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Author! Author!

Ethical dilemmas when reporters turn author

When reporters write books, questions of loyalty and priority can be expected. Here are some guidelines for resolving some of the difficult issues.

By Deni Elliott

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While writing a book, New York Times reporter Richard Severo found new information on the government's cover-up of Agent Orange. Although the discovery was made on his own time, he offered the fresh news to the Times.

"It was awkward for me to write something that might make a big splash without it being in the Times," Severo said.

But, because he wanted to protect the book material, he held on to it until the book was finished.

Reporters who write books or freelance pieces struggle with what they owe their employers. News organizations struggle with what rights they have to control staffers' off-hours work.

Bob Woodward's practice of writing books while collecting a full-time salary from The Washington Post has resulted in off-the-record accusations at the Post and elsewhere that he gets special treatment. Arguments over rights to material in reporter Severo's first book, *Lisa H*, lasted for seven years and resulted in what Severo called an unfair transfer from science reporting to metro.

In theory, management wants to like reporters' extracurricular success. But, in practice, many news organizations prefer monogamy. Or so it seems to their staff.

For example, Business Week Assistant Managing Editor Jack Dierdorff said that non-competitive after-hours projects are fine as long as the staffers "continue to make significant contributions to the magazine." But Business Week Senior Writer Chris Welles says that while freelancing is not forbidden at the magazine, it is "discouraged." His impression is that management accepts staffers' book writing as a "necessary evil." Management fears that outside writing diverts people's time from what they should be doing, he said.

The sticky issues will be a little different in each situation, but some things can be worked out before someone's ego or book contract is at stake.

*** Does the news organization have a right to know when a reporter has an after-hours project in the works?**

Of course. If the book is a spin-off of reporting done for the paper, the reporter has a moral, and often a legal obligation to clear the use of the materials, outtakes as well as the pieces that appeared in print.

Even if the project is entirely separate from the reporter's beat, management has an interest. Unless the work is produced under a pseudonym or without identifying the author's regular occupation, reporter-authors should consider how the extracurricular activity will reflect on the news organization. And their own careers.

*** Does the news organization have a right to say no?**

Sometimes. Other times, management may need to reassign the reporter.

Coauthoring celebrity books and similar PR work is out of line for journalists, although exceptions may be made for private individuals who are not likely to receive continuing journalistic attention.

But what do you do when a reporter wants to express in a book the considered opinion she developed while working as a reporter? The issue of position advocacy is more difficult.

The key is what happens to the reporter's and news organization's credibility. There's a difference between a reporter-author reaching a conclusion that annoys people and writing a diatribe, said Carolyn Lee, assistant managing editor of The New York Times. "If the reporter

beat.

When it comes to the credibility of their beat reporter, management has a right to decide if the reporter-turned-author has soiled his nest. Life is a lot easier if the news is no longer fresh.

Minneapolis Star & Tribune reporters David Hage and Paula Lauda coauthored No Retreat, *No Surrender — Labor's War at Hormel* after covering the Hormel strike. The book included "a great deal that had already appeared in the paper," Hage said. "Largely what we were doing was filling in the gaps."

Hage said that they were delighted with management's support and Managing Editor Tim McGuire said that management was delighted with their book. "This one was very clean in that the strike was over, yet there was still some interest."

On-going news is different. The reporter who covers abortion cannot maintain her credibility if she writes a pro-choice book any more than she could if she marched in a pro-choice rally.

*** How supportive can you expect a news organization to be?**

It's reasonable to expect news organizations to grant permission for reporter-authors to use material that they developed. Beyond that, management should make decisions on what is in the best interest of the news organization.

A short-staffed newsroom may not be able to grant leaves for book writing. Paid leaves aren't appropriate unless the reporter is writing the book on behalf of the news organization, but accumulated comp time and schedule changes may allow for research that can't be done after-hours.

A final problem that needs to be resolved is how to handle the book review. It's unfair to ignore a book deserving notice just because it's written by a staffer. But even if the book is panned, there will still be the appearance of conflict because the book was chosen over others for review. The damage can be minimized if the review includes a disclosure of the author's connection and the newsroom's support.

In return, management deserves no surprises when the book comes out. As long as the author is on the newsroom payroll, breaking news belongs in the news columns first.

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