

P. S. / Elliott

How now, sacred cow?

United Way's favored treatment by media

The special relationship that United Way has with most newsrooms creates — at the very least — the appearance of a nationwide conflict of interest.

by Deni Elliott

United Way raised \$2.98 billion in 1989. United Way of America estimates \$45 million worth of advertising was donated during the televised NFL football games alone during that year. Spokesperson Cathy Jenkins said that media support would total "much, much more" if all donated public service mentions and news coverage were taken into account.

While I applaud United Way's marketing successes, what are newsrooms doing donating staff and editorial space to the cause?

Of all the charities and non-profits that exist within a community, only United Way gets the benefits of widespread payroll deductions. Few fund drives involve reporters receiving pledge cards with their paychecks. Even fewer receive newsroom "volunteers" who follow up with colleagues, checking to ensure that everyone has "had the opportunity to give."

The special treatment United Way gets should raise questions in journalists' minds about fairness. United Way is not the only fund-raising game in town, but it's the only one that can depend on news staffs to boost its efforts.

The sheer magnitude of United Way's efforts should also signal the need for special scrutiny. But that's not likely to happen when news organizations are part of the corporate community that provides United Way its support. Often the newspaper's publisher and television station manager are members of the local board. How do you ignore your boss' favorite charity?

New Orleans *Times-Picayune* columnist and reporter James Gill agreed that investigative stories need to be done about United Way, but admits he is one of many who hasn't done them. "We have a vague idea that we ought to do it someday," he said. "But, it's not the kind of thing you get assigned by management."

The *Times-Picayune* runs a daily tally of United Way progress during its fall fund-raising drive, a weekly column in a zoned section on Sundays called "United Way at Work," and occasional stories in

the metro section on the campaign. City editor Keith Woods said that United Way gets attention unlike any other charity because the newspaper hasn't been asked for similar treatment by any other charity of that size.

Many other news organizations also do their part.

For example, *The Charlotte Observer's* coverage of last fall's United Way campaign was low-key until the local chapter said it might not make its fund-raising goal. Then the paper rallied to the cause.

During the last weeks of the campaign, *The Observer* ran stories with headlines that read, "United Way Troops Get Marching Orders" (10/19), "United Way Struggles To Meet Its Goal By Thursday Deadline" (10/23), "United Way Expected

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To Miss Its Goal By Thursday Deadline" (11/1), "99.1% Not Close Enough for United Way Crew, Challenge Continues" (11/2), "United Way Issues Plea For Support, Current Donors Asked to Increase Pledges" (11/6).¹

Lisa Hammersly, city editor at *The Observer*, said the faltering campaign was news. "United Way has a record of making its goal," she said.

Scott Wharton, media relations associate for United Way of Central Carolina said they appreciated *The Observer's* help. "We are obviously dependent on the press to tell the United Way story," he said. As a result of *The Observer's* coverage, Wharton said new donors called in and others doubled their pledges.

It's only on the editorial page that such community boosterism belongs, said David Johnston, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter who pioneered critical coverage of non-profit organizations in the early '80's.

"I read editorials and say this is United

Way propaganda. If you want to write about them in the newsroom, then cover them like any other institution. Why should United Way be treated differently?"

It has been Johnston's experience that there are many stories about United Way that don't get written. "Typically," he said, "Boy Scouts gets twice as much money from United Way as Girl Scouts. Are Boy Scouts twice as good?"

Johnston suggested that news organizations check out which banks in the community house United Way funds and see what role officers from those banks have within the local United Way structure.

"United Way ought to be treated like every other institution in the community," Johnston said. But, the problem, he said, is larger than the United Way.

The non-profit sector is generally not covered with the kind of scrutiny used on other institutions in the community. "Reporters hear 'charity' and think that means 'good,'" he said.

Now that the fall United Way campaign and the holiday season with its share of media-endorsed charities are out of the way, it's time that newsrooms take a careful look at their own favored causes.

If a news organization endorses a fundraiser, whether it is for an individual in need or the monolithic United Way, that news organization takes on a special obligation to tell people how that money their reporters helped raise is being spent.

Every story about social service agencies or non-profit organizations ought to tell readers how much of its funding comes from private philanthropy. Readers need to know how many of their United Way dollars are supporting that work. News stories at the time of campaign kick-offs should include mention of the problems of United Way and its agencies along with their successes and goals.

It's not wrong for journalists to want to contribute to the community welfare, but they should do so in the privacy of their own checkbooks. Journalists can't escape the appearance of a conflict of interests if they are raising funds for an organization they should be watching.

¹ Based on Vu-Text search

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