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Dead deer and Miss Mary: Lessons in readership from Hannibal

BY RANDY CRAIG | EDITOR

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The headline caught my eye. "We don't do dead deer."

I was reading the Missouri Press News from October. The headline, topping a story reprinted from the **Hannibal (Mo.) Courier-Post** (<http://www.hannibal.net/>), referred to the newspaper practice of running photos of hunters who bagged an impressive buck, so to speak. The "dead deer" line was in a list compiled by 30-year Courier-Post veteran **Mary Lou Montgomery**, the 8,500-circulation daily's editor. Also in the list:

- We stopped inviting pictures of the first mushroom finds of the year.
- We stopped taking pictures of the pee-wee league ball players.
- We stopped printing happy birthday pictures of children.

Each item was something the newspaper had stopped doing over the course of her career in the name of "journalistic standards."

The list and its accompanying column was not originally for publication, but Publisher John Whitaker saw it and insisted it appear on the front page. So the column ran on July 26, 2006. That began the Courier-Post's transformation back to a reader's newspaper.

"And until it got cold, people literally chased me down the street to say things like 'I feel like I got my paper back' and '**It's fun to read it again,**'" Montgomery said.

The Courier-Post and Montgomery have come full circle after years of growing more distant from readers.

When she started at the Courier-Post, Montgomery enthusiastically gathered news of chicken dinners and snapped photos of newly elected club officers.

Then she got caught up in management and lost sight of what readers wanted. She traced this transformation from gatherer of community news to a "journalist's journalist" to a page design workshop she attended in 1981. A journalism professor offered condescending reviews of her amateurish design, she said. Following the professor's lead, the other editors at the workshop laughed.

After this humiliation, she and her colleagues gradually redefined news, attempting to please contest judges and other journalists. Loyal readers, meanwhile, felt shunned and lost interest.

She looks back at the experience now and sees her instincts were right. In the past 20 years, newspaper managers have trapped themselves in offices "looking at computer screens and drawing rectangles" instead of being out among readers, she said.

She feels somewhat vindicated that her brand of news from 30 years ago is touted by many as one solution to newspapers' woes. She gathers hyper-local content with the same enthusiasm she did when she first started at the paper. Every day, Montgomery arms herself with a digital camera and takes a picture of people doing ordinary things, just to get more faces and names in the paper.

Serving as a catalyst for the transformation back to a reader-focused paper was **Mary Frances Carter**, who Montgomery described as the greatest thing to ever happen in her journalism career.

The story of "Miss Mary" came about after a woman from one of the community's black churches had a small request. She was compiling audio histories of the church's elders and one holdout, 103-year-old Miss Mary, refused to participate unless her oral history appeared in the newspaper. Montgomery granted the woman's request, but set no firm date for publication. She also lent the woman her tape recorder.

Weeks passed. Miss Mary's oral history had not been transcribed, so her story had not been published. Montgomery was home sick and decided she had nothing better to do than transcribe the interview. She was shocked by what was on the tape. It was the most beautiful

prose she had ever heard.

Miss Mary told her story in her own vernacular, complete with both sweetness and profanity. She loved "**Jesus, beer and fried chicken, in that order.**" She described walking five miles a day to clean a white woman's house for 50 cents. Her sage advice for today's women: "...listen, honey, people is tricky."

Miss Mary's story ran in the Martin Luther King Day edition of the Courier-Post last year. Then Montgomery caught hell.

For the record, Miss Mary loved the story. But the church people were irate. They felt the story made Miss Mary look uneducated. Strangely, Montgomery was under fire for not whitewashing the story, an act for which newspapers are often criticized.

"I told the truth. We whitewash everything we do. For once in my journalistic career, I told the truth," Montgomery said.

To palliate the group, she agreed to meet with them at the church. She walked right into the crossfire with the only armor she had-her willingness to listen. For 90 minutes she sat with church members who vented anger at the story as well as things that happened as many as 50 years earlier. In the end, though, she had names and addresses of people who pledged to help her make it better.

"For the first time I listened and didn't say 'I know what's best for our readers. I don't! I'm not in their skin,'" she said.

To ensure the paper remains reader-centric, Montgomery measures three things every day:

- The number of local faces that appear in the paper.
- The percentage of local headlines (must be at least 2 to 1).
- Daily single-copy sales.

Her premise is simple. People will buy the paper if their picture is in it. "And if it's fun, maybe they'll buy it again," she said.

A fall wedding inspired further reader-centric changes at the Courier-Post. The mother of the bride bought space in the paper to print the wedding story the way they wanted to see it, complete with details such as the type of wedding gown and the attendants' names.

Minute wedding details used to be common in newspaper pages, Montgomery said. What changed were the standards newspapers were willing to live by. What changed was that journalists began trying to please other journalists rather than their readers, she said. One by one, newspapers dropped details that lent personality to wedding stories until all that was left was a sterile "announcement."

So Montgomery changed things. Now, one staffer is in charge of **wedding stories**. Brides are encouraged to be creative with the information they supply for publication. All fees associated with wedding announcements have been dropped for the time being.

"We can't be CNN. We can't be USA Today. But we can be the very best at reflecting the personality of this town," Montgomery said.

Her original and long-repressed instincts serve her well now. She admitted that some journalists are probably still laughing at her, just as they did in 1981. But she's selling papers. In March, Courier-Post circulation was down 600 from the year before. By December, the paper had gained back 500.

"I've got 10 years left in my journalism career and I am going to spend every day of the next 10 years putting the community back in the newspaper, putting people back in the newspaper," she said. "I am absolutely, positively committed to this. Every newsroom in the country needs to hear this. Every day you have to make a conscious effort to get out of your cozy little chair and present yourself to the community." u

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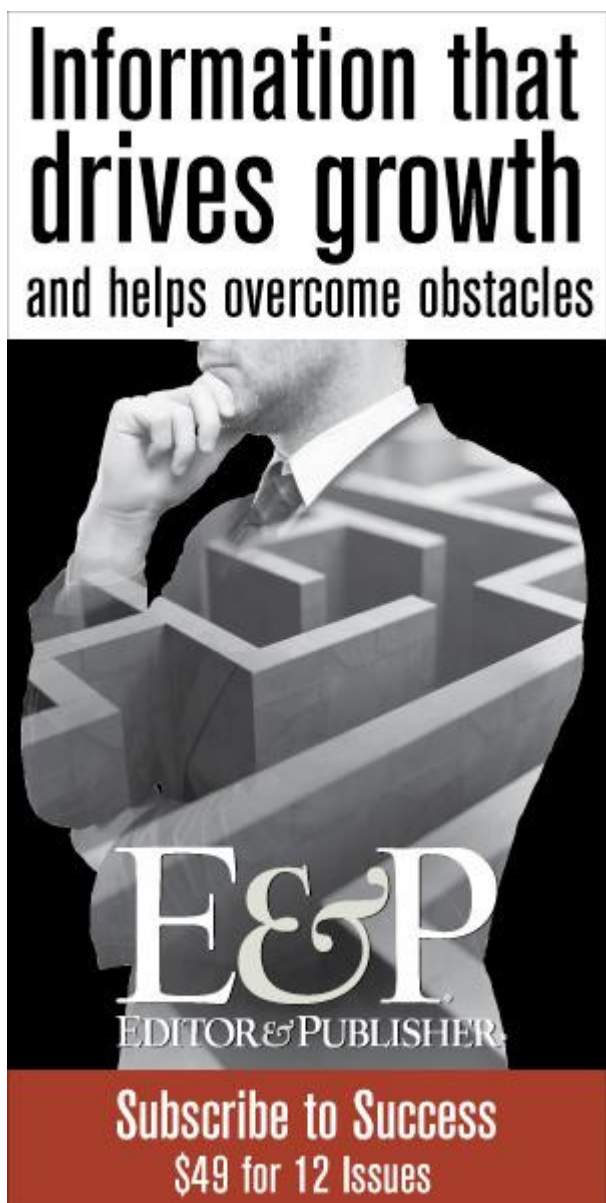
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