

# Watching the watchdog



**Philip  
Dine**

**Y**ou won't hear this in the news, so I'll tell you: These are not the best of times for the media.

There has been a lot of slipshod journalism in recent months; actually, in recent years. Mistakes. Careless writing. Punditry supplanting reporting. A lack of context. Bias. Retracted stories. Tumbling credibility ratings.

As I see it, several factors contribute to the media woes. Among them:

Financial constraints, caused by falling advertising/circulation revenue as competing sites open up, thanks largely to the internet. That leads to staffing cuts in key areas such as copyeditors, who check news stories for factual errors and lack of balance. It also leaves journalists with

less time to devote to a task before moving on to the next.

Reduced expertise, as outlets lose the luxury of having beat reporters who develop depth and contacts by focusing on specific topics; nowadays most are general assignment reporters with only passing knowledge of the many issues they cover.

A rush to post or air stories as the imperative to 'be right' shifts to 'be first' in the 24/7 news cycle era, exacerbated by the impact of social media. What's often sacrificed is the due diligence of checking facts, doing more research, talking to additional sources.

Politicization of the media, with many news organizations seemingly more intent on advancing their views than on presenting all sides of an issue. Separate but related, the expanding role of analysts and commentators who sit and opine, at the expense of reporters who knock on doors and dig up facts.

## So how does this affect us?

In one sense, it doesn't change what we do. It remains vital to our future that you continue to get your voice out there through commentary pieces or interviews, and that you urge local media outlets to cover the food drive or carriers' heroic actions on the route. By doing so, you're changing the national conversation about the Postal Service.

That said, media errors or omissions amplify the need for vigilance. As more of you inform us of misleading or unfair coverage, it not only allows us to set the record straight, it helps us educate journalists, meaning better coverage moving forward.

Here's a case exemplifying both themes—media misuses and letter carrier vigilance. In a recent weekly business column, a New York newspaper addressed the matter of letter carrier lunches, specifically whether carriers have to remain in their vehicles to guard the mail and so should be paid for their lunch break, before using the issue to dis-

cuss work rules for everyone.

Let's just say that the column contained nearly every conceivable error—and then some—regarding the length of the lunch, carrier lunchtime responsibilities regarding the mail, whether USPS pays for the lunch period, how all that affects overtime pay, whether carriers have to discuss the matter with their employer or their union representatives, and more.

Walter Barton, president of Long Island Merged Branch 6000, notified Headquarters immediately, adding that he and his officers were receiving calls and emails from letter carriers who, understandably, found the column confusing.

Armed by President Rolando with relevant facts, we called the columnist, who agreed to run our set-the-record-straight statement the next week. Unfortunately, not only did several attempted clarifications by the paper just produce more confusion while blaming postal employees for the situation, she also referred to us as "nonrural letter carriers." I explained that this was akin to calling a daily newspaper reporter a non-magazine reporter. Eventually, the newspaper's business editor was alerted and cleaned up the mess.

The takeaway: Had Barton not reached out, the 10,000 postal employees in the paper's circulation area would have been left confused, and the area's 8 million residents would have been left with an unflattering depiction of postal employees and USPS.

**I'll close with a follow-up to an episode mentioned in last month's column, where Nancy and Bob Henrichs of Belleville, IL Branch 155 alerted Region 3 Regional Administrative Assistant Bill Jackson to a misleading letter in the local newspaper. Jackson notified us, which led to a rebuttal from President Rolando.**

As it turns out, Jackson had previously spoken about the importance of getting the message out—including by responding to newspaper articles—at a Belleville branch training attended by the couple. So, when they read the initial letter, they quickly scanned it and sent it to Jackson. In short order, Illinoisans were reading accurate information on postal finances.

Great letter carrier teamwork, and an illustration of how getting the word around internally helps get it out externally.

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