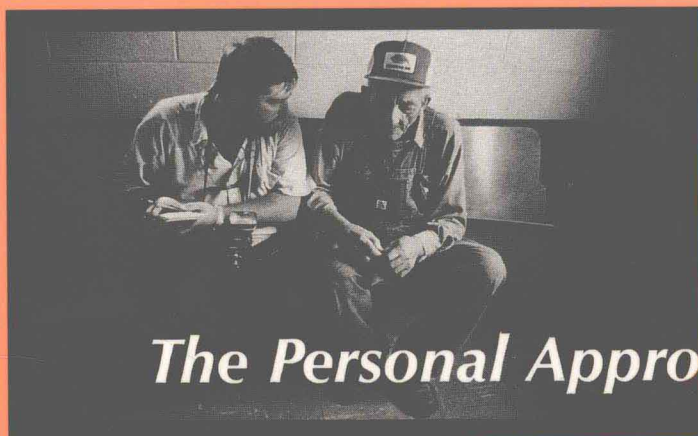


Community Journalism



The Personal Approach

JOCK LAUTERER

Community Journalism



THE PERSONAL APPROACH

JOCK LAUTERER

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS / AMES

Jock Lauterer is assistant professor of journalism in the College of Communications at Pennsylvania State University, where he teaches (among other subjects) community journalism. Lauterer is in charge of the College's photojournalism component, teaches graphic applications, is co-adviser to the *Penn State Journalist* and on the Board of the *Daily Collegian*. Between 1969 and 1983 he was the joint winner of 55 press awards from the North Carolina Press Association for excellence in papers he co-founded, edited and published. In an eventful career, Lauterer has taught photojournalism at his alma mater, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, designed the journalism program at Brevard College (N.C.) and published four books. In addition, he writes commentary for the local public radio station and community newspaper.

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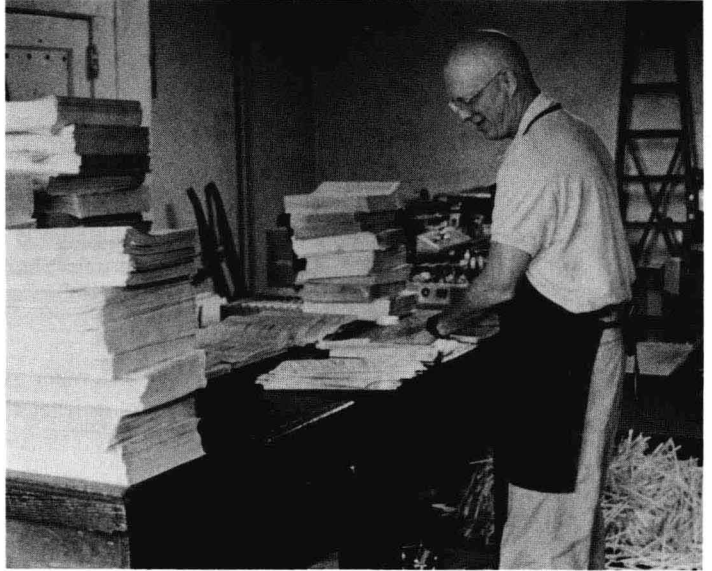
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ALL ACROSS THIS LAND every Tuesday night (or Sunday, Wednesday or Thursday) the lights are burning late at the *News* of Creedmore (or the *Gold Leaf Farmer* of Wendell or the *Weekly* of Wake Forest or the *Rocket* of Blowing Rock), the so-called small newspapers of our country. This book, which is meant to honor those late-night candle-burners, the men and women of community journalism, is especially dedicated to the finest community journalist I've ever known, Jim Shumaker, my first editor and second father.



The author, summer of 1993, doing “basic research” for this book in the backshop of the *Tryon* (N.C.) *Daily Bulletin*. (Photo by Charles Barnett)

FOREWORD

BE CAREFUL WHEN YOU PICK UP this copy of Jock Lauterer's book; it could land you in a world of trouble. It could land you in the community newspaper publisher's world of tumult and trepidation, tenacity and triumph. Lauterer's narrative will put you in the editor's place at the hometown *Gazette*, working late into the night, often well into the early morning, seemingly always hours past deadline. And he'll have you reading at the take-no-prisoners pace that he describes as the editor's lot in life.

Maybe this book isn't for everyone. Maybe it's not for the cynical reporter who writes for the city desk downtown and sneers at the thought that good news could ever be *news*, or that there *is* any good news in Bigville. Maybe it's not for the journalism professor whose aim is to prep the next generation of writers for the *New York Times*. And maybe it's not for the reader for whom the term "local paper" means a 12-pound, plastic-bagged edition that is hurled in the direction of the driveway at 5 A.M. each Sunday.

Lauterer's *Community Journalism: The Personal Approach* is for readers who have bumped into a different kind of journalism. It's for readers who have bumped into the person who writes the editorials—the same one who covers the Little League games, who sells the ads, answers the phone and carries the bags marked "Second Class Mail—Do Not Delay" to the post office.

It is for readers with a sense of humor. It's for those who harbor an empathy for small towns and aspiring journalistic enterprises. And it's for the dreamers among us who still romance the idea of owning a community newspaper.

Here's an additional reason to be careful when you pick up this book. It's tough to put it down.

The delightful anecdotes and illustrations ring true because they're right out of the author's experiences. Lauterer

delivers insight that has been tested by fire as an owner/publisher/entrepreneur/community journalist. His writing style is casual, easy to read, and he provides readers a genuine and user-friendly look at grass-roots journalism.

What would-be owners of small publishing empires (the Walter Mittys of newspapers) will find within these pages are good-sense lessons from Lauterer's years in the business.

What those who are already in the business of putting out their own small newspaper will find is a story they recognize; a story they've lived. And while Lauterer's tales may have them reliving their greatest struggles, his stories will also reaffirm the worth of their enterprise. This book may even help restore the vision that enticed venturers into the newspaper business in the first place, even if the vision has dimmed under the harsh and frequent glare of the midnight oil.

There's something here for journalism educators, too. If you, like me, have been waiting for a good text on community journalism, you'll find that Lauterer has provided it. His work speaks the language of community journalists. It puts into print the perspective of the grass-roots journalist. It's a perspective that has disappeared from textbooks as journalism has become a professional sport and community newspaper ownership a corporate quest.

Still thinking you'll read on?

All right. Go ahead. You haven't heeded my earlier warnings, but I'll leave you with another:

Catch your breath now while you can. You won't have time to do it again until you finish this edition. Welcome to the world of community journalism.

JOHN NEIBERGALL

Executive Director

Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media

A. Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications

Kansas State University

You know it's a community newspaper when you can't tell the editors and publishers from the production team. Unloading newsprint at *THIS WEEK* (Forest City, N.C.) the author (in overalls), then co-publisher and co-editor, is surrounded by the work crew that includes, clockwise, assistant pressman Jackie Arrowood (in Elton John T-shirt), co-editor and co-publisher Ron Paris, business manager and co-publisher Bill Blair, and pressman and business partner Don Lovelace. (*Photo by Joy Franklin*)

PREFACE

WE ARE DIFFERENT.

Not better, and certainly not worse.

Just different.

If you're an old-timer, a veteran with community newspapers, you already know this.

If you're new or have been at a community paper for a little while and can't seem to find the handle, perhaps this will help.

If you're a student of community journalism or an intern at a community paper, then you need to know this.

There is a fundamental difference between us and the big-city dailies. (And we're so different from TV that we might as well come from different planets.) At first glance, a community paper may look like just a dinky, unsophisticated low-budget version of a big daily. After all, some of us are daily; we run ads, print broadsheet, cover some of the same stories, print those stories and photos and headlines with ink on paper—so we *appear* somewhat alike. But that is where the similarities end.

There is a profound philosophical difference in the way we look at our community, at our readers, at our advertisers, and how we write, handle and package the news.

In a nut shell, it's the personal approach.

At a community newspaper, news is not events happening to sources. News is people, your people, and how the changing world affects their everyday lives. News is people being caught up in events.

Writers, photographers, ad people, editors and publishers who don't have or don't want to develop the human touch should look elsewhere for employment. Otherwise they will be miserable and make all around them likewise.

Writers, photographers, ad people, editors and publishers who cherish people, who either know how, or want to learn how, to celebrate the ordinary

and who want to have a lasting impact for good in a community can find an intellectually stimulating, financially rewarding and emotionally fulfilling lifetime of work in community journalism.

But in the words of Ringo Starr, “It Don’t Come Easy.”

To borrow from the Peace Corps: It’s “the toughest job you’ll ever love.”

According to the 1993 *Editor and Publisher Yearbook* there are 1,586 daily newspapers in America. The vast majority, 1,336 or fully 85 percent, have circulations under 50,000 and are classified by the American Society of Newspaper Editors as “small newspapers.” Of those 1,336, another 1,089 have circulations under 25,000. According to the National Newspaper Association, there are presently over 7,400 weeklies, with an average circulation of 7,487, reaching over 55 million people. Ours is a country dominated by small newspapers, most of which are community newspapers.

And yet, most graduates emerge from university journalism schools and schools of mass media and communication largely untrained and totally unprepared for what they encounter at papers of that size and nature. To compound the irony, most recent college graduates, cub reporters and photographers find their first jobs at these smaller papers (while they’re waiting for that call from the *Washington Post* or the *National Geographic*). The common misconception is that the community paper is a small version of the big-city daily. Nothing could be further from the truth. Little wonder then that newcomers find the community newspaper to be a bewildering journalistic briar patch.

While this book is intended to be used as a text and workbook for university students studying community journalism, it is the author’s aim for it to serve also as a survival manual/field guide/handbook — a support mechanism providing sustenance for those of you already out there in the

trenches. I mean it also to be an affirmation and a validation for all the long hours and crazy times, when you're feeling very alone, trying to stay sane and creative out in the boonies, or up against a thorny ethical dilemma when there seem to be no mentors, role models, allies or anyone else who's been through anything like this before. When it's late at night and it's just you and the problem, you and your fingers on the keyboard at deadline, you in bed in a cold sweat wondering if you did the right thing — take heart; we're all in this together. There are legions of enlightened, caring and dedicated professional community journalists who have gone before you and succeeded against great odds. And so can you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book, too, is a community venture. It reaches publication only through the inspiration, support and encouragement of a community of friends. I can take credit only for having been in the right place at the right time. My most heartfelt thanks go to three models, mentors and friends whose personalities run through this book like a clear note: editors and professors Jim Shumaker and Ken Byerly; and fellow Carolinian and inspiration, Charles Kurlalt. To my former “partners in crime” at the Forest City paper, Ron Paris and Bill Blair—Long live the spirit of *THIS WEEK!* Thanks to UNC-Chapel Hill School of Journalism and Mass Communications Dean Richard Cole for suggesting the idea for the book back in the early '80s; and to former Brevard College President Billy Greer for providing me a nurturing work space when the idea took root years later. Thanks also to former fellow workers who contributed good photos and wise guidance: Ron Paris, Joy Franklin, Pat Jobe and Maggie Lauterer. Inspiration came along the way from great friends: Virginia Rucker, Lin Redmond, Bill Byers, Mike Thompson and Lynne Vernon Feagans. At Penn State I have been constantly uplifted and empowered by the best friend a man could ask for in the person of Steven Knowlton, whose insightful essay enriches this book. Special thanks to David Perry at UNC Press for encouraging me early on, to Sally Heffentreyer for a first read-through and editing, and to media observer Elaine Pearsons who read the fledgling work-in-progress and proclaimed it “fit for humans as well as reporters!” In addition, I celebrate that readers are treated to a taste of the community journalism initiative at Kansas State University; John Neibergall's Foreword and Carol Oukrop's Addendum bracket my efforts with an appropriately scholarly yet enthusiastic framework. I would be remiss if I didn't thank the inaugural class in community journalism at Penn State, who, during the spring of 1995, “road-tested” this book using little more than galley proofs. Without their forthright feedback, the final product would be the poorer. In the end, this book is the result of Iowa State University Press believing in the vitality and fundamental importance of community journalism. To Gretchen Van Houten, Jane Zaring, Bob Campbell and all the gang at Ames I extend my sincerest gratitude.

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Community Journalism



After an all-nighter putting out *THIS WEEK*, the author takes a break from inserting. Undoubtedly, someone just told a joke; you can go a long way with very little sleep if it's a happy shop. (Photo by Joy Franklin)



The flag ripples in the July breeze. The maple leaves spread their shade. A gospel tune plays on the radio. Reading quietly, this couple enjoys each other's company in their favorite front-yard spot. An enlightened small-town newspaper is like a benevolent mirror held up to the community.

1

With Apologies to Nike, But Why Just Do It?

ONE JOURNALIST'S LOVE AFFAIR WITH SMALL NEWSPAPERS

Just as there are no small parts, only small actors, there is no such thing as a *small newspaper*. Especially if you're the editor of that paper, every issue is like giving birth.

Though we call it community journalism now, it still requires that you test the outer limits of your underarm deodorant. From an eight-page weekly on up, the so-called "small-town newspaper" requires all your guts, sheer grit, creativity and energy.

Big-city newspeople who harbor pipe dreams of buying that little weekly in rural Pennsylvucky and settling down to the leisurely pace of Rotary Club editorship with banker's hours had better wake up—because that's what a pipe dream is—pure fantasy. My workday averaged about 14 hours a day during my 15 years as co-publisher, co-editor. And whole weekends off were rare.

Even as faculty adviser to the lab newspaper of Penn State's College of Communications, the once-a-semester 24-page tabloid, I devote heaps of commitment and hefty amounts of overtime.

A newspaper is a living thing. Just ask any newspaper widow or widower.

AT HOME IN THE BACKSHOP

As I write this, I am hunched over the light table in the production room of a small-town newspaper where the *Penn State Journalist* is being prepared for press. All my senses come alive here: the sweet, acrid smell of the backshop, the whirl of the LogE negative-developing machine, the crank and clank of the copy camera easel, the whoosh of vacuum on the copy camera back, country music in the background, faces of the strippers and opaquers lighted by ghostly illumination from the light tables, the prolonged zzzzza-aap of plate burner and clunkaclunka of the plate developer.

The backshop is my home. I was raised in this briar patch. When I was a kid hanging out in the backshop doing odd jobs they called the likes of me a “printer’s devil.” The paper became my nursery room. As a burr-headed, whistling newsboy, I couldn’t get enough of the dusty, fusty confines of the *Chapel Hill Weekly* with its friendly Dickensian counting house of a shop, all a-clank and a-clatter with the busyness of collecting, collating and printing the news.

The printer’s devil liked the backshop so much he decided to own one, and so a college degree and a career as a community journalist ensued. Along with two partners, in 1969 I started a weekly, *THIS WEEK* (Forest City), in rural western North Carolina. Within five years we had moved to larger offices, purchased a press and bought out the competition semi-weekly. By 1978 we had grown into a 60-page weekly, and that fall we went daily, renaming it the *Daily Courier*. Yearning for another weekly, in 1980 I sold my interest to my partners and started a second paper with two young optimists in another community. We published this paper as a free broadsheet weekly until 1982, when we converted to paid and semiweekly. But the major recession of that year crippled us. After selling in 1983, I found my way into university teaching. (See Chapter 19 for Two Case Studies of Community Newspaper Start-ups.)

Never far from the newsroom or the backshop, I continued to freelance columns, features and photographs to the local community paper. All the while I began paying particular attention to the state of community journalism as only someone who had sat in an editor’s chair for 15 years could do.

I started noticing things.

First, that during the recession of the late ’80s (when major dailies were hemorrhaging, laying off reporters and folding at an alarming rate), the community papers seemed to be surviving in far better shape. Fewer lay-offs, fewer papers folding, less decline in ad revenues and circulation relative to the big boys. Plus, community papers were hiring all through the recession.

Perhaps not at the boomtown rate of the '60s-'80s, but there weren't hiring freezes either.

Secondly, community papers seemed better insulated not only from the recession but also from TV's insidious influence. In this age of instant global communications, this satellite-enhanced Information Age in which we're all regularly "CNN-ated," how can a small-town newspaper survive? Hasn't TV rung the death knell for community papers? Has the global village abrogated the need for the village news?

A flourishing community journalism industry says a resounding "no!" Happily for us, people are hungry for and needful of information about their community, its concerns and their neighbors.

So until CNN can come up with an uplink from Crooked Creek, Possum Trot and Gobbler's Knob, papers like the *Bugle*, the *Argus* and the *Tattler* will continue to thrive.

WE AIN'T AFRAID OF WORK

The plates for the *Journalist* are ready now and are being loaded onto the big gray Goss Community Press, the flagship of community papers everywhere. I can't help but think back to my favorite pressman, Babe Yount of Waynesville, N.C., whose Goss was emblazoned with two big signs on the press's folder: "U.S.S. YOUNT" and, "We Ain't Afraid Of Work."

The press operator, who you'd better get along with because he or she can make you look like either a king or a goat, fires up the press, which takes off like a chained locomotive. To stand beside a running press is to be in the presence of the essence of our trade. After all, before it was "the Media," was it not "the Press?"

I still prefer the latter, for it evokes the power, energy and vitality of the printed word rifling through the giant machine ... the oily pungent smell of printer's ink, washer and solvent ... the dry tang of paper dust that tickles the inside of your nose ... the concrete floor vibrating slightly as the press thrums a staccato chunkachunkachunka ... the solid schuss of paper blurring through the units ... the steady whining whirl of metal rollers ... and the sticky tacky hiss of rubber rollers meeting, meshing and parting.

Standing at the end of the press, watching the stream of neatly stacked *Journalists* shooting off the press, I can't help but be reminded again why I am, and always will be, a newspaperman. And above all, a small town newspaperman. A community journalist.

End of sermon. Can I have an amen?