

COMMENTARY

Media Darling

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This deal's perfect Roger, because people are so POSITIVE — POSITIVE, POSITIVE, POSITIVE — and I hope you write a POSITIVE story, because the Media has been so NEGATIVE, but our actions are POSITIVE, POSITIVE, POSITIVE...

Not Frank. When he said Cape Coral and Lehigh Acres were going to take off as residential retreats for the working class, they did. When he said downtown wasn't, it didn't. When he cited statistics, they were spot-on, as it turned out.

At the time, of course — this was the late 1990s when I worked as a city reporter for the daily — I was skeptical.

"Yeah, call Frank," my colleagues said, rolling their eyes. "He LOVES the press."

Well, yes, he did. To him, it was a tool for communication, and above all, Frank prized communication. He didn't see it as a matter of positive propaganda versus negative propaganda — a cynic's way of viewing it, or a simpleton's, either one — he saw it simply as a chance to communicate. And he saw information (good, bad or indifferent, positive or negative) as power.

He even wrote a book about it, about how to use communication for your own purposes. He published it himself, and peddled the thing across 46 or 47 states at the beginning of this decade, if I recall correctly. He went on a book tour, in other words, alone — without a big, comfy publishing house to float him. Just like he went on a kayak ride at night in choppy waters on the Atlantic coast. Alone.

The book was called, "The Instant Negotiator," and I have a signed copy. When he suggested that I help him write a second book, with some autobiographical content, I felt I couldn't, because then I could no longer be considered an unbiased reporter, albeit a

freelancer by this time, on economic and real estate matters. Boy, what a brilliant decision.

Then I lost touch, and he wrote a column for a number of years for the daily paper, after I had stopped working there. It was an event many journalists questioned, including me. Here's a guy trying to sell everything he can, we reasoned, and the newspaper, supposedly an unbiased recorder of local events and history forged daily, puts him right up front on the real estate page every week, in an example of massive free advertising and favoritism worth hundreds of thousands of dollars over several years.

Journalism isn't supposed to give anybody any gifts ever, editorially speaking. Because how are you going to ask your prominent local businessman/columnist the hard questions, and do an investigation of him that's fair (if you have to), when he's joined your club?

And even if you *can* do it (should the need arise), are readers going to believe that your integrity is as immaculate as you claim? To them, fairly enough, you'd be a guy stepping out of the House of the Rising Sun at dawn and insisting he's a virgin.

This is why reporters — and editors and even publishers — should not be hobnobbing, or sitting on committees, or attending social events with people who directly or indirectly benefit from them, or could, or might be perceived as benefiting.

But somebody was wiser than I am, I guess; Frank became a columnist. He didn't see it as a step down, either, in spite of the money.

The typical columnist gets paid enough to buy gas and the \$6.99 pre-cooked chicken at the grocery store. Frank's sales in 1999 were \$400 million. That was \$399.1 million more than the first year he came to Lee County in 1981, when he brokered a "pitiful" \$900,000, he once told me. And it was about \$400 million more than he made as a columnist.

As a journalist, Frank didn't spring from the old school of journalism ("The job of the

newspaperman is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," one of them said).

That notion carries the unspoken assumption that everything is not positive, and everyone is not treated fairly, and people with power and money are often treated more fairly than other people.

He may have understood those realities, I don't know. I would guess he did, having grown up with them. But instead of dealing with them directly, he believed (honorably and sagely) that information was good, it helped people, it was a form of currency that could make them richer, and much of it ought to be shared, especially by him, since he had more of it than many other people.

That's a classic egalitarian view, and in the best sense it's a generous American view of what it means to know something, and benefit from it in a community where you also live.

And of course his column allowed people to get to know him, and probably to do business with him. So his media marriage was what he called a "win-win." Somehow, the newspaper's editors and publisher figured this out when they married him.

He was their darling, and they were his, apparently. He wrote for their newspaper. He joined the media. He understood: that could only help everybody, because that was communication.

And we learned — I learned, at least — never to scoff at the information in his columns, which probably made some people a lot of money, and came with impeccable research and few errors.

So I called him last night, like always, to ask about the real estate on the other side, in "that undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns," as a broker of fine language once said.

I figure the phone will ring any moment now, and it'll be Frank. "Roger, how you doing? What can I do for you?" ■

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