

Gilbert Bouchard
MEDIA WATCH

by Gilbert Bouchard

Bylines on articles: most people don't even notice them and when they do, the names usually mean nothing to them.

In many cases, editors, aware of reader disinterest, are tempted to run stories sans attribution, especially if the content seems to warrant it.

Sometimes the copy is just too trivial (a rewritten press release or a four paragraph piece about parking stalls) or a reporter may have so much copy in a particular issue that the editor may feel an inundation of the same byline will dilute the overall impact of the issue.

To some extent, both excuses are valid. Who cares who wrote the three paragraph story on Central Zaire's crop failures on page 46. Reading both the Journal and the Sun reminds one of just how much copy is generated by a small group of writers, but can you blame them for not wanting to give the illusion of greater variety in their writing pool?

What concerns me is just how much anonymity we should allow our journalists the freedom to hide behind.

Sure, modesty and practicality are the primary reasons behind the lack of bylines in most cases, but lurking in the background is a certain amount of laziness and sloppiness. For example, that so-called insignificant story with no byline: was it really not much of a story or did it become insignificant because a writer failed to do the proper research to flesh it out? The same goes for the rewritten press release: was it rewritten because it didn't call for more of a story or was it because the author didn't feel like making that extra phone call?

Those insignificant stories and rewritten press releases therefore represent editorial decisions and even writer laziness and for that reason whoever is responsible should own up.

The temptation is always there for the writer to drop the byline on the story that is less than impressive, and before you know it the writer starts to rely on it. Caught by deadlines and pressure to produce copy, writers are sometimes driven (or at least feel so) to author pieces that just don't cut it, yet they escape with their journalistic integrity intact by running the article without their name.

By the same token, if a publication feels uneasy with the number of people dominating its pages, not running bylines is no solution to the problem. In fact by not running bylines the publication is actually misleading the public on the quantity and quality of its copy. It makes a world of difference knowing that only three people rather than five or six write the stories in any particular publication. The number of staff affects not only the quality of the copy but also the variety of the ideas generated. So by running stories without bylines the publication isn't being honest as to the size and variety of its staff.

Ethical questions also arise, particularly if the unbylined story is prominent and of questionable content.

A good example is the "Footlights" section in the entertainment section of the Journal. This column, featuring short items about Edmonton's artistic community, written and not signed by various members of the paper's entertainment staff, frequently descends into catty little insults about the people it writes about. Unfortunately, this kind of column lends itself to that. Individual writers sometimes have information (or views) that they can't publish because it would damage their reputations — especially if they cover a beat and rely on the same people time and time again for interviews and stories. So, a writer might be tempted to run the dirt he has in Footlights without signing it; that way he doesn't anger the people in this beat. But what does that say about the trustworthiness of that reporter?

Printing bylines also saves the paper from suspicions of conflict of interest. After all, how do we know what the unbylined story about the NDP wasn't written by someone from the NDP? If there is a name with the story the public can examine the affiliations and sympathies of that reporter and determine if the writer is indeed objective.

Nothing is lost and everything is gained by the newspaper that comes clean and owns up to who is writing any particular story, and its up to us as readers to demand so.

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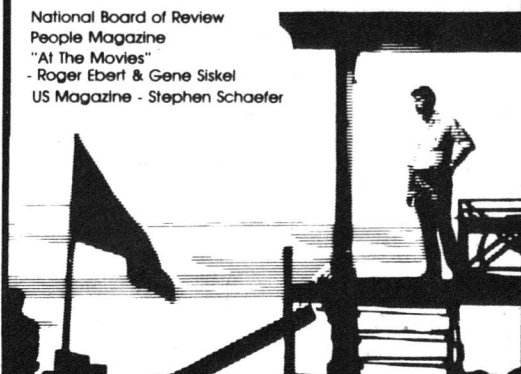
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