

May 29, 2007

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Wendy McCaw
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Dear Ms. McCaw:

Your diatribe about me in the Sunday *News-Press* has been brought to my attention. What an amazing compendium of falsehoods and innuendos! But the piece served the purpose of highlighting our different views of a newspaper's responsibility. I believe a newspaper is a public trust. You apparently regard a newspaper as a plaything to serve the personal purposes of an owner unconstrained by journalistic ethics or human decency.

As various inquiries have determined, you violated ethical standards of journalism by suppressing news stories and reprimanding reporters for doing their jobs. In so doing you provoked a series of courageous resignations by persons who risked their livelihoods in the name of ethical journalism. Considering your track record, for you to lecture me on journalistic ethics is a bit like Willy Sutton instructing someone on bank management. I have spent my life in journalism, working for several California newspapers and twenty-six years for *The Washington Post*, and am highly regarded for my professionalism. I have won numerous awards and written eight books, including acclaimed biographies of Ronald Reagan and a social history of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. My reputation has been earned, not inherited or won in a legal settlement. I am not beholden to any party, government, sect, faction, corporation, union, nor to anyone, like yourself, who believes that your wealth entitles you to harass, smear, and intimidate honest people.

There are too many absurdities in your Sunday column to respond to all of them. But let's set the record straight on a few points. The first is your pretense at being concerned by child pornography and the implication that I somehow condone it. I am much more concerned about this problem than you are, being a father of four, a grandfather of six, and a great-grandfather, as well. Child pornography is EVIL, and we need to combat it. What have you done? Most people would say that one combats child pornography by getting the police to investigate any evidence of it and the district attorney to prosecute. Are you really trying to retrieve from the police a computer with images of child pornography? Why would you do that? Do you know more than the police? Those of us who are truly concerned about child pornography find this very strange behavior.

Another point that requires response is your COMPLETELY FALSE and ludicrous statement that I have not attempted to talk to you. I have been trying to talk to you for six years! Let's look at the record:

After the attack on our country of September 11, 2001, your city editor asked me to meet with *News-Press* staff members to discuss the problems of journalism in times of national crisis. I spoke and answered questions in a room at the *News-Press* building. It was announced that you were invited to the meeting and were expected to attend. But you never showed up. This was disappointing, for I was looking forward to meeting you.

After Jerry Roberts and the other ethical journalists resigned because you had suppressed stories that a reputable newspaper would have published, I telephoned you. You didn't return the call. Then, on July 10, 2006, I sent a letter to you and to Travis Armstrong canceling my subscription and giving the reasons. There was no acknowledgment. When it became evident that you were not going to publish my letter, I made it available to the *Independent*, which ran it. Are you afraid to expose your readers to the views of those who disagree with you? What is your explanation for your editorial policy of keeping most critical letters out of the *News-Press*?

Still, after all that had happened, I harbored the hope that you had the interests of the community at heart. How naïve that seems now. But on August 27, 2006, I wrote a letter—signed also by the respected journalist Sander Vanocour, two community activists and two members of the local clergy—in an attempt to avert the mass union campaign against the *News-Press*. The letter asked for a meeting to “get beyond the confrontation and the name-calling” and to “explore any and all alternatives to this damaging and seemingly endless confrontation.” It was hand-delivered to the *News-Press* by Harriett Phillips, one of the signers. You did not extend us the courtesy of a reply. I was told later that many community leaders had attempted to meet with you and had received the same treatment. So please withdraw your contemptible statement that no effort was made to get your side of the story.

Ms. McCaw, journalistic ethics are not derived from polling readers. They have evolved over time—I wrote a chapter in a book about it, if you are interested in the history—and are not particularly mysterious. They involve basic procedures of fairness and integrity and are embodied in a code written by the Society of Professional Journalists, which found you had failed these standards in the case of Mr. Roberts and the others who resigned. Those of us who are journalists try, however imperfectly, to follow these standards. I know of no newspaper owner other than you who disavows them.

Let me conclude with some questions:

Why do you surround “journalism” with quotation marks? If you owned a restaurant, would you use “food” in quotation marks?

Do you really believe you can silence your critics by attacking and trying to intimidate them? Ms. McCaw, the truth has greater force than all your millions. During my fifty

years as a journalist, which includes covering the fall of President Nixon, I have seen many rich and powerful people who have been held accountable for ethical lapses.

When do you plan to tell advertisers and your dwindling readership that the *News-Press* lost nine and a half percent of its subscribers this past year, in percentage terms more than any other paper in the region? The *Los Angeles Times* reported this information (and its own circulation decline, as ethical newspapers do). How many readers do you expect to have a year from now?

Will you meet with community leaders who are outraged by your inaccessibility, the paper's lapsed ethical standards, and its diminished local news coverage? Ms. McCaw, the hour is late but not too late. If you changed course, treated employees fairly, and observed the basic ethical standards of journalism, I'm sure the community would forgive you—I know I would--and your fellow publishers would no longer shun you. It is in your interest to behave responsibly.

Since you were upset that the *Los Angeles Times* didn't publish your reply to my column, I'm sure you will want to print this letter in full in the *News-Press*. That would be a valid demonstration of journalistic ethics.

Sincerely,

Lou Cannon