

The ethics of reporting

By Skid Crease

?The pen is mightier than the sword.?

So wrote author Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839 in the play *Richelieu, or The Conspiracy*. His intent was to show that the power of words to change opinions, to create opinions, to incite social revolution and evolution was far greater than the power of military force.

Winston Churchill knew this when he gave his powerful speeches to the war weary citizens of England. Of course, the Spitfire and the Lancaster bomber helped. Rachel Carson knew this when she wrote *Silent Spring* and an entire planet's environmental consciousness was reawakened. Politicians like Donald Trump know this in the most perverted sense where boldly repeated lies and incendiary tweets can elevate a narcissistic megalomaniac to the status of presidential candidate.

And reporters for newspapers great and small know this. The ability of ?the word? to educate or confuse, to bring light or to cloud an issue, to elevate or crush a reputation is a power not to be underestimated.

An editor who lets a news reporter slip into editorial commentary is like the bystander watching a bully. A good newspaper simply does not let this happen, which is why major chains immediately publish apologies when they have printed a news report that crosses the line.

Here's an example from the most insidious of wordsmithing occupations, the legal profession. Pretend we are defending a driver whose vehicle struck another car and we have a witness in front of us. Depending on who we are representing, we ask the witness: ?And how fast was the car travelling when it dented the other vehicle?? or ?How fast was the car travelling when it smashed the other vehicle??

Our witness can change their calculation of the speed of the vehicle by as much as 50 km/h depending upon the words used ?dented? might get a 40 km/h and ?smashed? might get a 90 estimation from our ?eyewitness.?

And the charges and the settlement will go accordingly. Lawyers know this and so do reporters. A reporter in Caledon recently wrote that one party to an issue ?flooded? and ?inundated? the Regional council with their reports, while the other party was ?succinct? and ?brief.? The one creates the impression of a destructive deluge of biblical proportions, and the other implies business-like demeanor. This kind of bias in reporting can influence a reader's opinion.

That is why the Canadian Press has the following Code of Principles and Practices:

1. Investigate fully before transmitting any story or identifying any individual in a story where there is the slightest reason for doubt. When in doubt cut it out.
2. Cite competent authorities and sources as the origin of any information open to question. Have proof available for publication in the event of a denial.
3. Be impartial when handling any news affecting parties or matters in controversy. Give fair representation to all sides at issue.
4. Stick to the facts without editorial opinion or comment. Reporters' opinions are not wanted; their observations are. So are accurate backgrounding and authoritative interpretation essential to the reader's understanding of complicated issues.
5. Admit errors promptly, frankly. Public distrust of the media is fed by inaccuracy, carelessness, indifference to public sentiment, automatic cynicism about those in public life, perceived bias or unfairness, and other sins suggesting arrogance.
6. Our integrity can help overcome negative public attitudes towards the media through scrupulous care for the facts, and unwavering dedication to fairness. We must not be quick to dismiss criticism and complaints, a trait journalists refuse to accept in others.
7. The power of news stories to injure can reach both the ordinary citizen and the corporate giant Our integrity and sensitivity demand that we respond empathetically and quickly when an error has been made. It doesn't matter if the complaint has come from a timid citizen acting alone or a powerful figures' battery of lawyers.
8. Every story shown to be erroneous and involving a corrective must be drawn to the attention of supervisory staff
9. In our reports, parties in controversy, whether in politics or law or otherwise, receive fair consideration. Statements issued by conflicting interests merit equal prominence, whether combined in a single story or used at separate times.
10. Part of our responsibility as a news agency is to ensure we don't do anything that demeans the craft or weakens our credibility. We must observe stringent ethical practices, and be seen to be doing so. We should not accept anything that might compromise our integrity or credibility.?

If we, as intelligent readers, use these principles as a guideline, we will instantly be able to separate the good from the bad and the ugly. This column permits editorial commentary, but my editor insists that commentary be based on legitimate research and

investigation, still honouring the Canadian Press Code of Principles and Practices.
As a member of the Canadian Association of Journalists, I am bound by that code. Never let me forget it.