INTRODUCTION

Filling a Black Hole

Declining readership, daunting Internet challenges, and flagging profitability get most of the blame for what ails today's American newspaper business. Some lovers of the print medium, though, see another affliction within the fifteen hundred dailies that survived the last century's industry consolidation. These readers lament the steady rise in numbers of what people commonly call "once-great newspapers."

A sickness of the soul—and a bit of amnesia about the newspaper's societal role—underlies that phenomenon. Pleading poverty, but acting with editorial timidity, some publishers forgo devoting precious resources to public-service projects, confronting serious community plagues, or even pursuing basic reader concerns through daily beat coverage. Such work cannot be done with papers on life-support, managements may argue. When budgets are cut, though, these same publications often target the senior journalists most able to do meaningful and inspirational work, worsening the crisis.

Greatness survives, and even thrives, in hundreds of newspaper oases around the country, of course. That's why competition still heats up early each year for journalism's Pulitzer Prizes, especially the most coveted prize of all: the Public Service Gold Medal.

What kind of work attains the rarefied distinction of Pulitzer Gold Medal winner? Journalism that reveals an unacceptably high number of police shootings of civilians and helps reverse the trend, as a *Washington Post* team did to earn the honor in 1999. Or that blows the whistle on racism infecting a federal agency, as Portland's *Oregonian,* the 2001 winner, did in its investigation of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Journalists may be honored for opening our eyes to a scan-

dal involving Catholic priests who were sexual predators and the Church's equally shocking cover-up—the *Boston Globe*'s claim to the 2003 prize. Or for employing every ounce of a battered newspaper's strength to help communities recover from a hurricane, as was the case with the *Sun Herald* in Gulfport, Mississippi, and the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans during the devastating 2005 summer of Katrina. The *New York Times* earned a 2002 prize for creating "A Nation Challenged," a daily section that included "Portraits of Grief," which gave New Yorkers tools for coping with the September 11 attacks and their aftermath.

The dramatic contributions to the public welfare continued with the 2007 Gold Medal, awarded to the *Wall Street Journal* for disclosing how companies had secretly and improperly backdated the stock-purchase options they had granted to their executives. The *Journal*'s team of four reporters—one of them a recent Yale University math major—developed its own algorithm to measure the most egregious cases. In the scandal's wake, at least seventy executives lost their jobs and the federal government launched investigations at more than 140 companies.

This kind of public service may pay off in higher newsstand sales or additional advertising dollars. Or it may not. Sometimes the business side actually suffers from outstanding journalism, at least in the short term. The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* won its 1985 Gold Medal for investigating a design flaw that led to a slew of fatal Bell Helicopter crashes—coverage that sparked Bell, the area's largest employer, to boycott the paper. For Little Rock's *Arkansas Gazette,* balanced coverage of school integration won it the Public Service Pulitzer in 1958, but cost it dearly in readers. And in the case of Ohio's *Canton Daily News,* honored in 1927, exposure of politically connected local thugs led first to the editor's murder and then the paper's closure.

If today's reporters and editors don't know much about these important moments in U.S. journalism history, it is perhaps symptomatic of the industry's spiritual ailment.

Bill Blundell, who travels from paper to paper as one of the country's top writing coaches, sees the malady as "a black hole that exists at the heart of our business: the nearly universal failure of newspaper staffs to learn from the past, including the past of the very newspapers they may be working for at the moment." The hole is especially gaping in the case of public service, where so little work has been done to expose today's journalists to the best projects that have been done in that field.

Why hasn't a book on Pulitzer Gold Medal winners been written before? After all, Pulitzer-winning photography, feature writing, editorials, and cartoons all have their own books. For one thing, newspapers earning the Public Service Prize often

emphasize the team elements involved. That is noble, and may accurately reflect the nature of many projects. But team studies can be complex, and may not be easily understood by readers. Not surprisingly, the inner workings of newspapers—*All the President's Men* notwithstanding—stir less and less interest in this day of glitzier media.

Further, with the Public Service award especially, the event being *covered* gets the attention—not the distinguished journalism associated with that event. While books have been written studying the Catholic priest scandal from all sides, little until now has been written about the reporting that brought it to our attention. Four papers over the past fifteen years won Pulitzer Gold Medals for how they covered storms, yet the storms themselves are what attract the nonfiction writer. That is as it should be, for the most part. But unfortunately, it cheats journalists out of their own history.

The best-known exception also is the best-known Pulitzer Public Service winner: the *Washington Post* Watergate coverage that made celebrities of Carl Bernstein, Bob Woodward, and Ben Bradlee. Bernstein and Woodward's book *All the President's Men*—and, of course, the movie based on the book—served journalism just as powerfully as their reporting served the nation.

My book is intended for journalists and students seeking to learn about great newspaper work of the recent and less-recent past. I hope that American history buffs, curious about the interplay of press and society, find value in it as well.

Where possible, *Pulitzer's Gold* attempts to capture the "Aha!" as reporters and editors discovered that some seemingly routine assignment was becoming the story of a lifetime. For many readers, that will be the most interesting element of these case studies.

Like most obsessions, this project began as a labor of love, and started small. On September 9, 2002, the hundredth anniversary of my father's birth, I presented a program about the Public Service Prizes won by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch.* My father, a career news reporter, had won a Public Service Prize for the paper in 1950, and had helped it win three others between 1937 and 1948. When the *Post-Dispatch* won yet again in 1952, it became the only paper at that time to own five Gold Medals. Yet the St. Louis journalists at my presentation, from the editor on down, knew nothing of that distinction, of what the paper had done to earn those five great honors, or of the reporters, editors, and publisher responsible.

In doing the research for that presentation, I discovered how little had been written about Public Service award winners as a genre. The deeper I dug, the more I was moved by these often overlooked stories that demonstrated how basic jour-

nalism practices, even reporting and newsroom management techniques, remained the same over the years—despite technological evolution and ever-deepening newsroom economic pressures.

Of the ninety-two Gold Medals awarded through 2006, *Pulitzer's Gold* examines the latest dozen in detail. Other cases were chosen because they are not only terrific stories but also fine illustrations of how Pulitzer Prize–winning work has evolved over the years, displaying a variety of topics and reporting styles. The appendix contains briefer chronological accounts of the remaining Public Service winners.

What will become of newspaper journalism through the current period of turmoil? Former *Los Angeles Times* editor John Carroll raises dire warnings. Shortly after his *Times* won the 2005 Public Service Pulitzer for exposing problems at a large public hospital, he left the paper in a dispute with its Tribune Company owners in Chicago.

In April 2006, from his post at Harvard's Jane Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Carroll was asking tough questions of journalists. In a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors titled "Last Call at the ASNE Saloon," he challenged editors to imagine a "newspaper-free" America. If the police decide to beat confessions out of suspects in such a country, he asked, "who will sound the alarm, as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* did?" when it won the 1978 Pulitzer Gold Medal. "More routinely, who will make the checks at City Hall? Who, in cities and towns across America, will go down to the courthouse every day, or to the police station? Who will inspect the tens of thousands of politicians who seek to govern?" More broadly, he asks, "How long has it been since an editor was so rash as to cite public service in justifying a budget? You might as well ask to be branded with a scarlet N, for naïve."

But when the Pulitzers are announced in April, journalists across America still will stop a moment, as they do every year, to reflect on what their profession has done—and on what they and their papers might do to join the ranks of Pulitzer winners.

As we search for new models to allow the newspaper business to thrive again, both financially and journalistically, the hope is that the cases presented here will recall the irreplaceable role of the press in American democracy. Whatever models emerge, public service should be at their center.

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