



Dealing With the News May 11, 2020

By Don A. Wright

There have been many changes to our society and always will be. As they say change is the constant. Dealing gracefully with change is an important part of survival; and living well. One of the biggest changes I've noticed in the past couple of decades is the prominence of daily newspapers. They used to sit at the apex of presenting and guiding both public thought and comment. Newspapers have taken a precipitous drop due mostly to the increased competition of other media outlets. I still enjoy reading print and subscribe to a couple of magazines and newspapers. I like newspapers, the spot news and the crossword puzzle but I tire of the template many stories follow. It is my considered opinion, often enough reporting about water in California needs a disclaimer announcing it as editorial.

One of the magazines I used to read religiously was *The New Yorker*. If you made a list of the very best, sharpest, witty writing ever produced in America and it didn't include *The New Yorker's* Talk of the Town and A Critic at Large sections you missed by a mile. From E.B. White to Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley – the Algonquin Roundtable were regular contributors – just those two sections of the magazine would keep anyone challenged, entertained and informed.



Bad Examples

I let my subscription lapse after 9/11. Former President Jimmy Carter's speech writer Hendrick Hertzberg had become editor and 90 percent of the once great magazine became vitriol directed towards then President George W. Bush. I remember giving up on it after the magazine dipped so low as to review the 2007 movie *Zoo*, a documentary about a man in Washington state who died from having – um, relations with a horse. Beyond the disappointment that the magazine would consider such a topic as worthy of its mention the critic (I don't recall who) was able to work into the review; conjecture the deceased was reckless in his sexual practices due to being despondent from working for a company that manufactured weapons used by the US Military and was concerned Bush would deploy them unjustly. The review was eloquently written, after all the author was a critic for *The New Yorker*. But the review blatantly implied the decedent's death from the willful participation in bestiality was a result of President Bush's immorality in conducting his duties as Chief Executive Officer. It was a bit of a stretch in my opinion and I found it insulting. I responded by no longer giving Conde Nast the \$100 plus annual subscription fee.

That review stuck with me. Sure the salacious topic was shocking but in the long run it was the bald face use of the logical fallacy post hoc, ergo propter hoc to draw a conclusion and then passing it

off as reasonable. This Latin expression post hoc, ergo propter hoc literally translates as “after this, therefore because of this.” Notice I called the example “bald face.” It is about as easy to fall into one of the dozens of logical fallacies as it is to find cold weather above the Arctic Circle during December.* Since this was a movie review it was clearly an opinion piece involving subjective rather than objective reporting on questionable material. So here’s my subjective opinion. The review’s subject and reasoning coarsened society a little and contributed to lowering the bar of what’s allowed.

Another example of subjectivity beyond reason from the pages of The New Yorker? Easily done. I don’t recall the date, author or section an essay about taxes appeared in, but I do remember it standing out for its provincial narcissism and assertion of practicing the holy grail of economic theory. We hear a lot about economics and I want to remind you President Harry S. Truman once requested a one armed economist so he couldn’t say, “On the other hand.” The thesis of the piece was how unfair to the taxpayers of Manhattan who pay \$2,500 or more per square foot for retail space on Fifth Avenue to have to share national tax policy deliberations with folks who pay \$3 per square foot for retail space in a strip mall in Kansas. It was kind of silly in the assumptions that anyone wouldn’t want to live with millions of other people stacked on top of one another on an island just didn’t get it. And of course there was the economy of scale being ignored and a liberal helping of condescension that seems to incubate best in the enclaves of wealthy coastal elites. The story took a position that it had all the necessary facts, not all the facts, just all the necessary facts needed to reach a conclusion regarding economics.

The above examples are from old stories in a magazine known for literary content not hard news. What do they have to do with today’s news coverage, especially water in the Valley? I’m referring to them because they are examples of what I find to be common practices in water reporting. Take your average story about Delta flows. Fish need water post hoc, send more water through the Delta, propter hoc.

For the past two days I’ve been included in a long, multi-participant email chain regarding the questionable economic statement that one almond nut represents a gallon of water used to produce a food exported for profit. Almond growers have taken many hits in the press with stories implying it is wrong to use water for this purpose. And by that implication it is harming the environment and therefore immoral. That’s a lot to unpack but for the purposes of this piece; It is a fact almonds require water to produce, they are a food produced in quantities great enough to allow exports to other countries and if the production is managed properly they can be profitable. Not all the facts, just all the necessary facts to reach a conclusion regarding economics.

I’m not bringing all this up because my reporting exemplifies the epitome of accuracy and balance. I have my biases and I’m open about them They aren’t hidden in the WaterWrights.net reports of district meetings. Neither are my reports straight ahead news reporting and they are not represented to be so. And that is why I’m bringing all this up. There are a lot of stories being presented as news that are not balanced, accurate reporting. They are editorials and opinion pieces disguised as reports.

Where to Find Articles

There are clipping services available to anyone with email and an interest in water in California. There are more services than I’m listing but these are the ones I follow. By the way for younger readers, back before the internet when news was mostly on the literal printed page there were companies that subscribed to all manner of publications: daily, weekly, monthly newspapers, magazines, trade journals and who knows what else. They’d receive the publications, clip articles out of them and catalog them under various criteria like subject matter, author and such. If you were say, a

banker specializing in loans for steam powered ocean vessels you could subscribe to a clipping service that would send you reprints of articles related to that topic. Now clipping services provide links.

Here are the water related clipping and news services I like best: California Farm Water Coalition <https://www.farmwater.org> CFWC links you to the top half dozen or so, current stories specifically regarding farm water in California. Occasionally CFWC will comment on certain stories.

The California Department of Water Resources has the DWR Water News water_news_editors@water.ca.gov You have to send them an email request to join the service. This is strictly a clipping service and offers no comment or editorializing about what is presented. There are dozens of links daily about water in California but it is comprehensive. Comprehensive can be good but there are a lot of stories about wastewater treatment plants in San Diego or other far flung subjects not necessarily ag related. But if you want to know what's being written about water in California this is the place.

Maven's Notebook is great combination of clipping service, original content and links to a wide variety of water and SGMA related material www.mavensnotebook.com The editor/publisher Chris Austin; I don't think she sleeps. She does an amazing job.

Families Protecting the Valley <http://familiesprotectingthevalley.com> unabashedly calls foul on the more egregious news stories and pronouncements by the government on water. FPTV offers comment and insight while keeping a light shining on the importance of feeding people, one of the central benefits of a healthy agricultural practice.

How to Respond

I advocate we follow the media and keep track of who is writing about water. Do you know which reporters in your local area cover agriculture and water? How about who's covering the subject regionally, statewide, nationally? Are they accurate and balanced? Are they naïve? Are they flame throwers out to harm ag? How do you deal with them?

I used to write for *The Business Journal* in Fresno. I was not then nor have I ever been a sportswriter. You may recall several years ago David Carr was leading the Fresno State Bulldogs to collegiate football prominence. I've told this before so please forgive me if you've heard it. I was assigned to write a story about the economic impacts of having a nationally ranked team. I gathered my facts about hotel and restaurant receipts and the benefits of home games on the local economy. I cited one game played against either Colorado or Colorado State, I forget which. This wasn't a sports story I didn't mention anything that happened on the field at that game. Turns out I got the name of the opposition incorrect. If I wrote Colorado it was actually Colorado State we played or visa versa. It was absolutely a mistake. I wrote it, the editors didn't catch it. Now, I'm a Fresno State graduate and even tutored for the athletic department while attending school there. So, the amount of hate mail I received was hurtful. Certainly a good case to be made it was overblown, but they nailed me hard and it stung. I'll always remember that.

The moral is, responding to the author of a story has an impact. I do recommend instead of questioning their parentage as in my above example, instead you offer to be a source. Treat them like you want to be treated, always be kind and try to be nice. Even if they aren't kind or nice. Sometimes reporters don't have good sources. They get an assignment based on a press release from the NRDC saying farmers are wantonly killing the planet by using water as a production input for crops and livestock and off they go to write the story. But they have lived in a high density, urban environment their entire life and they don't know any other environment so they write what they know. Perhaps a kind note gently pointing out the omission and offering to provide expertise to help them balance the

next story will be appreciated. Perhaps 50 kind notes would get the point across. Even the flame throwers aren't immune to critique.

And for goodness sake if someone writes or airs a positive story about ag and water drop them a line or call of support. Believe me, I'm not fishing for complements. I have the best professional support group I've ever enjoyed and I'm thankful. I'm asking you give positive reinforcement to those who are making an effort to get the water story straight.

What if a reporter contacts you for comments or background on a story? It's OK to not have an answer but it's not OK to ignore them. I firmly believe back in my print days if everyone I contacted would have answered or called me back immediately I could have went home finished for the week on Wednesday afternoon. Reporters are working under deadlines, that's just how it is. "No comment at this time" can be a good answer. Maybe you really don't know what to say or you need to consider your response and not just blurt out something. No comment at this time allows the reporter to check off that they have tried to get further facts and opinions but none were available, at this time. Add the "this time" offer to get back to him by deadline if possible with the answer or information or whatever is being requested. Don't jerk him around, make the effort and if you can't let him know before the deadline so the story can be wrapped up.

To recap; Know who is reporting on ag and water. Provide feedback to reporters. Offer praise when merited or constructive criticism when needed. Offer to be a source of expertise to reporters. Always respond to reasonable requests from the press.

Speaking of feedback if you found this worth your time to read let us know. There is a comment section helpfully located just after this article. I want to start taking a look at individual examples in future reports.

Waterwrights.net welcomes opinions from the water community, membership restricted to those who drink water. If you or your organization would like to submit your thoughts please send text and photos to; don@waterwrights.net We reserve the right to decline submissions for no reason or any reason, but they'd have to be pretty mean spirited for us to do so.

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