

APRIL 17

When media dogs don't bark

The recent decision by General Motors to pull its advertising from the Los Angeles Times has not gone over very well.

"Blame the press," Daily Variety scoffed in mid-April, after several days of publicity about the automaker's move. "That's the latest coping mechanism for General Motors, whose slumping share price and falling profits have generated a wave of negative media coverage.

GM isn't the first Fortune 500 company to retaliate against a newspaper's editorial coverage by taking a punch at its ad division. But most companies understand the tactic just doesn't work; it only generates more bad coverage."

In the Motor City, the Detroit News business writer Daniel Howestold readers that the monetary slap at the L.A. Times exposes "GM's thinning corporate skin." Boston Globe columnist Alex Beam had this to say: "On the one hand, the decision, which may affect up to \$20 million in ad spending, sends a powerful message to the Times. On the other hand, it sends a powerful message to the country about the idiots who are running GM."

Drawing more attention to GM's financial woes, the ad-yanking gambit is likely to backfire. But news outlets are far from immune to advertiser pressure.

By coincidence, the conflict between General Motors and the L.A. Times went public just as a new report highlighted the media clout of advertisers and other powerful interests in business and government. The media watch group FAIR (where I'm an associate) released the results of its fifth annual "Fear & Favor" report on "how power shapes the news."

The FAIR report, by Peter Hart and Julie Hollar, provides context with sobering information: "A survey of media workers by four industry labor unions found respondents concerned about 'pressure from advertisers trying to shape coverage' as well as 'outside control of editorial policy.' In May [2004], the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press released a survey of media professionals that found reporters concerned about how bottom-line pressures were affecting news quality and integrity. In their

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summary ... Bill Kovach, Tom Rosensteil and Amy Mitchell wrote that journalists 'report more cases of advertisers and owners breaching the independence of the newsroom.'"

Among the examples in the new "Fear & Favor" report – which will also be published in the May issue of ColdType.net – at <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2486> are these gems:

* Last July, "when furniture giant Ikea opened a new store in New Haven, Conn., the New Haven Register cranked out 12 Ikea stories in eight straight days — accompanied by at least 17 photographs and a sidebar on product information — with headlines such as 'Ikea's Focus on Child Labor Issues Reflects Ethic of Social Responsibility' and 'Ikea Employees Take Pride in Level of Responsibility Company Affords Them.' ... The back-scratching reached its apex the day of the grand opening, when the Register heralded the arrival of Ikea and fellow super-store Wal-Mart and remarked upon Ikea's 'astonishingly low prices — a coffee table for \$99, a flowing watering can for \$1.99, a woven rocking chair, \$59.' Sound like an ad? It was the Register's lead editorial."

* In January 2004, Boston Herald readers "could easily have mistaken the paper's front-page ad for news. When discount airline JetBlue launched several new flight services out of Boston's Logan Airport, Bostonians who picked up a free promotional Herald that day found that every item on the front page was devoted exclusively to the airline, including the lead headline, 'JetBlue Arrives, Promises a Free TV to All Who Fly,' and teasers like 'Flight Attendant Gives Passenger Entire Can of Soda.' After the front page, the paper resumed its actual news content — but nowhere did the Herald indicate that its front page was in fact a paid advertisement, and the 20,000 recipients of the promo paper missed out on the actual front-page news of the day."

* When a TV station in Kirksville, Mo., "ran a news report that quoted a company that didn't advertise on the station rather than a competitor that did, the angry advertiser pulled its ads from the station. KTVO vice president and general manager Crystal Amini-Rad quickly apologized to the sales staff in a memo that also required news reporters to 'have access to an active advertiser list ... of sources which you can tap into' for expert opinion and industry comment — and told reporters that they 'should always go' to station advertisers first on any story."

* In Silver City, N.M., when KNFT Radio "brought on progressive host Kyle Johnson as an alternative to the seven hours of Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage and Bill O'Reilly the station aired every weekday, KNFT's advertisers boycotted the show. The station made Johnson raise the cash to pay for his airtime, and his listeners anted up. But the advertisers threatened to boycott the entire station if Johnson stayed on; faced with

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the prospect of a nearly \$10,000-a-month loss, the station manager reluctantly gave the progressive host the boot."

Such incidents are low profile, in contrast to the recent General Motors move against the Los Angeles Times. But the most insidious instances of advertiser pressure are the ones we never hear about — implemented with winks and nods or the simple tacit understanding that the media business is, after all, a business. In the mysterious case of why mainstream news outlets aren't more aggressive in challenging corporate power large and small, Sherlock Holmes would probably conclude that the most profound clues are to be found when the media dogs don't bark.

We hear the least about the most pervasive media filtration — when thoughts go nowhere because journalists have been made to understand the limits of their profession in the present day. Advertising is part of the corporatized atmosphere that sucks the oxygen out of the newsrooms. The sound of an idea being smothered in its crib doesn't rise to the decibels of a bark or even a whimper. And media consumers don't know what they're missing.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer. His columns and other writings can be found at: www.normansolomon.com