

SJR**Charles L. Klotzer**

The failure in crediting sources creates doubts with the news consumer. Therefore, it is always preferable if journalists can find other sources that are willing to be identified.

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In the last issue, SJR published a letter to the editor with the author's name withheld on request. In the letter he made references—not derogatory at all—to other persons, including St. Louis media icon Martin Duggan. Mr. Duggan had no comment about the content of the letter, but wondered whether SJR should publish unsigned letters.

That is an excellent question. It also triggered memories of the early years of the St. Louis Journalism Review, when its writers, advisors and supporters worked for the local media. At the time, it was the early '70s. It was decided by the 13-member SJR editorial board, primarily including reporters from the St. Louis Globe-Democrat and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch not to use the names of any writer.

The reason was obvious: job security. Editors did not look kindly on this upstart that would second-guess their work. "How dare you bite the hand that feeds you?" was a challenge reporters faced not only in St. Louis, but throughout the country at similar media reviews. (For a few years nearly 30 journalism reviews erupted in many cities. By the end of the '70s they all folded, making SJR the only survivor.)

No, the writers were not happy with this policy, but they decided that the imperative of informing the public of suppressed news or not publishing it for fear of editorial retribution left them no choice.

Were there suppressed news? You, bet. The first issue revealed that a Pulitzer Prize winner, Al Delugach, quit the Post because it ignored or dismissed the revelations of ties between organized crime and then-Mayor A. J. Cervantes. SJR revealed for the first time of the profit splitting between the Globe and the Post, which even editors of the Post did not know about. SJR wrote about government attempts to obtain media files and notes under then-Attorney General John Mitchell. As a result, the Post resolved to destroy unpublished negatives of news events a week after the pictures have been taken, while the Globe willingly gave its evidence to a grand jury. Printers in this region refused to publish alternative, controversial newspapers critical of administration policies. The listing can go on and on.

Nevertheless, after a few years, when

Always better to source news—if possible

the local editors began to accept that SJR would not fade and as "protectors of the First Amendment," they reluctantly granted that the function of SJR may have some merit.

Publisher Joseph Pulitzer Jr. from time to time invited editors and some reporters to his home, I am told, to discuss policies at the paper. On at least one occasion, he queried his guests, "Anyone from the St. Louis Journalism Review here?" Three raised their hands. He smiled and continued with the agenda.

The Post even permitted its reporters to write for SJR, as long as it would not report on matters that should first appear in the Post. The Globe was not as charitable. Some Globe reporters, who actually resigned from SJR, were continually harassed whether they were the source of information that SJR published about the Globe. Later, these policies changed and free-lancing for reporters at the dailies became a taboo activity. The late Post editor Dave Lipman told me repeatedly after his retirement that he did not understand the Post's policy of restricting its reporters from free-lancing under some guidelines.

In summary, circumstances may force reporters to withhold the source of information they assemble. Just open any newspaper nearly every day, many reports note that the source was not an official spokesperson, that government sources provided the news only as background information, that citing the principals would endanger them or relatives, that developments were still under investigation, etc. etc.

Yet, the failure in crediting sources creates doubts with the news consumer. Therefore, it is always preferable if journalists can find other sources that are willing to be identified.

Should SJR have published the letter withholding the name of the writer? Probably, not. Indeed, the letter was originally sent with the clear instructions that this was not a letter to the editor. It was so interesting that SJR decided to contact the writer to ask the party to reverse this decision. Reluctantly, the writer agreed that the letter could be published with the note "Name withheld on request."

Well, it won't happen again, at least in regard to letters. Other situations will have to be examined case by case. ■