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Opinion #31

What the newspapers won't tell you!

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LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

R-J SUXX!

Study finds "no intelligent life"

...in editorial offices of city's biggest newspaper

*Dismal journalism...
Wacko editorials...
Calling Rupert Murdoch:
PLEASE come save our
paper!*

BY GLENN CAMPBELL

It was a slow news day last Wednesday, so the Las Vegas Review-Journal did what it normally does on days like this: It manufactured news to fit the space.

"AGENCY PRACTICES CRITICIZED," it said in its main front page headline (2/7), "Background checks lacking for caregivers of 22 children."

The article described the contents of a leaked internal email from the Department of Family Services. In it, a DFS manager strongly reprimanded her subordinates for allowing some children

who were taken from their parents to be placed with relatives before criminal background checks were completed on those relatives.

For example, Mom and Dad are caught using drugs, so their little Johnny gets taken away. Johnny is turned over to his Grandma—but in as many as 22 past cases not without a full paranoid background check on Grandma first.

We've looked at this story backwards and forwards and can't figure it out. Where's the news? And what elevates this trivial story to Page One headline status?

For the agency, it's a perfect "Catch-

22." Whatever they do, the R-J is going to ream them for it.

To us, the leaked email shows only that management was doing its job. A problem was detected, so a manager



You gotta love this little guy. He says things the rest of us wish we could say.

wrote a strongly worded internal memo to try to correct it. How else is she supposed to take action?

On the rare occasions when other newspapers print internal memos, it is usually because the memo shows some kind of cover-up or malfeasance on the part of management. This case shows quite the opposite: management trying its best to do its job. Ironically, if the manager had done nothing and written no memo, nothing could have been leaked and the R-J would have had no story to fill its empty front page.

Is this what the R-J wants: child welfare managers to do nothing?

When an agency's normal internal communication is printed in the newspaper, it is going to have a chilling effect on that communication. It means that everyone who writes an email not only has to think about their recipient; they have to consider how the tabloid press is going to distort and misconstrue their words.

Now that the R-J has proudly violated the county's email system, how is management supposed to communicate? Carrier pigeon?

We think the 22 missing background checks are relatively minor because everything in child welfare is a compromise. Thanks to previous R-J induced hysteria, Child Haven (the county children's shelter) is now seen as an unacceptable placement for young children, even for a few hours. The R-J has effectively portrayed Child Haven as one step removed from a concentration camp, and these unfounded emotions have since been coded into law. This creates enormous institutional pressure to place children quickly with relatives.

Background checks are the official policy, but they take time. So if you're a caseworker in a pinch and you've got to send Johnny somewhere, where should it be: the concentration camp or Grandma's house? If they choose Grandma's house, at least while things get sorted out, who is to blame them?

The Reporter

This article is not an anomaly. It is a representative sample of shallow R-J journalism, at least within the areas we know in Family Court. It reflects not just one bad reporter but a complete void in credible editorial leadership.

The author of Wednesday's article, and nearly every R-J story on Family Services, is Lisa Kim Bach. She is a pleasant and uninquisitive woman who

has been on this beat since before we arrived three years ago. We have met her many times at various hearings, trials and news events, but she has shown no interest in what we do. In this detached position, we have observed both the original data and the R-J story that resulted.

Ms. Bach misses the most important point in every single story! She has never looked below the surface of anything. She writes exactly the story that was assigned to her, reporting what one side says then what an opposing side says, but she doesn't inquire one inch further. She has no native curiosity and no interest in understanding how DFS really works.

More than anyone else, it was she who inspired the motto on our masthead.

To put it bluntly, Ms. Bach lacks the intellect and initiative to be a big city reporter. She should be restricted to birthday parties and PTA meetings at one of the company's many community newspapers; instead she's reporting on a lynchpin agency in a city of 2 million—and screwing it up every time.

We wouldn't normally use such language about any human being, especially someone so non-aggressive, but this woman is tremendously dangerous to the children of our state. In Nevada, as everywhere, politicians naturally pander to the press. If press coverage is simplistic, superficial and self-contradictory, then legislation also will be.

And it was! Child welfare legislation in 2007 was a Lisa Kim Bach production, even though she never set foot in Carson City. A series of shallow and ill-considered bills—like one banning young children from Child Haven—were essentially driven by her articles and may have made things even worse for our children.

Conspiracy of Dunces

Who gives Ms. Bach her power? It's a conspiracy of dunces. We've been dutifully reading the Review Journal since about the time it changed hands in 1993. In all that time, we have seen no evidence of intelligent life at the editorial level.

Good reporters turn up from time to time, but they don't last long. These young go-getters typically produce 95% of the paper's meaningful content—'til they leave for a real newspaper a couple years later and intelligent content returns to zero.

Nationwide, the local news business is shrinking, but journalism schools are still cranking out Woodward-and-Bernstein wannabes. That means the R-J can always find fresh meat for its operation. The one thing it can't do, however, is retain good talent, because once they're here for a while, they realize that exposing the truth and educating the public isn't what the paper's all about.

Instead, the R-J is a political organ unabashedly promoting an extreme libertarian agenda: "Guns good. Government bad." This makes it difficult for any reporter to write a story that promotes understanding of government. The editors don't want to hear, say, that the Department of Family Services is composed of intelligent, well-intentioned people trying their best against overwhelming odds. Because they are part of government, they have to be seen as nefarious villains in black hats twirling their sinister moustaches.

In the background are the incompetents, the Lisa Kim Bach's with no talent, who stay on staff forever. They are the darlings of the paper by virtue of their blind and unenlightened criticism of government. When they produce a vapid anti-agency article like last Wednesday's, the editors don't shoot it down; they elevate the story to headline status!

Sadly, the R-J's star news columnists now fall into the same category. Jane Ann Morrison and John L. Smith used to be credible reporters in their heyday, but they stayed too long and lost their mojo. We suspect, in fact, that they're both dead and that their columns have been outsourced to India. Obviously no local research goes into the product, only the usual blind anti-authority rhetoric that could have been written by a computer program.

We don't mean to say that everyone at the R-J is incompetent. At any given time there may be a few good reporters passing through on sabbatical—biding their time, building their resumes—but they produce good stories in spite of management, not because of it.

In 2007, the R-J gave us two admirable series on the court system: in-depth investigations on conflict attorneys and sealed records. We wonder, however, if these stories would have happened or been given as much space if the *LA Times* hadn't produced a devastating series on our court system a few months before. The *Times* essentially gave the R-J permission to

report on the court system, which it has since done with gusto (being that its an anti-government story). Could the R-J have produced the original *Times* series on its own? Not in a million years.

Has the R-J ever produced any truly independent journalism? Virtually everything you read in the paper today was initiated by someone else—usually a government agency. When the police arrest a murderer or the feds indict one of our fine ex-politicians, the R-J knows what to do, following the case to conclusion. When O.J. or Hillary come to town, the R-J is on top of the story, because the national media has already given the editors a roadmap for how to cover it.

Apart from government-supplied news, the only reliable investigative journalism at the R-J is some guy who goes around doing people's jobs for a day. Window washer, snake handler, DJ at a strip club—this reporter's done it all! And that seems to be what the people want, because Las Vegas has always lived for the day and has no real tradition of journalism.

To the few in town who know journalism, the R-J is a sad embarrassment to our city. To see how skewed it is, how far it has drifted from the mainstream, you need only look at the editorial page.

The Libertarian Slant

For a primer on the political philosophy of the Review-Journal, check out the weekly opinion columns of Vin Suprynowicz, the R-J's Assistant Editorial Page Editor. Public education—or what he calls “government youth conformity camps”—should be abolished. Global warming deserves no action because “cold weather kills people.” Citizens need guns, guns and more guns and should be able to carry them wherever they choose. All government is bad. All freedom is good.

We defend Suprynowicz's right to express these opinions. What we can't fathom is why anyone in their right mind would pay for them. Any teenager or out-of-work conspiracy buff could write this stuff—and they do... all over the internet! What doesn't make sense is a major newspaper actively funding and promoting such fringe viewpoints.

“Assistant Editorial Page Editor” implies that the paper has hired Suprynowicz to represent the management's viewpoint. In fact, the views in his column are not much different from the main editorial space.

The main editorial, of course, is the part of the newspaper that no one reads where the editors pat themselves on the back for the stories the paper has done. In the R-J, however, there is every indication that the editors haven't read their own stories. While the go-getter reporter may have written a balanced article on a current issue, the editors have to skew the story (and its placement in the paper) to match the party line.

The Bergeron case is a fine example. In that long-running saga, a child was crippled in a vicious knife attack when her mother left her at home alone, but a Family Court judge refused to terminate the mother's parental rights. The core issue, as the news articles fairly reported, was rule of law. A judge cannot arbitrarily terminate parental rights without the legal authority and evidentiary grounds to do so.

However, to the editorial writers and knee-jerk columnists, it was a simple black-and-white case. If a child wanted to do something, then she should be allowed to do it, law be damned. Rule of law is something way beyond the intellectual capacity of the R-J or its columnists. To them, it was good people in white hats (Barbara Buckley & Co.) vs. bad people in black robes (mainly Judge Gerald Hardcastle, defending the law alone). Saturday morning cartoons have more subtlety.

The obvious philosophy of R-J editors and longtime reporters is Libertarianism. In an earlier era, this was called “Anarchism”—the extreme position that all laws and institutions are corrupt and people should be able to do whatever they want without any government interference.

Libertarianism is just a theory, because in fact no one has ever pulled it off in the real world. Turns out, whenever a number of people live together there has to be some form of government or they will consume each other.

The R-J raises hell whenever a child dies and DFS didn't intervene, but such intervention is a product of government, which requires legal authority, taxes and public understanding. The R-J seems insanely opposed to all of these things and feels compelled to twist journalism accordingly.

Editorially, the R-J can handle only breaking news because anything deeper is going to run into the editors' libertarian biases. It can't report on the internal workings of child welfare, juvenile justice or the court, because

that would be giving government more credit than allowed. The rubes at the top need all government to be bad, and the more understanding the paper conveyed the harder it would be to maintain that blind philosophy.

Ownership

In 1993, Donald Reynolds, the previous owner of the paper, died and his empire of mostly small newspapers was sold to Jack Stephens, an Arkansas billionaire and friend of Reynolds. Stephens, a banker and one of the earliest investors in Wal-Mart, instantly became a media mogul—a task, we suspect, for which he was not prepared.

Private ownership can often give life to great newspapers, like the New York Times and the Washington Post, or it can foster neglect, which is what happened to our paper. It is the only big-city newspaper in the group, which includes such powerhouse publications as the Pahrump Valley Times, the Ely Times and a bunch of small Arkansas rags. We suspect that it was the Arkansas properties that Stephens cared about and that the R-J was just along for the ride.

When the R-J changed hands, Thomas Mitchell became editor, apparently because of who he knows, and the newspaper has languished ever since. There's sound and fury from time to time as the paper engages in one ill-informed crusade or another, but that's not quite the same as good journalism.

We're not saying the R-J isn't doing its job—as long as you understand what that job is. In business, a newspaper exists to sell advertising, which in the current noncompetitive environment is going to happen no matter what the paper prints. As long as you've got O.J., Norm! and the Frys ad in there, people are going to buy the paper, and the Stephens family back in Arkansas is probably going to be happy.

As our city disintegrates around us, the Review-Journal will always be there, reporting on disasters after they happen and even contributing to a few. The R-J will always give us breaking news in lurid detail, but the one thing we can't realistically expect from it is understanding.

Think of it as television news—with words!

—G.C.

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