

MEDIA

A Cheap Violin

Eighteen rules of journalism, as violated
by *The News & Observer*

BY JOHN YEWELL

On Jan. 30, *The News & Observer* published a front-page story by staff writer Amy Gardner describing the relationship between Gov. Mike Easley and lobbyist Dave Horne—who also serves, in Gardner's words, as Easley's "gatekeeper and talent scout" for jobs in the new administration. In the generous space of some 32 column inches, Gardner and *The N&O* forgave both men their sins and extol all their virtues, scoring 114 offenses against journalistic art out of a possible 115. It breaks the record.

It seems to me that it was far from right for *The N&O* to report on questionable ethics in government without actually posing questions. The kid-glove treatment of the relationship between Easley and Horne recalls a famous 1895 essay by Samuel Clemens, in which he detailed the literary offenses of James Fenimore Cooper. In that spirit (and with profound apologies to the bard of Hannibal, Mo.) is the following critique offered.

There are 19 rules governing journalistic art in the domain of political reporting—some say 22. In her story titled "Lobbyist balances career with role as adviser to governor," Amy Gardner and her publisher violated 18 of them. These 18 require that:

1. A reporter shall not ask questions that elicit obvious, self-serving answers—or, if she does pose such questions, the answers will be looked upon with considerable skepticism. When a lobbyist and a governor who are old friends are asked whether there would be any undue influence in the one working for the other, and both insist there would not be, the reporter shall either let out a hearty guffaw, or find someone more perspicacious than herself to offer a contrary view.

2. They require that when a politician so corrupts the language that a bald-faced absurdity results, the reporter shall call attention to the absurdity lest she be taken for its interpreter and emissary. Under no circumstances shall a reporter let a governor, without hint of irony, assert that a lobbyist "has asked me to meet clients and he has asked me to make public appearances. But he's never tried to take advantage of our personal friendship—and he wouldn't." If the governor compounds the absurdity with a contradiction by also admitting that he spoke to one of the lobbyist's clients at the lobbyist's request, the reporter shall not aid and abet the disparity by failing to question it.

3. They require that a reporter shall not let a lobbyist in an obviously conflicted relationship off the hook by writing that "he is not the first lobbyist to juggle political and corporate relationships."

4. They require that when a politician or a lobbyist tries to snow the reporter with heartfelt stories of their early beginnings in

poverty, the reporter shall recognize the rank sentimentality as a trap intended to disarm her natural skepticism and step carefully around it, but under no circumstances lend credence to the ploy by parroting it.

5. They require that when a lobbyist asserts in the same sentence that his clients are corporate (General Motors, General Electric) and the interests of those clients are populist, the reporter shall not employ tortured logic or a facility with language to further this falsehood, but rather will point out in a plain fashion that the lobbyist attempted at that moment in the conversation to play the reporter like a cheap violin. A degree of skepticism is in order. Corporations simply do not push "for issues that are in sync with ... populism."

6. They require that when a politician whitewashes with generalities, the reporter shall pose obvious follow-up questions. If a governor characterizes a lobbyist's requests as routine because "[the governor] does that for most groups who ask," the reporter shall demand specific examples.

7. They require that when a politician admits that he or she hates to raise money, and has delegated that function to a lobbyist—who delivers on the charge and gets the politician elected—a conflict of interest is established if the lobbyist then goes to work for the governor. The reporter shall not dignify this by calling the relationship a balancing act. Examples of people who "balance" careers with other responsibilities: Single parents, students, artists. Examples of those for whom career interests do not "balance," but rather coincide: a lobbyist who raises money for a candidate and then acts as a power broker for the elected official, putting the lobbyist in a position to repay the campaign contributors with favors.

8. They require that reporters shall not idly speculate on whether a politician's interests are in conflict with those of a lobbyist's clients. Lobbyists look for situations where they can create a confluence of interests, and one does not need to wonder "where [the lobbyist's] allegiances will be during his first [legislative] session playing those two roles—with the governor or with his client." If the reporter does not understand that it is the lobbyist's job to merge those interests, the reporter shall go back to the weekend police beat.

9. They require that the reporter shall assume that when the people in her story have nothing but positive things to say about a lobbyist and his relationship with an elected official, that this may well be a sign that people are afraid to criticize the lobbyist, the elected official or the relationship itself, and that the

reporter must therefore be even more vigilant in the public's interest and step into that breach. If sources do say critical things off the record, the reporter must at least report the substance of those remarks, and in fact must go out of her way to solicit them.

10. They require that if the story makes it into print without a single source, on or off the record, questioning the propriety of a lobbyist raising money for a successful gubernatorial candidate, then serving as that governor's "gatekeeper," the editor shall be required to do penance by reading the entire *oeuvre* of James Fenimore Cooper.

11. They require that crass stupidities designed to lend humanity to the fine art of influence peddling shall not be played upon the reader by the reporter, such as "Horne is part of a new breed of lobbyist."

In addition to these large rules, there are some little ones. These require that the newspaper and reporter shall:

12. Know the difference between wisdom and influence.

13. Understand how power moves and show it to the reader.

14. Eschew sycophancy.

15. Understand that the interests of lobbyists and politicians are often not those of the newspaper or its readers.

16. Avoid slovenliness of thinking.

17. Give the devil his due, but not forget he's the devil.

18. Employ a simple and straightforward bullshit detector. ■



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