

Generally first. Always right.

They got the staff. We got the stories.

by *Dave Featherly*

I'd tell you how many people it takes to put out the Cheyenne Herald, but that would take all the fun out of it.

The daily paper does tell you how many people it takes to put out their publication.

With that staff, in a little market like this, they ought to be producing Newsday. Both exaggerate their circulation but Newsday is a solid publication.

In spite of all of the WT-E employees, management is still not aggressive enough - or professional enough - to get to the stories first or with any depth.

A couple of issues ago, I started to review just a few of the stories we covered that I thought were of consequence.

We don't do anything as predictable as have readers choose what stories are important like the other guys do. Oh, wait, they stopped that. Not liking to be upstaged by the paying public, the WT-E ownership decided only THEY were capable of determining what stories are important.

Channel 5 (*your* station) here in town did much the same thing. But, one thing you've got to say for the dwindling newspaper at 702 W. Lincolnway, they were a helluva lot closer to getting it right than the TV station with the vertical blurry lines through the picture.

Channel 5's Top 20 included:

1. I-80 Accident
2. Tort reform
3. Downtown Fire
4. Record High Gas Prices
5. Wyoming Loses Brucellosis-Free Status
6. Wolf Lawsuit
7. Governor Gets a Match in the Mail
8. Laramie Smoking Ban
9. Meenan Sentenced
10. Elk Die From Lichen
11. McCormick Sex Assaults

Wyoming Tribune-Eagle's Top 10 stories:

1. I-80 Wreck
2. Credit card troubles (*Maggie Carter*)
3. Trilegiant closes
4. Medical malpractice
5. Threatening letters
6. Lopez killed, one sentenced
7. Election 2004
8. Annexation ruling
9. Pokes win Las Vegas Bowl
10. Water restrictions

Not many of the same stories made both lists. Channel 5 obviously considers itself a statewide broadcaster - which it isn't. Their No. 9 choice is bizarre. What match did the governor get in the mail? And, did I miss something (I confess to seldom watching Channel 5)? What were the McCormick assaults? The wolf lawsuit hardly affects their market area; nor does the Laramie smoking ban; Kevin Meenan was the Natrona County district attorney; and the elk died near Rawlins.

So, how were those major Channel 5 stories in 2004?

For Channel 5 to not consider a story alleging city employee dishonesty - and city elected officials credit card abuse - defies reason. It wasn't among their Top 20 local stories. Ignorance is bliss, I guess.

At least the television station did consider the repeal of term limits among the major stories of 2004. The newspaper didn't.

In spite of 77% of Wyoming voters voting in favor of term limits in 1992 and the Wyoming Supreme Court rejecting that referendum, the WT-E didn't think that was a Top 10 story in 2004. Go figure.

Well, these things are subjective and viewers and readers can decide for themselves who is right and who is wrong. What is important or not depends on whose ox is being gored. The fake letter received by the daily paper was big news - in their minds, at least. Because it was them.

The Cheyenne Herald is published bi-weekly and we cannot cover in the same way they can (Channel 5 and WT-E) stories like the I-80 pileup. It was an Albany County accident and victims were taken to Iverson Memorial Hospital in Laramie.

The Herald wrote regarding the accident when the local daily newspaper refused to print an obituary for two victims of the pileup because the obit didn't come through "normal channels." In other words, a funeral home. Survivors wanted the obituaries of the mother and son who lost their lives in the wreck printed so Cheyenne readers would know of a Saturday memorial in Rock River. The WT-E refused, **UNLESS** the survivors provided them "a page one story." The family offered to pay. The WT-E still refused. The family took the obit to Trader's and it was published as an ad in a shopper. It was also printed in the Casper Star-Tribune but few Laramie County residents get that newspaper and the victims had links to Cheyenne and Laramie County.

More recently, the WT-E repeated printed the obituaries of a husband and wife who jointly committed suicide. Those obits presumably were received via the mail, not through normal channels.

Consistency is not the WT-E's strength.

A previous issue of the Herald mentioned some stories we covered during the first couple months of 2004. Here are more, beginning in the second quarter:

We disclosed that a ballyhooed private expansion was being greatly aided with public money - your money. An Oregon company which sponsors its own golf tournament was provided \$675,000 in public money for its Cheyenne expansion.

Considerable coverage was given to the issue of the term limits approved by voters in 1992 and taken away by two legislators action in 2004. They were eerily silent until their time was up.

Even before the Supreme Court struck down term limits because they were enacted by statute instead of a constitutional amendment, the Herald reported that Representative Becket Hinckley would sponsor legislation to revive them if the Supreme Court did as many expected. He has done as much in this session.

It was disclosed that the City of Cheyenne continued to have problems with their handling of CDBG funds, according to the city audit. The same issue (April 19) pointed out that the city sent seven representatives to Washington, D.C., to pick up an insignificant award.

Our extensive coverage of tort reform reported on a local case of medical malpractice. The Cheyenne Herald, from the outset, opposed the deprivation of constitutional rights that the supporters of Amendment D sought at the last election.

Jimmy Valdez has always contended that mayor Jack Spiker arranged for him to be paid for a final month of city council service - after he left office. No one told him that he was not entitled to be paid until he was to reassume office as an appointment to finish the uncompleted term of Tom Scherr. Once again, we pointed out that the city had lost all three of their three illegally annexed properties. And, even though the daily newspaper continued to support the illegal acts, the courts did not.

In the May 3 issue, we were first to disclose that Jim Woods had sold four-plex units as "condos" that had been approved to be built on a single lot, and that he was proposing another controversial development which would later successfully be challenged by neighbors. When changes were made much later in the year, councilmen Patrick Collins and Tom Segrave opposed the neighbors and aligned themselves with the controversial developer.

In a follow-up story about the misuse of public money to send a bunch of city elected officials and employees to Washington, D.C., a story revealed that the "Preserve America" program was to "Recognize(s) exceptional efforts to use cultural and natural resources to promote tourism, revitalize the community, create jobs, and educate the public."

The recognition was for making the old UP depot into a tavern and public agency offices. Hardly the intent of the program.

Even before the filing deadline for city offices, the Herald predicted that the mayor and WT-E would partner up for the campaign. Which they did. As an insider of the 2000 campaign, I disclosed how Jack Spiker had surrendered his independence and integrity in an effort to be accepted and praised by the WT-E. The payback has been reciprocated and the WT-E was an unpaid but effective campaign partner in 2004. The "Odd Couple" continues to operate in tandem. For access to scoops, the daily newspaper provides only positive coverage to city government. Daily, they practice the greatest breach of journalistic ethics. They sleep with targets.

Inaccuracies in the city budget were pointed out in the same issue. A review of the spending and revenue projections for the upcoming year showed they would not come true. This administration has adopted a practice of underestimating the true spending and transfer money during the year to cover the spending. The mayor has bragged that he has always presented a balanced budget, while not also telling voters that he was required to. He also did not share with them that for fiscal year 2005, he had to use almost \$1.9 million of one-time state funds to balance the city's budget.

This budget included a new spending item. In order to provide even more of a raise to many city employees, the mayor adopted a "longevity" bonus. Later in the fiscal year, the governing body would lament the unavailability of funds for other uses and said they would be unable to pay the normal Christmas gifts to employees. That is what the longevity bonus was to be - it would have been duplicative to also pay Christmas bonuses.

June brought the story about an argument by a representative of the Wyoming Department of Education that "there is no logic or law which would require the State Board to consider the best interests of the pupils, school district, or community ...". So the State Board would not get involved in the unwise and unnecessary closing of the Albin junior and senior high schools.

Later, on the same subject, Judge Ed Grant ruled that a 4-4 tie vote did not satisfy the "majority vote" required to deny the charter school application of the Albin community. State statute 21-3-105 reads: **"No action of the board of trustees shall be valid unless such action shall receive the approval of a majority of the members elected to the board of trustees."** A Cheyenne attorney who wanted to replace Barbara Cubin in Washington continues to believe that a 4-4 vote is a majority and has appealed the decision of Judge Grant.

Several state legislators ignored the will of the voters and sought office beyond the 12 years (from the 1992 vote, not from the date some assumed office) 77% of Wyoming voters supported. Hank Coe, Gerald Geis, Bob Peck and Charles Scott (all with more than 12 years) in the Senate and Pete Anderson, Ross Diercks, Jim Hageman and Frank Philips in the House, all were automatically returned to the office they sought.

Will any of the above contribute mightily during this session of the Wyoming Legislature? How much of a drop-off would there be with a younger, more energetic person elected? Notice that all those who considered themselves irreplaceable are men.

There were so many stories of interest and importance in Cheyenne and the state during 2004 that even publishing bi-weekly, the Cheyenne Herald cannot review them in limited space. The review will continue in the next issue.