

Nov. 20, 1989

A 'NIGHTMARISH QUEST'

Are two Free Press staff members being made scapegoats in their superiors' game of ethical hopscotch?

On Nov. 11, executive editor Heath Meriwether delivered his Sunday homily a day early, thus avoiding the embarrassment of seeing his paper beaten by the News on a controversy that originated in Meriwether's own news room.

Meriwether's column loftily spoke of ethical transgressions by a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer and a staff reporter during the Free Press' crack cocaine project.

The Free Press seemed poised to enter the project in numerous journalism contests. But now, according to Meriwether, dreams of a Pulitzer are gone because two staffers violated a bond of trust between the paper and its readers.

Meriwether said the photographer, Manny Crisostomo, had been suspended for three days without pay for buying sausage for \$3 and a Sony Walkman for \$20 from a cocaine addict named Tim. The reporter, Pat Chargot, was suspended for two days without pay.

Tim allowed the staffers to photograph and report his behavior while smoking the drug he bought with the money.

So what went wrong?

In his Nov. 11 column, Meriwether explains. "The section . . . was designed to document the terrible toll that crack and other drugs exact from our community in a single 24-hour period."

Again from that column: Crisostomo and Chargot "got close enough to a crack cocaine addict named Tim to chronicle his nightmarish quest for the drug."

But were editors aware of or involved in anything Manny and Pat were doing that went beyond documenting and chronicling Tim's cocaine dependency?

According to Meriwether, a week before the project began, Crisostomo and Chargot had met shaggy-haired Tim at a Hamtramck bar. To help establish some rapport, Crisostomo had bought some bratwurst from Tim for \$3.

Editors knew before the project began that Manny bought food and booze for Tim. That was OK. Also, Meriwether says editors approved Manny driving Tim and friends to crack houses.

Did editors encourage, perhaps even instruct, the two staffers to find a crack addict and prime him for a night of binging?

Here is Meriwether's justification for chauffeuring Tim and friends to crack houses: "We felt Tim and his friends were
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TALKING TURKEY

The two largest U.S. newspaper chains are anxious to launch their \$100-million-a-year monopoly in the fifth largest newspaper market in the country.

Their employees are being paid much, much less than newspaper workers in other parts of the country.

The companies are counting on our sense of impatience and frustration to convince us to take a two-week start-up bonus as a bribe to try to get us to trim our demands for fair and just compensation.

Management is sitting down, ready to carve up a fat turkey. Will we be content with a few bones?

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going to the crack houses anyway, whether on foot or in someone else's car. Our staffers were really just along for the ride, and driving enabled us to retain control of the situation should personal safety become an issue."

But staffers were not just along for the ride. They provided the ride. How did editors know that these guys would have gone to a crack house if the Free Press hadn't arranged it? Giving them a ride was orchestrating the news.

If the pair would have gotten to a crack house themselves, wouldn't they have found the money eventually, as well?

Crisostomo "should not have made it possible for the three to buy crack," Meriwether wrote. Yet Free Press editors thought it was OK to take Tim to crack houses, which also made it possible for Tim and his friends to buy crack.

The story made two references to Tim on wheels:

"4:41 p.m.: Riding in a car northbound on Jos. Campau, Tim sees a friend, Jeff, on the street."

"5:21 p.m.: As he pulls away from Dave's house, Tim says . . ."

There is no indication that a Free Press employee was driving. The second entry implies that Tim is behind the wheel. This information was omitted from the story.

Isn't that as misleading to readers as omitting mention of the purchases?

Editors, according to Meriwether, approved the ride-share. But were editors called on the carpet for this supposed ethics violation?

And just which ethical standards did the two staffers violate?

Heath never cited the exact transgressions, nor the source of the charges.

Heath alleged in his column that

the staffers misled readers, misled editors, paid for the news and influenced the news.

There are two potential sources for Heath's indictment -- the Newspaper Guild contract section on "Professional Integrity" and a document titled "Free Press Ethics Guidelines."

Since the guidelines are not part of the contract, can Guild members be disciplined for violating them?

The contract's "Professional Integrity" section says, "No person employed by the Free Press shall, for any reason, prepare for publication material which is inaccurate, misleading or false." It says nothing about misleading editors, paying for news or influencing news.

The "Ethical Guidelines" say nothing about lying to editors or influencing news.

The guidelines mention "paying for news," but that prohibition is qualified: "We generally avoid paying for information. Exceptions must be approved in advance by a managing editor."

So, we only "generally" don't buy news, and then only if approved by a managing editor.

Compare this wishy-washy statement to the absolutism of Heath's column: "We don't pay for stories and we don't do things that make it appear we're buying information -- not ever."

So the real problem is not that we bought anything, but that a managing editor didn't approve it in advance.

What if the staffers had refused to buy the Walkman, had come back to the office and said they couldn't get the story? Would their editors have congratulated them for upholding the ethics guidelines?

No.

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It was OK for Crisostomo to use his car to drive Tim to a crack house so he could buy crack in violation of state and federal law, because editors had approved. But it was not OK to provide Tim with money to buy the crack, in violation of state and federal law. "We don't help people buy drugs or otherwise break the law," Heath wrote.

But we do drive a crack addict around the city so that he can get high and we can get an award-winning story.

If we're waging a crack crusade, could we have served Tim and his neighbors better by getting him professional help to kick his habit?

What would the Free Press have done if the staffers had gotten busted for possession of cocaine while driving Tim and his friends? Would the Free Press have argued in court that it was legal because the editors had approved? What would the executive editor had written then?

Ethics, indeed. It's more like hopscotch from hell. The big shooters cast the stones and then sit back as we jump from box to box. Who will stumble next?

CLARK CLIFFORD'S DIARY

Dear Diary:

Whew!

We did it. All the blood, sweat and legal fees were worth it.

Alvah turned to me in his darkest hour. He feared for the JOA. He feared for his legacy. If this JOA were killed, he imagined future corporate executives without recourse when they felt a JOA in their market, er, city could better serve democracy by maintaining two distinct editorial voices.

You've got to love that Alvah. Then there is Dave Lawrence.

You've got to love that man. At first, he struck me as a bit of a Babbitt the way he toadied up to Detroit's movers. But hell, even that crazy mayor got on board after Dave was through with him.

How about those Free Press employees, God bless 'em?

They gave up raises, perks and out-of-town trips for the JOA. They busted their butts. They put their lives on hold. I said to Alvah: "We've got to do something for these kids."

"How about a raise?" I suggested. "Parking allowance? Free day care? More vacation?"

But that Alvah, God bless him, he's a realist.

"Clark," he said, "We can't just reward our employees. We've got to do the right thing. This is free enterprise, don't forget. We've got to let the market determine what they get."

You've got to love that Alvah.

NEW FREE PRESS CODE OF ETHICS

1. We never pay for stories. That is absolutely wrong, unless we are submitting the piece for a Pulitzer Prize nomination.
2. We do pay gas for certain sources, but not mileage.
3. Employees, spouses, children and their acquaintances shall not engage in any political activity, contribute to any political party or organization, display any lawn sign or bumper sticker, or watch the dwelling of any political candidate, unless their editor approves in advance.
4. We do not allow interview subjects to approve the wording of news stories about them in advance, unless they have attained the rank of publisher or aspire to that rank.
5. Employees are forbidden from selling their Free Press key chains.

ASK MS. MONOPOLY
Q&A on the JOA

INTERCEPTED MEMO

Aug. 11, 1982

The companies have promised a two-week bonus if the JOA is implemented "without disruption." How much does that amount to spread over three years?

Less than 10 bucks a week, for most of us.

Most analysts predict profits of \$100 million a year within 5 years. Does that mean I'll eventually get my own ATEX terminal?

No, in fact you'll be sharing your terminal with more fellow workers but you'll be eligible for weekly cash prizes if you answer the phones politely.

The News now publishes an astrology column which gives you tomorrow's horoscope. The Free Press gives you today's. What will happen in the combined editions on Saturday and Sunday?

Cancer, Capricorn, Libra and Sagittarius readers will get their horoscopes for the weekend on Fridays. Aquarius, Pisces, Virgo and Gemini will get their Sunday horoscopes on Saturday and their Saturday horoscopes on Sunday. Taurus, Scorpio, Leo, and Arics will be lucky in January, and may receive a serious proposal in April.

What about the comics?

Unfortunately, Alvah and Al retired, so you won't be getting them. In their place, though, will be a new comic, "Billy the K and his Brother Go Banking."

What does the JOA mean for the future of the Lafayette Bowl?

The game will continue as before during the first half, but during the second half the two teams will combine and split the beer 50-50.

TO: The Staff

FROM: [REDACTED]

You did it once again!

Our coverage of the Lions' second straight preseason victory was a real touchdown, from the eye-catching scoreboard graphic across the top of 1A to the pix page on the tailgate parties in the Silverdome parking lot to Mitch Albom's revealing Page 1 column on Bo Schembechler's latest affair.

All of you once again proved we can beat the pants off the folks down the street, whose dull reporting on the Democratic Convention at Cobo was a bleak contrast to our peppy, go-get-em silver-and-blue blitz.

Today's paper is yet another reminder of what class and character means when you have to produce greatness on deadline.

I'm proud that, despite the tough times here recently with the profit margin downturn and those few unfortunate layoffs, all two dozen of you showed once again that it's team spirit, not numbers, that wins the day.

Go Lions! Go Free Press!

[REDACTED]

BIG PLANS

The Downward Spiral has filed an application with the Detroit City Council for a 10-year tax abatement on its new riverfront printing facilities, which will bring many needed jobs to the area.

Editors can be reached at the Jack Miner Bird Sanctuary or the Anchor Bar.