through the newspaper's chain of command when necessary and generally did a yeoman's job of news reporting and comment.

He was aware, as was the paper's business manager, that most of the readers were more interested in Ralph Cramden and The Honeymooners than in so-called hard news. Outside of Ed's office, the entire Herald organization ... whether they knew it or not ... was aimed at making a profit for the newspaper's owners. From the guys who hustled the 4 foot rolls of newsprint into the cellar below the presses, to the kids hired cheaply out of Journalism School to write what they thought were hard hitting stories about animal shelter funding and traffic stops, the bottom line would be stated in profits earned and dollars saved, not freedoms saved.

Part of Ed's job as editor was to deal with readers like the gentlemen who hung out at Pete's, which Ed thought of as the only barbershop in America with its own foreign policy. Letters to the Editor expressing outrage and implying thousands of angry readers always brought a smile to Ed's face. He knew the real number would be less than a hundred. Charges of being on the side of the enemy in any controversy would cause Ed to stop and wonder which side indeed was the enemy, or even if an enemy existed. The Herald seldom saw enemies or fellow travelers, pinkos, cohorts, deadheads, liberals or conservatives ... only customers. Just folks who handed over a dime for the newspaper.

Ed and his staff liked being newspapermen and women. He realized that to continue to be such, the paper first and foremost had to sell advertising to businesses who wanted to peddle their products to the readers. One look at the ads would tell you everything about the Herald's audience. Few of them were under 50, unless the town had an unusually high number of young people interested dry cleaning and rupture support appliances.

When he thought of it in his low moments, Ed reasoned that while a newspaper was a wonderful dream of democracy, in reality it was also the cheapest entertainment in town. And it didn't take much brains or money to become a valued customer.

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