

AUGUST 7, 2003

To err is human, to truly correct is divine

For America's newspapers, the New York Times is a pacesetter. And this summer, with the Times expanding its daily "Corrections" slot on page two, some other papers seem open to more rigor in setting the record straight. This is commendable. But the limitations of the genre leave much to be desired.

Traditionally, published corrections focus on such factual matters as the proper spelling of names or the accuracy of various numbers, dates and geographic locations. Sometimes we learn that photo captions mixed up the identities of individuals. Or we find out that events happened a bit differently than they were reported.

Fine. When it comes to getting facts right, better late than never. However, more substantive steps could be taken. So, here are some hypothetical newspaper corrections of the sort that I'd like to see:

* Yesterday's front-page article about the mayor's support for taxpayer subsidies of the proposed new ballpark failed to mention that he received more than \$150,000 in campaign contributions from real estate investors who stand to benefit from the plan. The Daily Bugle regrets the error of omission.

* For the 958th consecutive week, the Daily Bugle published a Business section each day without ever including a Labor section in the paper. This tacit identification with the interests of capital over the interests of working people is inconsistent with the values of independent journalism. The editors regret this chronic error.

* The Daily Bugle published a wire-service story yesterday that flatly reported: "The events of 9/11 changed everything in America." But Sept. 11 did not really change everything. For instance, widespread hunger among low-income people has persisted in this country. To take another example, 9/11 did not change the society's basic financial structures, which continue to widen already-huge economic gaps between rich and poor. It is inaccurate and irresponsible journalism to report that "9/11 changed everything." The Daily Bugle regrets that it has gotten caught up in this media myth.

* A news report in the Daily Bugle on Thursday stated that Secretary of State Colin Powell is "a moderate." This assessment should have been attributed rather than

being presented as an objective fact. The lengthy article did not mention Powell's record of strong efforts for the contra war in Nicaragua, the invasion of Panama, two massive assaults on Iraq and other wars waged by the Pentagon: a record some would contend hardly merits characterization as "moderate."

* On Wednesday, a news story in the Bugle used the term "casualties in Iraq" to refer only to the deaths of American troops. This usage had the effect of rendering invisible the Iraqis who continue to die because of military actions by the occupiers.

* News articles and editorials about regulatory issues related to the media industry have not included the relevant information that the Silverado Newspaper Group, the chain that owns the Daily Bugle, stands to gain or lose millions of dollars in profits depending on the outcome of deregulation proposals. The editor regrets the lack of appropriate disclosure and disclaimers.

* In recent weeks, the Daily Bugle has printed more than a dozen large advertisements for cigarettes. During the same period, the Bugle has published no articles about negative health consequences of smoking. The editors regret this error of judgment.

* Yesterday's long article about Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean described the former Vermont governor as a "candidate from the left." Yet the story failed to mention that many of Dean's positions are far from the left: such as his statements in support of raising the Social Security retirement age, his stance against cutting the U.S. military budget, his assertion that American troops should not be withdrawn from Iraq, his opposition to medical marijuana, and his backing for the NAFTA "free trade" agreement.

* In numerous stories this year, the Bugle has referred to U.S. "defense spending." Yet it is an arguable point as to whether most of the Pentagon budget is for "defense." A more evenhanded journalistic term would be "military spending."

* Several articles about international affairs in Friday's edition quoted top officials and other sources in the U.S. government without balancing their claims with quotations from foreign-policy critics. This stenographic reliance on official sources is not in keeping with independent journalism. The Daily Bugle expresses its regret and resolves to do better in the future. ■