



*As the saying goes, journalism is kind of like making sausage: the more you know about the process, the less appetizing the final product seems.\**

## A Healthy Contempt For Journalism

by NICK MEADOR

*I love journalism. I hate journalism. Or...maybe I can't decide.*

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“As far as I’m concerned, it’s a damned shame that a field as potentially dynamic and vital as journalism should be overrun with dullards, bums, and hacks, hagridden with myopia, apathy, and complacency, and generally stuck in a bog of stagnant mediocrity.”  
—Hunter S. Thompson, October 1, 1958, *The Proud Highway*

“I had to learn, as I soon did, that one must give up everything and not do anything else but write, that one must write and write and write, even if everybody in the world advises you against it, even if nobody believes in you. Perhaps one does it just because nobody believes; perhaps the real secret lies in making people believe.” —Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*

During summer 2007 I had an internship at The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a non-profit environmental protection group. I learned about the Sleeper Lake Fire, a wildfire that started in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula in early August. The fire was of particular interest to me because I traveled to Wyoming right around the same time. I actually saw enormous plumes of smoke billowing above a wildfire in Yellowstone National Park. I also learned about quarrels that have occurred between

national park employees and the public over firefighting practices. Apparently a couple decades ago, there was a huge fight about the proper way to handle naturally occurring wildfires. The public felt that the enormous fire – one that was doing sufficient damage to our country’s first established national park – should be extinguished. The park service stuck to the modern view that the fire was part of a natural cycle, and the overall effect on the forest would be decidedly positive. Scientists never considered the positive effects of wildfire until the 1930’s. But it seemed that the public dissidence arose from the Smokey the Bear campaign, which gave people the impression that all fires must be prevented *and* put out.

I viewed this as the perfect opportunity to get involved with *EJ Magazine*, a student-written environmental publication that is printed once per semester by the Knight Center at Michigan State University (MSU). I had shied away from participation the previous semester, mostly because my attention was focused on SpartanEdge.com, my veritable sandbox for online journalism endeavors. I attended *EJ*’s informational meeting in September, and proudly announced that I wanted to write an article about the Sleeper Lake Fire. Then I met with the editor to officially pitch the story. She liked the idea, so she suggested types of sources to approach and a general idea of how to present the information. Basically, I would speak to an MSU professor, a contact at TNC, and whoever was in charge of the firefighting at the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). It all made sense, and I was excited to get started.

Through my research for the article, I discovered that Michigan has had a less than favorable interaction with wildfire. Two fires in the late 1800s were so destructive that they each burned more than 1 million acres and killed more than 200 people. Fast forward to August 2007. The Sleeper Lake Fire turns out to be the third most destructive fire in Michigan’s recorded history. Naturally, I was glad I committed to this subject. Let’s not forget that I am, and probably always will be, a science nerd at heart. Questions started pumping through my mind. Was this scenario similar to the one I heard about in Wyoming? How was the fire being suppressed? What were the long-term effects of the fire? Would citizens riot



and rampage if the authorities didn't take appropriate action to fight the fire?

Despite my excitement, I didn't start right away. I was an amateur journalist, and I'm not a very outgoing person. At times, I despise the very idea of an interview. Usually I build it up into a monstrous idea. I get nervous that I won't ask the right questions. Or maybe my lack of expertise on the subject will make me appear incompetent. Even worse, perhaps I'll say something that directly offends the source, and they'll hang up on me or ask me to leave. I know some of this is the result of never taking an undergraduate journalism course and never having any proper training.

Naturally I procrastinated, and it took me a couple weeks to actually get in touch with my primary sources. I kept putting this off until after my halfway check-in point on September 20, when, as a first-time *EJ* writer, I was actually supposed to have my first draft submitted. I did manage to speak with all three of my sources by October 4, the first deadline for fall stories. I hit a small speed bump when I spoke with the MSU professor, and she informed me that a few other students had also contacted her about articles for *EJ Magazine*. I asked, "Really? During this semester?" She replied affirmatively. I then asked my editor if it was a problem that multiple writers were using the same contact. She said, "No, that should be fine. I gave the other writers her contact information, but they're all writing about different topics. If there are any problems, we'll handle it in the editing process." I didn't think for a second that those other writers would also be speaking to the professor about wildfires. *They were all writing about different topics*, like the editor plainly said. I wasn't just being naïve.

I rolled on and wrote the article in the manner that made the most sense to me. I started with a reference to Smokey, then got into the Sleeper Lake firefighting specifics, and related that to general information about wildfires in Michigan. I incorporated quotes from the MSU professor with wildfire expertise, the fire manager at TNC (the organization, by the way, is the biggest landowner in the Sleeper Lake area), and the manager at the DNR Newberry office. Most importantly, I was happy with the story.

I knew going into the editing process that I would need to make sacrifices. For starters, my first draft was 1400 words, and the editors ask for articles between 800–1200 words. The editor sent me a first cut at about 880 words, saying that my article was well written, but was better suited for a newspaper than a magazine. She also informed me that another writer had submitted a story about wildfire, and that our articles were too similar for both to go into the magazine. She asked if I would be willing to reconfigure my article as a side-story to the other piece, by focusing on Sleeper Lake only. It was either that or put my article up against the other – like snarling dogs about to lunge into the fighting pit – and the editor would choose the best fit for the magazine. I asked if she told the other writer I was already doing an article on wildfire, since I declared my topic at the original meeting. She said she couldn't do that, because sometimes people have great pitches that never materialize into articles. *EJ Magazine*, she said, was trying to simulate a competitive, professional environment, where no author has a guarantee of being published.

I met with her to discuss the matter further, and thought about it for a day before telling her that I wanted to stick with my piece. After all, I had worked too hard and invested too much time, brainpower, and passion to sit in a little side buggy while someone else steered the Harley. It turns out that the other author wasn't writing about wildfire on a national or international level – he or she was only focusing on Michigan. But the most mind-boggling part of this was that the author hadn't even mentioned the Sleeper Lake Fire in the piece. I thought to myself, "Well, if I have to rewrite mine to focus on Sleeper Lake, the other writer should have to take on a *broader* focus." My reasoning was based on the fact that, in 2007, the biggest wildfires in the world happened in Greece – not anywhere in the U.S. If the magazine was looking for balance, I thought that would be the most effective plan.

Essentially, the editor wanted me to emphasize why it's so good for a forest to go through the wildfire process. I sucked up my pride and got more info from the MSU professor's postdoctoral associates (the prof was too busy that week to talk), rearranged the article, and submitted a second draft at 1010 words. The editor



send me a second cut at 550 words, suggesting that I go deeper into the positive effects on plants and animals, and when those effects were expected to start showing. I expressed significant concern at this point. I was very careful with my response, since I have a tendency to vent my aggravations vehemently through writing – often in one unedited burst. My exact words were, “I’m trying to be cooperative, but the second edit is so far removed from its original context that I have almost lost my interest in the subject.” I also said it bothered me not to know how she was steering the other article.

I started to question my motivation for persevering. Did I just want to see my name under a headline in the magazine? Was I hoping to show the article to potential future employers? What bothered me most wasn’t the reduced word count – it was the elimination of background information, style and, most importantly, meaning. In my mind, I was not overreacting. The second edit was an ugly beast of an article, and I barely wanted to be associated with the thing. How can I describe my disgust? Imagine having a child, and then taking that child to the doctor for a routine check-up. Next, the doctor pulls the boy’s intestines out through his anus, wraps them around his body, ties a huge, gory not, and then tries to convince you that the boy is better off that way. He says something doctor-ish like, “This is what we call an extra-intestin-otomy. Studies show that it helps digestion if the intestines are *outside* of the body.” Plus, bloody muscle red tones are in fashion this season!

For some reason, I still couldn’t give up. I spoke to a second contact at the DNR Newberry office (my first contact was on vacation), rewrote once again, and turned in a third draft of a measly 670 words. Finally, the editor sent me a third cut (are you lost yet?) at 580 words, from the journalism professor who acts as managing editor for the magazine. As we were notified at the informational meeting, nothing makes it into *EJ* without the approval of that professor. I gave the third edit a fuck-if-I-care glance, answered the couple questions he had asked, and sent it back in. I just wanted to be rid of it already! It was turning into a bad rash that kept coming back, just when I thought the anti-fungal cream had done its damn job. Then in late December, the article appeared in that finalized form

with pictures from TNC, even though that source had been cut from the article.

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This dilemma posed a serious threat to my progression in the Masters of Journalism program. I literally wanted to cut all ties and drop out of grad school. But then, this wasn’t the first time I had a tiff with an editor. In August, I wrote a band profile for *UR Chicago Magazine* that led to a falling out with the editor. I had been freelancing for the magazine since my internship in Fall 2006 when I still lived in that dismal town. The problem arose in April, when new management bought the publication and booted my original editor. In her place, they deposited a man who boasted *enviable* accomplishments such as writing for *Rolling Stone* (this is where you emit the *ooohs* and *aaahs*).

At first, I was excited because of the boost in *UR*’s music section, and even though I never met the editor in person, we got along well enough via email. But I immediately noticed a change in the editing process. He edited much more severely by rearranging sections and altering phrasing – but with no apparent reasoning. The worst example was when he appended the phrase “switched from acoustic troubadour to electric genius, plugging in and setting things on fire” to a short sentence in a feature on Norwegian singer/songwriter Sondre Lerche. I’m very sensitive about words like “genius.” In fact, in the pool of musicians writing and performing today, I could probably count the ones I’d call geniuses on my two hands – if not on a single hand.

The magazine underwent some expected changes with the new ownership. One of those was to use a bunch of 400-word band profiles instead of fewer 600-word features. After writing two of those profiles, I started to get frustrated. There was no room to breathe when trying to fit in quotes, band info, *and* creative quirks. I tried to express my feelings to the editor. Unfortunately, my aggravation got the best of me, and, because of my mixture of idealistic suggestions and gentle ribbing, the editor felt that I was being condescending. As anyone who has used email or instant messenger knows, asynchronous communications are very easy to misconstrue.



To summarize his response with one quote, he claimed, “I think you’ll find it difficult to find work in this business if you can’t work within assigned word counts and get across enough flavor along with substance.” It was clear that he was consciously trying to hurt my feelings. But in my opinion, I wasn’t really being condescending. I was simply trying to tell him that, if the magazine continued on its current path, more people would use it as a cum rag than for reading material. Not only can music writing be a very limiting medium, both in terms of vocabulary and style – but this editor was voluntarily filling the magazine with clichés and nonsense, because of the perceived direction in which the magazine business is moving: in other words, shorter is better.

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This is not the future. The future will not be dictated by editors who dole out roles of “somebody” and “nobody.” In the future, everyone will have the opportunity to be somebody – even if they are surrounded by millions of other somebodies. In the future, most people will have a small voice, but every voice will count towards a glorious collage of creation.

I had been trying *so hard* to be a journalist because of how much time and energy I had dedicated to my program. It was demanding on all fronts: financially, psychologically, and emotionally. Finally, I took a step back to reevaluate the situation, and turned to my inspirations for guidance. Two of the main reasons I wound up in the program are Jack Kerouac and Hunter S. Thompson, two writers who, through different approaches, succeeded through the fictionalized documentation of their own lives. Journalism needs fiction to reach beyond its “factual” confines and achieve a greater truth, but fiction needs journalism too. Fiction depends on the imagination to flourish, but if it contains no elements from real life, it is meaningless.

I started to realize the extent to which our society has become departmentalized and institutionalized. That’s why it takes so much time and effort to make any real changes or improvements. Well, journalism is reflective of the society it reports on, and journalism shares those same characteristics and faults of organization. It was starting to seem impossible,

within the professional world of journalism, to write anything artistic or creative. What matters in a journalistic business is making a profit, so the content has to be tailored so that people will buy it, or read it and subsequently be exposed to the advertisements.

What I think bothers me the most about the professional world of journalism is that it is made up of an endless number of embittered father figures, who always manage to point out your flaws, but never seem to pick up on your strengths. Journalists are not the real gatekeepers; editors are. They are the selective filters for what is finally presented to the public readership. And that is a position of immense power! Of course that power is going to affect their decisions, especially if the individual feels that he or she had to fight to get that role, as the new *UR* editor clearly did. This also explains why the journalism industry seems skeptical about the oncoming changes attached to the Internet. Increasingly, non-journalists can reach large audiences using blogs and citizen journalism sites in ways that were never before possible.

So how did I end up in a Masters of Journalism program if I dislike the profession? It all started around January 2006 when I began writing about music as a hobby. *Music*. That word alone releases a flood of endorphins over every wrinkle in my cerebral cortex, and sends tingles down the back of my neck. At the time, I was living in Chicago with no friends or family, no romantic prospects, and little besides my day job to occupy my time. I came across a website called Blogger.com, and decided to start a blog of my own. I had become familiar with the word “blog” through MySpace.com. People were sharing more about their lives than was probably appropriate, in a place that was viewable from any web-equipped computer in the world.

I named my blog “Head Dress Tattoo,” as a testament to the tattoo on my back. After a quick introduction, I got right into the music with a post entitled “My 10 Favorite Albums of 2005.” At the top, I wrote, “This is a celebration of the worst year of my life.” The weirdest part is that the entry *wasn’t all that bad*. Reading it now, over two years later, I’m still kind of happy with the article. Clearly I had found a way to spend my time doing something creative, constructive, and rewarding. I knew perfectly well that, other than



myself, not a soul would be reading the blog. But that's not what mattered. What mattered was that I was happy with the words shooting out of my brain, being digitized by my fingertips. I kept moving with CD reviews, themed mix CDs with lengthy explanations, and experimental features. I had no boundaries or limits, so I wrote what I wanted.

I completed the internship at *UR Chicago* and felt good about the direction I had chosen. I applied, visited, was accepted to, and enrolled in the program at MSU. In Spring 2007 I took an Ethics of Journalism class. The instructor told us about the role journalism plays in a democracy, and he helped forge my idealistic views. However, this was the first place I heard that journalism is like making sausage. Not only does the saying refer to the unsavory practices that go into making journalism (including but not limited to extortion, fraud, and fabrication), but also the finished product. Most corporate journalism today is the written equivalent of half a dozen varieties of meat, bone, cartilage, and maybe even feces thrown into a grinder and pumped into casing. To a certain extent, the ingredients are interchangeable without much effect on the final product; it'll still look and taste like sausage.

In Spring 2008 I took the required Media and the Law class. I learned about my basic freedoms of expression and how they related to my role as a writer. I realized just how much I can get away with in America, because it's promised in the Constitution. I can say that I'd like to wipe dog shit all over George W. Bush's face, that I want to inseminate Laura Bush's ear, and that I hope Dick Cheney develops colorectal cancer and suffers massive internal bleeding – all without fearing that I'll be hung in a public square. Those fellows are doing their best to endanger my freedoms – like expression, right to privacy, and right to fair trial – so I think it's my obligation to stretch those freedoms to the limit, to balance the scale.

Another reason I stuck with journalism is the simple fact that not all editors are loathsome. I got along really well with the first editor at *UR Chicago*, during an internship that would turn out to be a formative experience in my career. I was fortunate enough to have an internship at *Traverse Magazine* in summer 2008, where I answered to five editors and butted heads with

no one. Plus, other areas of the publishing world are worse, especially literary journals. They want to be the gatekeepers of the literary world, but if I have my way, their opinion won't matter more than any other person. The revolution is coming to their front door as well, now that newspapers, television, and radio have been tossed out for blogs, YouTube, and podcasts.

Now, in the closing months of 2008, I'm still not a professional journalist. But I'm no longer sure that I would want to be. To some extent, I have been aborted. Now, this statement should not be taken too literally. Think about it this way: let us presume that humans are living beings made up of atoms and cells and organs and organ systems and a body. Now let us also presume that humans have a soul or a spirit or a mind or a consciousness, or whatever it will be called. The two – body and soul – are inextricable, at least, how they exist in this dimension. But perhaps, as an embryo is forming in the womb, there is some mystical process by which the atoms gather into cells, and the cells gather into organs, and the organs gather into systems...all while the soul is gradually being channeled into the portal of the mind, connected physically with what will eventually become the brain. Gradually, because if an embryo is extracted from the womb before it is ready, it will die.

I'm starting to wonder if there might be circumstances when that spirit is denied entry into our world because it would be better off in some other dimension, in some other form of existence. Maybe the soul will align with billions of atoms at some far off corner in the universe, within a more agreeable system that doesn't try to manipulate, discourage, and ruin the soul.

Furthermore, maybe some babies are *wrongfully* delivered into life. How else could you explain Adolf Hitler – or George W. Bush, for that matter? But if some humans are wrongfully delivered, then that means that some human spirits, humans who might have had a positive impact on our world, could be denied entry or delivered transdimensionally. In that case, who are we to say that they should have been launched into *our* version of life?

Of course this isn't about abortion rights or practices, and I shouldn't drag out the metaphor. What's important is that there are active forces in the journalistic world – and in the professional world in general – trying



to keep me down, to wear me out, to see me fail. But regardless, I know I'll be okay. Even if I don't fit into the mold of professional journalism, I'll be fine. I like being idealistic and passionate. I like being strange and irregular. I like disagreeing with corporate authorities and traditions, especially when it comes to journalism.

At the core, a journalist's trade is writing. I will always be a writer. I'm also a poet, a scientist, a philosopher, a lover, and an explorer, among other things. My power lies in assembling facts (i.e. – objectivity), while sculpting my opinions and emotional impulses (i.e. – subjectivity) into a semblance of truth. What I really want to avoid is unnecessary editing. I must be able to express myself completely and without sacrifice. Even so, I can't force people to pay attention to me. The trick, as Henry Miller put it, is to make people believe. He also said to write and do nothing else but write, because writing is living and they are inextricable. What I need is a way to make a living. If I can't do that by writing, either now or in the future, then I'll get a day job and write at night. If no one reads my work, or if I can't get a publisher to help, I'll still post my writing online.

I will write because it is my calling, it is my duty, and it is my freedom.

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*\*Graphic made by Nick Meador using a public domain image. The title of this essay is a quote from the same collection of correspondence by Hunter S. Thompson, The Proud Highway. Access this article online at [http://www.supraterranean.com/issues/issue\\_003/08\\_9\\_1\\_E\\_journalism1.html](http://www.supraterranean.com/issues/issue_003/08_9_1_E_journalism1.html)*

