

Letter from the Editor

This was my first big story, and I was overwhelmed. Too much was happening, too quickly, with too many possible angles to pursue.

It was late one night, perhaps 1 or 2 a.m., and the entire downtown area of Quincy, MA, seemed to be on fire. We were an afternoon newspaper (yes, pre-Internet, pre-24-hour cable TV, there actually were such things, to deliver the latest news to people) and so I was writing for that very day's paper, which would be on the streets by noon, to help people make sense of what had happened to their city.

I was writing, that is, if I could figure out what on earth to write. The list of choices was growing by the minute. There was the law-and-order aspect, with police everywhere trying to maintain control of the hectic scene. There was the economic devastation. There was the human element, with distraught shopkeepers seeing their livelihoods go up in flames. There were the valiant efforts by firefighters to contain the fire. There was the dramatic visual of what was happening to the center of the only city in the country to produce two U.S. presidents.

I breathlessly relayed these and other possible areas of focus to my editor, a no-nonsense city editor with a blue-collar attitude, that night back in the early 1980s. I hoped for some guidance, or at the very least, a few words of encouragement.

He remained silent, as was his wont, as I rambled. The moment I stopped, he barked out, "Just cover the fire." Then he hung up.

I tell you this because I want you to understand something very useful for your purposes, for our purposes, about working journalists. Not the blow-dried types you see reading the news on TV. Not the commentators whose endless pontification far exceeds their knowledge. Not the op-ed columnists or editorial writers for the national newspapers, who answer to no one.

No, rather the working reporters who hustle around the country's cities and towns, armed with their pen and pad, perhaps their microphone or camera, on an assigned story or a search for news. They're trying to gather information, make sense of what's going on around them, develop stories that will resonate with the everyday folks who are their audience.

The elite journalists in the previous paragraph can be described by words such as pompous, self-righteous and opinionated. The folks I'm talking about—the ones you're most likely to deal with—are better characterized as harried, overworked and earnest. They're looking for stories that will impress their editors, get good play, and inform or entertain their readers, listeners or viewers. The best way for that to happen, they know, is to come up with news that no one else has, that has a human dimension, or that counters the conventional wisdom.

On all of these counts, we have lots of what they seek, from the actual financial situation at the USPS to the ways letter carriers improve their communities to the importance of six-day delivery.

The type of reporters I'm talking about—the ones who cover our local communities, where we live and work—don't bite. On the contrary, they'll generally be grateful for tips, for information, even for constructive criticism. They're working folks too, just like us. They have pitifully few contacts in the labor movement, and they know virtually nothing about the Postal Service, other than perhaps the prevailing myths, which we need to dispel.

I've seen such efforts pick up steam recently. Chicago NALC branch officers helped inform several print reporters in the Windy City about issues related to mail delivery, and the result was a thorough story that was far more fair than would otherwise have been the case. I've seen a news website reporter write a misleading story about the Postal Service and then, when given the facts, produce a balanced follow-up that provided the rationale for retaining six-day delivery. I've seen a Georgia newspaper run an op-ed column about the wastefulness of having letter carriers deliver the mail, and then, upon hearing the other side, welcome a piece by President Rolando that gave readers the real picture.

Whether about building relationships with reporters or synthesizing our message, we in the Communications Department stand ready to talk things through with you whenever you think it may be useful.



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