

EDITORIAL

Sins of the Media: Both Omission and Commission

The recent press coverage of the dispute between the Department of Health and Vermont CARES has a silver lining. It has provided a wonderful platform from which to compare our local media, as well as perfect examples of the mistakes we as consumers of the media need to watch for.

But it was certainly a nasty cloud that concealed that lining, and that cloud started in last month's lead story in this very publication.

Before I go any further, let me state the obvious. Although I can point out the mistakes of all the media outlets involved, I can only explain the actions of one — ours. Does only offering explanations for our own actions make this editorial biased? Perhaps. But let me state that this is not an attempt to make us stand ahead of the class — we're all taking home bad report cards. I offer the explanation as illustration of the tiny factors that make for sloppiness in journalism and of the dire need for readers to be ever critical of what they read.

That said, take a moment to decide how much salt you need to take this editorial with, and let's begin at the beginning.

The OITM article was by no means perfect. AIDS service organizations other than CARES should have been, and were not, mentioned. Although attempts were made to contact both Brattleboro Area AIDS Project and AIDS Community Resource Network, the story broke only hours before we went to press and busy signals and answering machines don't make for good quotes. Still, the standard "Neither BAAP or ACORN could be reached for comment" line should have been part of the story to clarify that attempts were made. That was a problem; although the story itself as coverage of the effects on CARES was balanced, it was not balanced as

coverage of the whole issue.

Ditto for lines such as "But that's not a realistic option, say the ASOs..." Once we'd determined that we couldn't reach other ASOs, they should have been changed to reflect the single ASO in question. It was a mistake. Our copy editor and I share the responsibility for these gaps.

I find it alternately comforting and disturbing to note that even the revered Vermont Public Radio news staff made a similar mistake. When repeated calls to the Department of Health for

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comment on the story led nowhere, VPR aired their story with only the Vermont CARES comments, not mentioning the unsuccessful attempts to include the DOH. I'm told they took a great deal of heat for this, and I know that they later aired a correction to apologize for the exclusion.

OITM may get to break big stories, but we often have to watch as the mainstream press, with better resources and more frequent publication, run with it. It was therefore appropriate that Heather Stevenson's piece in the July 11 Rutland Herald/Times Argus went much further than either ours or VPR's did. Similarly, Shay Totten's Vermont Times article, printed in their July 14 issue, promised the 'real story' of the whole matter.

I am familiar with the work of both these reporters, and both are usually quite good. Unfortunately, both were quite disappointing on this issue.

In the Times piece, there is blatant editorializing, which does not belong in a news article. I refer specifically to the paragraph

in which Totten describes what emerges from a month-long investigation. It might have been intended as summary, but it is in fact Totten's impression of the events. In a news story, a reporter should let us decide this after reading the evidence, not tell us up front and back up the case later.

In the same article, emphasis was placed upon a report prepared by one of the disputing parties. It doesn't matter whether that report is the objective gospel truth of the situation or not — rely-

ing on a report prepared by one of the involved parties creates at least the appearance of bias. By the journalistic standards I've been taught, there's no difference between bias and perceived bias. If your readers don't believe you are presenting unbiased evidence, then it means diddleysquat how objective you are or your evidence is.

Again in the Times piece, there was no questioning of key points in the dispute between the two agencies — in some cases, there was no mention of them. Totten did not question whether some of the state's requirements were reasonable, and seemed to gloss over the fact that there was dispute as to the nature of the contractual obligations. It failed to confront either agency on issues mentioned in the letters: CARES with its cabinet lock, the DOH with its unprovided tracking software.

Totten neglected a discussion of why other ASOs don't have problems with the DoH requirement when CARES does; Stevenson mentioned it, but failed to do anything with the

information. Neither offered any contemplation of geographic, cultural, or other differences among the state's ASOs. And especially in an investigative piece of the Times' purported scope, some objective outsider opinion would have been welcome.

In fact, in all the reports, we have seen plenty of statements that should have been verified and issues that could have been clarified. Is CARES really a model of rural delivery? Are ASO-state disputes such as this one common? How are they solved, and how does this compare to the route these agencies are taking? Instead, all we've seen is "he said, he said." There's also been a lot of subtly slanted language and structure — whether judicious or careless, misplacement of "however" and "but" in switching story threads affect the reader's perception. And similarly, ending a story with the phone number of one of the parties instead of both is as good as taking sides. Nitpicky, yes, but that's what journalism is about.

There's a lot more to be said about all the articles around issues of interviewing, of depth, of verification and of balance. I hope I've at least provided the beginnings of a discussion that needs to be ongoing in our community.

This is certainly an issue that deserves a good investigative article to reveal the underlying truths — I doubt that there's just one truth in this complex matter. But so far, we haven't seen it. My third most fervent hope is that someone can make sense of this mess and produce a fair investigative piece about it soon. The second wish on my list is for the staff and resources for this amount of research and investigation here at OITM. My most fervent hope is that such an article, when it appears, turns out to be a retrospective on a nasty incident that's since been resolved. ▽

OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of *Out in the Mountains* is to serve as a voice for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered people, and our supporters in Vermont. We wish the newspaper to be a source of information, insight, and affirmation. We also see *OITM* as a vehicle for the celebration of the culture and diversity of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities here in Vermont and elsewhere.

EDITORIAL POLICY

We will consider for publication any material which broadens our understanding of our lifestyles and of each other. Views and opinions appearing in the paper do not necessarily represent those of *Out in the Mountains*. This paper cannot and will not endorse any candidates or actions of public officials on issues of importance to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons. We reserve the right not to publish any material deemed to be overtly racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, ageist, classist, xenophobic, or homophobic.

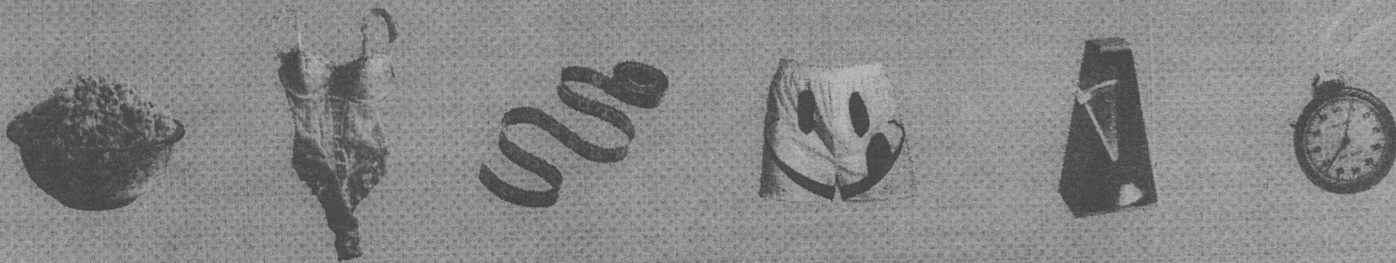
Writers' guidelines are available on request. All materials submitted must include a name and a contact number. However, within the pages of the newspaper, articles may appear anonymously upon request, and strict confidentiality will be observed.

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Don't take a chance...
take a condom