

September, 1982

In November, 1981, the Pulitzer Prize Board refused to correct a blatant and serious error in its features award of the previous spring, thus formally ratifying a panicked and inadvertent action taken on the heels of its Janet Cooke fiasco. The Board has since failed to consider, as promised by its administrator, the release of the attached letter (D), which would have clarified the record of this chain of events and laid bare the duplicity of the earlier official claim of faithfulness to the intent of the Pulitzer features jury which considered the award (C). The disdain for seriousness and veracity evidenced in these transactions not only demeans the Pulitzer Prize, but sanctions a continuation of journalistic abuses which deserve condemnation rather than awards.

Before the last traces of the Cooke affair fade from memory, it seems in order to put clearly on the record the facts of this second stage of that episode. The irresponsibility which has pervaded this sequence raises fundamental questions about the seriousness and sense of obligation with which a major journalistic trust is being administered.

Jeff Robbins
22 Forest Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Summary: 1981 Feature Writing Award

1. The feature writing jury was asked to choose from among 164 entries, some extremely long, in a period of three days. Following their efforts, the members unanimously requested the Pulitzer Board to ease the burden of volume on features panels in the future. ("After 'Jimmy's World,'" National News Council, p. 89)
2. The features jury was not consulted in any way prior to the substitution of the Janet Cooke entry, which it had never seen. Following the Cooke debacle, they were likewise not contacted about the matter of the listing of constituent articles on the rebound features award. (pp. 89, 92)
3. The substitution of the Carpenter for the discredited Cooke award took place through a process which was hurried and improvised. No meeting of the Pulitzer Board was held and not all of the members were reached in the telephone poll which was conducted. The process was completed in a matter of hours. (p. 92)
4. It remains unclear whether, at the time of this substitute award, any of the members of the officiating board had read or even seen two of the three stories cited in it, including "From Heroism to Madness." Neither that story nor "Death of a Playmate" was included anywhere in the basic "Brown Book" of nomination documentation supplied to board members prior to their April 3 deliberations. (pp. 95-96)
5. The features jury chair, Judith Crist, stated the panel's position in a May 12 letter on their behalf to the Pulitzer Board: "Our recommendation for the prize was based solely and exclusively on 'Murder on a Day Pass,'" she wrote. "Once again because the Board did not follow or publicize the exact recommendation of its panel... both the panelists involved and the Pulitzer prize itself are being held up to ridicule and their integrity questioned... We are outraged by the mishandling of this second award and embarrassed on behalf of the Pulitzer Prize." (emphasis added) (D, Editor and Publisher, May 16, 1981)
6. The National News Council ruling on "From Heroism to Madness" was issued on June 11. Its twenty-page report documented numerous specific deficiencies in the story's method and content, and the ruling upheld the initiating complaints. (E) No independent inquiry into the facts was apparently ever undertaken by the Pulitzer administration.
7. Stating that it saw no reason to alter its "acceptance of the jury's recommendation" (sic), the Pulitzer Board, on November 20, reaffirmed its prior actions. (C)

THE WALL STREET

© 1981 Dow Jones & Company

VOL. CXCVII NO. 94 ★ ★ ★

EASTERN EDITION

THURSDAY, MA

Bad News

Some Journalists Fear Flashy Reporters Let Color Overwhelm Fact

They Say Methods of Fiction Are Overused by Writers Who Lack Special Talent

Have Editors Lost Control?

By PAUL BLUSTEIN

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

BELFAST—Peering over the hood of an armored car, gunner Christopher Spell of the British Army watched a child not yet in his teens fling a gasoline bomb against the front of the Northern Bank on the Falls Road. . . . A soldier to Spell's right raised his SLR rifle and fired two shots. A 15-year-old named Johnny McCarten fell. . . . "If I'm lucky, the little Fenian will die," the soldier said.

From a column by Michael Daly in The New York Daily News

Sounds as if Mr. Daly accompanied gunner Spell in an armored car, right?

Sweeney was utterly alone. . . . Lowenstein, he was sure, had willed the murder of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone in 1978, as well as the 1979 DC-10 crash in Chicago. . . . The plan he devised contained a simple and chilling logic. He would confront Lowenstein and demand assurances that in the future he would leave Sweeney, his family, and others alone. If he got those assurances, Sweeney intended to drive home to Oregon. . . . If not, he would have to destroy his tormentor.

From an article by Teresa Carpenter in The Village Voice

Sounds as if Miss Carpenter had a searching interview with Mr. Sweeney, right?

Wrong on both counts. There isn't any British soldier named Christopher Spell, and Miss Carpenter hasn't ever met Mr. Sweeney.

A - From Wall Street

Journal, May 14, 1981

Since the exposure as fiction last month of an article in the Washington Post by Janet Cooke about an eight-year-old heroin addict, journalists have been soul-searching about some of their profession's techniques. Much attention has been focused on liberties taken in the name of the so-called New Journalism, which has been controversial ever since it became popular in the mid-1960s.

According to Clay Felker, the editor of New York Magazine from 1968 to 1977 who encouraged the technique and helped make it popular, "All New Journalism is a resuscitation of standard literary techniques such as narration, dialogue and scene-setting."

But while the literary styles common to fiction can sometimes be more revealing than the journalist's standard who-what-where-when formula, "some journalists have drifted into the substance of fiction," says Ben H. Bagdikian, a former Washington Post editor who teaches journalism at the University of California at Berkeley. "The doctoring of quotes and the invention of vivid detail of scenes has gone too far with many people."

And it's a short hop from "doctoring" a story to what journalists call "piping" it—making it up—as Miss Cooke did in her account of "Jimmy," the young addict.

Just a Pseudonym

Mr. Daly resigned from the News last week after his column from Belfast was denounced as "a pack of lies" by the Daily Mail of London. The News said "Christopher Spell" was a pseudonym for a soldier who didn't want to be identified as a source—although Mr. Daly couldn't tell an editor the man's real name.

Michael O'Neill, the News' editor, said that "the central incidents" of Mr. Daly's column had been confirmed, and he noted that the column never claimed that Mr. Daly was on the army patrol or in an armored car. But the News accepted Mr. Daly's resignation "with extreme regret." Mr

O'Neill said, because of "the absence of independent corroboration of disputed points" and because it was "misleading" for Mr. Daly to have used a pseudonym without alerting the reader that it was actually an anonymous source.

Miss Carpenter was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing after Miss Cooke confessed her hoax. One of the Carpenter entries was a story about Dennis Sweeney, the man who has been accused of killing former Rep. Allard Lowenstein last year. Although her story probes Mr. Sweeney's thoughts and includes such language as "According to Sweeney . . ." and "Now, from his cell at Riker's Island, Sweeney denies . . ." Miss Carpenter says she didn't mean to imply that she had talked to him. "It's very cumbersome to say, 'According to sources close to Sweeney,'" she explains.

Indirect Access

The passage about Mr. Sweeney's thoughts just before Mr. Lowenstein was killed was derived, says Miss Carpenter, from interviews with the accused man's attorney and with another person who talked to Mr. Sweeney after the killing and who requested anonymity. Since the attorney was planning on pleading his client innocent by reason of insanity, Miss Carpenter says, "If I had not been able to corroborate the material, I might not have used it."

"I knew in my gut that this is what Sweeney was thinking," she says. "It's incumbent upon me to make judgments. Otherwise I'm shunting off responsibility and being terribly cautious, and being a clumsy writer in the process." She notes that Mr. Sweeney wrote to the Voice disputing a few points in the story, but not its main thrust or the passage quoted above.

How many stories are misleading is anybody's guess. "I don't think that the kind of thing that happened with Janet Cooke—that is, the total fabrication of stories—is very

Please Turn to Page 20, Column 2

% 239 Carlton Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11205
July 31, 1981

Editor
Village Voice
842 Broadway
New York, New York 10003

B - Unpublished letter
to editor

Dear Editor:

It is sad to see the Village Voice continue to disgrace itself in defending a pathetic and inaccurate article. The sophistry and arrogance of Messrs. Schneiderman and Hentoff, however, do nothing to restore any credibility to Teresa Carpenter's shoddy essay on Allard K. Lowenstein and the man who murdered him.

The reliability of this article is most simply illustrated by a few factual examples:

- 1.) Miss Carpenter places the murder at issue on the wrong day of the week and the wrong date of the month. Or does Mr. Schneiderman contest this with his claim that he stands behind "every word" of the story?
- 2.) Miss Carpenter charges that Lowenstein traveled around the country in 1967 "attacking Resistance for not working within the system." In fact, as the Voice knows, he supported resistance activities and argued that they were "within the system."
- 3.) Miss Carpenter reports, among other things, that "everyone simply assumed that Lowenstein approached Sweeney." The National News Council quotes seven members of "everyone" - from Stanford, Mississippi and elsewhere - who assumed nothing of the kind. Scores of others could have been cited.
- 4.) Miss Carpenter reports a Lowenstein meeting with Sweeney in Palo Alto in the mid '60s, including an "embrace." Sweeney's direct written account describes a short verbal exchange on the telephone.
- 5.) Miss Carpenter adds to the written quotation of Lowenstein's part of this telephone call and proceeds to utilize the fresh portion as a basis for interpretation of Sweeney's psychological decline.
- 6.) Miss Carpenter says Lowenstein "dropped out" of politics after 1964 "to attend to his family's restaurant business." In fact, he did neither.
- 7.) Miss Carpenter repeatedly treats as reality the second-hand accounts of a man whom she, his lawyer, and everyone else describe as "insane." Was he equally reliable when he himself challenged part of her version of his history?

8.) As the News Council concluded and Hentoff himself half-admits, Miss Carpenter misleadingly implies that she had personally interviewed this unreliable source.

9.) Miss Carpenter frequently mis-portrays the politics of the Mississippi civil rights struggle, including the discovery of "betrayal" out of what Michael Harrington (another "betrayal"?) describes as "differences within the movement over how to conduct the [Atlantic City] floor fight."

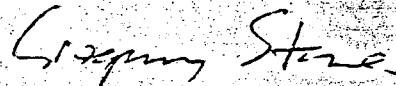
10.) Miss Carpenter devotes part of two paragraphs to a description of Sweeney's contacts with a film-maker named Ed Pincus. Mr. Pincus has reported six separate errors of fact in these brief references.

Illustrations of this kind, however, only begin to address the subtle problems and distortions of the story as a whole. A fuller appraisal would take up the persistently contorted portrayal of Mr. Lowenstein, including the intimation that he "descended on Stanford in a breathless frenzy," that "even back at Stanford there was suspicion that (he) never dealt quite honestly," that his efforts to help individuals were matters of "ego pangs," and that "of course" he denied the weighty "stories" "rumoured" that "he was actually an agent" for the CIA. These casual slurs and others easily validate the News Council judgement of "reckless and speculative construction" and "profound unfairness to the victim of a demented killer."

Unwilling to address the real issues of this story, Mr. Hentoff takes refuge instead in the subsidiary but protective non-issue of gay or related impulse. Although serious questions exist about the article's checkout-counter fixation, however, the above element alone is not critical to Carpenter's broader abuses. Or does Hentoff want to charge that anyone linked to suggested gay experience is "breathlessly frenzied," ego-maniacal and "never quite honest?" Wrapping himself in his fraudulent "issue," he wails at those who go beyond it and hides from or distorts nearly all of the serious ones they address. Readers can decide for themselves about the gracefulness of this posthumous tribute to one of the finest and most selfless leaders in America.

In view of the Voice proclamation, "let the reader judge," I am disappointed at its careful excision of the facts which might make informed judgement possible. While the exposure of Carpenter's concoction may upset Messrs. Hentoff and Schneiderman, it should cheer anyone more committed to standards of accuracy and decency in journalism.

Sincerely,



Gregory Stone

At its annual fall meeting on November 20th, the Pulitzer Prize Board took several decisions concerning its future operations. As part of a continual^{ING} effort to refine its procedures and in light of a number of suggestions which it received last spring, the Board voted to expand the duration of its April meeting, at which the year's Pulitzer Prize winners are chosen, from one day to two. This will not only permit the members of the Board to review nominations even more exhaustively than in the past but will also enable them to talk with representatives of the nominating juries concerning changes in the categories of nominations and any other questions that may arise concerning jury nominations.

The Board also reviewed its 1981 award for feature writing to Teresa Carpenter in light of critical comments by The National News Council and others and found no reason to depart from its acceptance of the jury's recommendation. The vote on this question was unanimous. A copy of the jury's recommendation on the Carpenter award is appended.

Contact: Robert C. Christopher
203-434-2745 (weekend)
212-280-3841 (office)

(12) For a distinguished example of feature writing giving prime consideration to high literary quality and originality, One thousand dollars (\$1,000).

First Choice:

Teresa Carpenter, of The Village Voice
This gifted journalist went beyond the surface of a crime in "Murder on a Day Pass" to deal with tragic weaknesses in our criminal justice and mental-care systems. In clear and concise reporting, she showed how an insane man could declare frequently and publicly that he would kill his wife-- and did. Her excellent writing was apparent too in dealing with the killing of a public figure and of a showgirl.

D - Crist letter to
Pulitzer Board

May 12, 1981

Mr. Richard T. Baker, Secretary
The Pulitzer Prize Board
Columbia University
New York, N.Y. 10027

Dear Mr. Baker:

The five members of the Feature Writing panel would like to clarify our recommendation of Teresa Carpenter as our first choice for a Pulitzer Prize. Confusion has resulted from the Board's award of the prize with simply a listing of several of her articles. Our recommendation for the prize, however, was based solely and exclusively upon her work in "Murder on a Day Pass," although we noted that her "excellent writing" was apparent in the other stories submitted on her behalf, including one on the death of Allard Lowenstein.

The panel agreed on this citation: "This gifted journalist went beyond the surface of a crime in 'Murder on a Day Pass' to deal with the tragic weaknesses in our criminal justice and mental-care systems. In clear and concise reporting, she showed how an insane man could declare frequently and publicly that he would kill his wife-- and did. Her excellent writing was apparent too in dealing with the killing of a public figure and of a showgirl."

Once again, because the Board did not follow or publicize the exact recommendation of its panel, when finally following its nomination, both the panelists involved and the Pulitzer Prize itself are being held up to ridicule and their integrity questioned by those with a personal quarrel over another of Ms. Carpenter's stories. We are outraged by the mishandling of this second award and embarrassed on behalf of the Pulitzer Prizes.

I sign this on behalf of myself, as chairperson, and my fellow panelists, John O. Emerich jr., Joel Freyfass, Robert C. Maynard and Edward F. Shanahan, all of whom concur.

Yours truly,



E - Excerpts, National
News Council Report

COMPLAINT NO. 24-81

(Filed May 4 and
May 6, 1981)

LARRY LOWENSTEIN AND JAMES A. WECHSLER
against
THE VILLAGE VOICE AND TERESA CARPENTER

Nature of complaint: Immediately after the awarding of a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing to Teresa Carpenter for three articles in The Village Voice, two complaints were filed with The Council about one of the articles, "From Heroism to Madness: The Odyssey of the Man Who Shot Al Lowenstein." One complainant was Larry Lowenstein, brother of Allard Lowenstein, the former Congressman from New York's Fifth District, who was shot fatally in his Rockefeller Center law office by Dennis Sweeney, a former student and, at one time, a political

-21

COUNCIL ACTION: Under the patterns followed on most newspapers, the inclusion of many critical comments about an individual's actions and motivations would bring requests from editors for further investigation and broader interviewing to make certain that the general characterization being drawn was well-founded. There is no evidence of any such attempt in this Village Voice story, even though The Council's research promptly brought forth a number of strongly differing viewpoints and flat contradictions from individuals who were closely associated with Allard Lowenstein during his career.

Teresa Carpenter has made it clear she was a free-lancer at the time

she submitted her articles and has said that because of this The Voice applied stringent checking to her copy. Despite Editor David Schneiderman's reiteration of such checking and his confidence in the article, a number of valid challenges have arisen to cast doubt on the story's accuracy and its depiction of Mr. Lowenstein. The Council is further disturbed by a paragraph that reads as if Ms. Carpenter had interviewed Dennis Sweeney in his cell at Rikers Island when in fact she did not.

In sum, The Council finds the article to have been marred by the over-use of unattributed sources, by a writing style so colored and imaginative as to blur precise meanings, and by such reckless and speculative construction as to result in profound unfairness to the victim of a demented killer. The complaints are found warranted.

Concurring: Abel, Bell, Brady, Cooney, Decter, Ghiglione, Hornby, Huston, Maynard, Pulitzer, Scott, Stanton and van den Haag.

Dissenting: Miller.

DISSENTING OPINION BY MILLER: I would have to be convinced that Teresa

-22-

Carpenter made up what she wrote before I could agree with the majority that this complaint is warranted. I am not convinced that she did and I cannot assume that she did.

I agree that her use of unidentified sources was reckless, but this practice is unfortunately very widespread and spreading. Many editors today appear to believe they have done their duty when they publish or broadcast an item that says, "Sources say..."

Abstaining: Isaacs.

Pulitzer Prize :

fiasco, band, cover,