

CAROL BURNETT FUND FOR RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM

*presents*

# HOWARD SIMONS

Curator, since 1984, of the Nieman Fellowship Program at Harvard University.  
Former managing editor of The Washington Post during its prize-winning  
coverage of the Watergate coverup.

*speaking on*

## THE BUSINESS OF THE PRIZE BUSINESS

Thursday  
March 9, 1989  
Noon  
Hemenway Theatre

*Sponsored by the University of Hawaii Journalism Department as the eighth in  
the series of annual Carol Burnett Fund Lectures on Ethics and Responsibility  
in Journalism.*

## THE BUSINESS OF THE PRIZE BUSINESS

When John Luter invited me to come to Hawaii to present the Carol Burnett lecture, I readily accepted. Who realized then it was going to be the mildest winter in recent Boston memory? I thought also that I could wing it across the Pacific and then wing it during the lecture, I would give my famous, patented, flaming, First Amendment speech that tells the world how wonderful are American journalists and American journalism. That I use the First Amendment as my measuring rod around the world. That is, the freer the press, say I, the freer the society. And, thanks to the First Amendment and the courts that have interpreted it liberally all these two hundred years, we arguably have the freest press in the world. It's a helluva stem-winder, believe me.

Alas, Luter called some time later and told me that what he was after was something original, something I haven't said before, something that can be published.

It then just so happened, as they say, that I was riffling through my weekly Editor & Publisher when I saw that writers at two of the better newspapers in the United States--the Louisville Courier-Journal and the Lexington Herald-Leader had received the Eclipse Award. What, you may ask, is the "Eclipse Award" because that is what I asked? And I was told by someone who knows "Why, it's the Pulitzer of horse racing."

Upon closer inspection, it turns out that the Award is named for the most celebrated horse in thoroughbred racing who was born during a "remarkable" eclipse on April Fool's Day 1764; remained unbeated during its racing career; and is one of three acknowledged ancestors from which all modern race horses are descended.

So much for the horse. How about the award which happens to be a statue of Eclipse? Well, it is given annually by three organizations--a group of journalists banded together as the National Turf Writers Association; a specialized newspaper, the Daily Racing Form; and the Thoroughbred Racing Association, comprised of the 51 horse racing tracks which, it seems fair to surmise, constitute the beat of the turf writers and the Daily Racing Form. So the question that occurred to me was: Should the turf writers and the Daily Racing Form be in bed with the owners of the race tracks whom they cover or should they be checking the bed sheets?

The next week I was thumbing through E&P again and came across this item under the headline:

"Veterans groups

to offer award

"The California branch of the Disabled American Veterans is establishing an annual journalism award to be given to a writer or editor in the state who authors or publishes a newspaper article about issues favorable to all disabled veterans or to the DAV organization."

Now, there it is. No euphemisms. No lofty notions. No mincing. No anesthetizing. They say what they are about--to reward those journalists who place disabled veterans or the DAV, itself, in a favorable light. So, I salute the veterans for their forthrightness.

I now began to think more about journalism prizes. And so I thought I would discuss the business of the prize business. I am not here to hector my former colleagues. But rather to explore the topic. Indeed, as I hope we will learn, it is a complicated subject, with no simple cure-alls and no simple directives. As with so much in the newspaper business, varied and individual effort and ethic, notion and solution, seem to be more a strength than a weakness and I would not want it any other way.

But before I get into my discussion, I want to be very clear about my own prize behavior. I am guilty, guilty, guilty. I won the American Association for the Advancement of Science-Westinghouse science writing award in 1962 and again in 1964 and accepted checks for \$1,000 tax free dollars with each award. This was at the same time that I was covering both the AAAS and Westinghouse. Today, if I were still an active journalist, I would no more accept the award than would I have then accepted a check for \$1,000 directly from the AAAS. Even to this day, I have listed these awards in my Who's Who biography and on my c.v., as you've heard. So I know the joy of being a "award-winning journalist" and advertising the same to gain credibility,

advancement, a measure of respect in the profession, among sources, and with my mother. And, finally, we, at the Nieman Foundation, ask applicants to list their awards.

Now to my thoughts.

As I stated, it is a complicated issue. For example, what should be done when a reporter is sitting there minding his or her own business and an organization in the community bestows a public blessing upon the reporter or editor or newspaper. Say, for example, a mental health association gives a plaque to a reporter--uninvited--for his or her contribution to a better community understanding of that serious societal challenge? Should the reporter be allowed to accept? If one believes, as do I, that the appearance of fairness is as important a fairness itself, then we ought to reflect on how it appears to a share of the readership.

As inconceivable as it may seem, there may be a group in the community that opposes the aims of the mental health association. Acceptance of the award, which the newspaper and the reporter did not seek, implies that the mental health association found the stories to be favorable, or at least that seems to be the reason why such awards, certificates, and plaques are given. At the same time, do-gooders can become do-badders, and that's always a story. And, finally, it is the job of the newspaper to cover the mental health association and not accept blessings. It seems to me accepting gratuities, no matter how well-meaning, innocent or small, is to be avoided by the press.

But it is very difficult to insult a well-meaning group doing commendable work in the community in which one publishes. And it may not even be smart. It may be what we used to term at The Washington Post "a too hard."

Now, this brings me to prizes, those contests which newspapers and journalists knowingly enter to win recognition, wall decorations, and money. My suspicion is that journalists bestow and have bestowed upon themselves more awards and prizes than any other profession, certainly more than most. Estimates vary from 200 to 500 contests. But I do not know this for a fact and would suggest that this would be a good subject for a graduate thesis.

What I do know, because in the last century I was a science and medical reporter, is that the medical profession heaps heaps of awards on the journalism profession.

Bob Cochran, when he was at The San Jose Mercury some years back summed it up better than I. He wrote: "It would appear that virtually every disease or affliction worth mentioning offers us some sort of award, provided we write persuasively about that disease or affliction."

Many of the medical prizes probably were intended to raise the public awareness of shared health threats. And it has paid off. Indeed, heart specialists will tell you that the publicity about the devastating effects of smoking and the concomitant public campaign to get Americans afflicted with high blood pressure to do something about it have reduced dramatically the number of deaths from coronary disease.

Many of these awards, such as those given by groups battling the diseases of heart, cancer, arthritis and multiple sclerosis, were meant to reward journalists who wrote about the challenges and medical research and control of these afflictions and got it clear and, above all, got it right. And it might seem unseemly to argue against entering contests for such awards.

But I would argue, as is my wont, that journalists who submit their work to these societies to compete for their prize money or trophies should consider the fact that these very same medical societies, foundation, groups and doctors' collectives are competing with each other for public attention, fund-raising, favorable legislation, and warm regards, as well as tax dollars. And they compete for access to the press. They call attention to get attention.

Now in the literature of journalism prizes, as thin as it is, all kinds of issues surface. To note but a few-- money prizes vs. non-monetary prizes; contests judged by journalists vs. those judged by non-journalists; and contests sponsored by journalists for journalists and of journalists about which, just about five years ago, Angus McEachran, editor of The Pittsburgh Press said this:

"Contests are fine. It's nice to be recognized by your peers. They are excellent staff morale boosters. I just think we have become too obsessive with them. And as a matter of policy we do not enter nor will we let our staff accept cash prizes for contests that are not judged by a peer group."

I cannot tackle all these issues and questions about prizes here today. Therefore, I decided to concentrate on what are known as "sponsored" prizes; those prizes given by special interest groups other than the profession, itself. In this regard, it would be easy to pick on any number of contemporary awards such as the Miller Lite Women's Sports Journalism Awards or the Ned Ramsaur Travel Writing Award for "articles promoting travel in South Carolina" sponsored by the South Carolina Department of Parks or the O.P. Smith Award of \$500 and an all-expense paid trip to the meeting of the sponsors, the Greyhound Track Operators' Association, for stories that portray "the sights, sounds and flavor" of greyhound racing or my favorite the LULU which, says E&P, honors "writers for editorial coverage of men's fashion..." and, unsurprisingly is sponsored by the Men's Fashion Association of America.

But it would be wrong.

So, what I want to do today is talk about two awards that are sought after and coveted by many, if not most, of the best publications and reporters in the business.

The first of these is the John Hancock Award, now in its 22nd year.

If it were named the Virginia Slim Award, I doubt as many reputable newspapers and journalists would vie for it. But, then again, Virginia Slim did not sign the Declaration of Independence.



The stated objectives of the award are very clear, and like so many sponsored awards, laudable and lofty:

"To foster increased public knowledge of, and interest in, business and finance.

"To clarify the significance of political and social developments as they relate to the nation's economy.

"To recognize editorial contributions to a better understanding of personal money management."

There are two groups of judges for the John Hancock--all journalists. The first is a screening group of Boston journalists. But the final say is made by someone from Fordham University Graduate School of Business Administration which co-sponsors the awards and the sitting presidents of the National Press Club, the Society of Professional Journalists (nee Sigma Delta Chi), the New York Financial Writers, and the American Society of Business Editors and Writers.

Each year, seven \$5,000 awards are given. The winners are brought to New York for a night at the theatre together with the judges and a luncheon at which a prominent person such as Henry Kissinger, will speak and there follows a presentation dinner. The cost for all this--awards, honoraria, hotels, travel--to John Hancock Financial Services to whom contest entries are mailed, is roughly \$175,000 a year. And what does John Hancock get for its modest public relations investment? I asked a spokesman for John Hancock this very same question.

The answer? "A tremendous amount of good will among news people throughout the country." He went on to say that it raises consciousness about John Hancock in the news industry and is "invaluable" for him to have an opportunity to interact with the top journalists in the United States. Moreover, he added, it allows "my chairman and president and top executives to have dinner with the top newspaper people and to have social interaction with them and to converse with them about subjects of mutual interest." But, he concluded, the primary benefits are to raise consciousness and to build good will for John Hancock.

I then called Bill Small, former president of NBC News and a stalwart defender of the First Amendment and all good things about journalism, because he is the designated representative of Fordham's business school.

Bill defends the John Hancock prizes. He says that John Hancock public relations staff is remote from the judging; the quality of the material is fantastic; it is very encouraging of good reporting and writing, especially for smaller publications; that it is not a contest to reward people who pat business or the insurance industry or John Hancock on the back; and, finally, most of the business community would probably be upset at the kinds of stories that the John Hancock jurors have selected to honor.

The second award I want to focus on is the Silver Gavel of the American Bar Association. The newspapers and journalists that compete for the non-monetary Gavel awards are just as reputable as those who compete for the John Hancock. And its goals are just as lofty:

To:

"1. Foster greater public understanding of the inherent values of our American legal and judicial system;

"2. Inform and educate citizens as to the roles in society of the law, the courts, law enforcement agencies, and the legal profession;

"3. Disclose practices or procedures needing correction or improvement so as to encourage and promote local, state and federal efforts to improve and modernize the nations laws, courts and law enforcement agencies; and/or

"4. Aid the legal profession and judiciary in attaining the goals set by the Model Rules of Professional Conduct and the Code of Judicial Conduct."

About this last named objective, although the official entry rule booklet doesn't say, presumably those who enter the Gavel Awards competition know that both codes of conduct are promulgated by the American Bar Association, which sponsors the award.

Judging is done by lawyers. Parenthetically, a lawyer friend when I talked to him about an award for journalists judged by lawyers and given by lawyers, mockingly attacked me by suggesting that why would it be wrong for lawyers to give such awards but okay for journalists to give themselves awards? After all, he argued, journalists are as much a special interest group as lawyers. Moreover, he said warming to the attack, they are hardly a disinterested group of objective judges.

Nonetheless, the Bar Association is a large subject for press coverage and editors have to ask whether they should compete for its favors.

Rick Tulsy, a Nieman Fellow this year who has won the Silver Gavel twice and the Pulitzer Prize once remarks about the Gavel contest: "They don't mind giving the award for stories that attack the system and lawyers."

Now what do editors think about the sponsored prizes? Well, I do not really know. What I do know is that when I was an editor I worried about the propriety of entering contests sponsored by a special interest group, no matter how lofty the groups aims or clean its judging mechanism. And so several years ago we purged our prize list to try to eliminate the most flagrant special interest awards and had much fun fighting about it. For example, I remember the argument whether we should or should not allow reporters to enter the Heywood Broun contest. The purists said that as long as we were precluding special interests, why not a labor union, even if it were our labor union. The Broun Award stayed in.

To be sure, I rubbed Preparation Howard on the list, but not enough of it. I listened too intently to the entreaties and arguments of my staff and colleagues about the value of prizes for careers and reputations and their value to the newspapers reputation.

My successors have done better. This year The Washington Post has pared the list of categories it will permit its editors and reporters to enter into two short

groups. The intent is to further shrink the list of special interest contests The Post will endorse. Tom Wilkinson, a Post deputy managing editor wrote to me that "Not to sound too high-minded about it, but we didn't see how it was in our general journalistic interest to win a prize promoted by a special interest. Our general feeling is characterized by distance--there is a proper one for a journalistic enterprise covering a special interest, and competing for prizes offered by that special interest precariously--and probably unacceptably--shortens the distance."

The first Post group is comprised of 25 "acceptable" contests and includes John Hancock and the Penney Missouri Award, funded by the retailer, J.C. Penney. The second represents those contests which, The Post editors characterize as "awards we know of but won't enter as a paper," which means the individual reporter can enter but the newspaper will not support the entry nor officially submit it in the name of the newspaper. The list includes, for example, the Bar Association's Silver Gavel award, my old AAAS-Westinghouse award, World Hunger Media Awards and many pure journalism qua journalism awards such as Stokes and Edward J. Meeman.

This move by The Post editors brings them apace of The Philadelphia Inquirer, whose policy for a few years now has been to believe "it is beneficial to the newspaper and to the staff, collectively and individually, when the quality of our work is recognized by responsible and respected

organizations." A list of "approved" contests may be obtained from the managing editor and staffers can argue for a contest to be added to the approved list or deleted.

Inquirer policy states: "In determining which contests to enter, we seek to avoid the possibility that the newspaper or its staff will be exploited by the companies or organizations that run journalism contests primarily to benefit themselves. Therefore, The Inquirer does not participate in any contest that seems designed substantially to foster a product or organization."

Thereafter are five general considerations.

In 1989, The Inquirer did not enter the Hancock contest, but did enter the American Bar Association and 34 other contests, the majority journalism awards for journalists judged by journalists. The Bar Association gavel contest seems to violate two of the five considerations set forth in the Inky's statement of policy: 1. Generally journalists should be substantially represented on the judging panel; and 2. The judging of the contest should be insulated from the sponsoring organization.

The Inquirer's list cleansing put it on a par with The Milwaukee Journal.

Fifteen years ago, The Milwaukee Journal purged its list as a result of the work that a committee of Milwaukee Journal Staffers did for the Associated Press Managing Editors Ethics Committee. Both groups were responding to a review of prizes called for by the then managing editor Joe Shoquist.

The Journal committee noted that in reviewing such contests, "the following guidelines emerged...":

"1. Contests sponsored by press associations were approved, since it was felt that they had no commercial taint.

"2. Contests with commercial sponsorship were approved where it was felt that the controlling organization, for example, a journalism school or an outside panel of judges, was an intervening objective or disinterested party.

"3. Contests sponsored by trade associations or special interest groups solely for the promotion of products or professions were not approved, unless a disinterested panel appeared to control the judging."

Shoquist told me: "You will note that on the original list of approved contests, the American Bar Association Gavel awards appeared. I persuaded the committee to move it to the unapproved list." Joe, now dean of the College of Journalism at the University of South Carolina and as mean a moralist as ever, told me he thought that the Journal's deliberate withdrawal from many of the national contests sponsored by special interests, cost the Milwaukee Journal some of its thitherto national reputation.

At the same time, as a result of Joe's prodding the APME's Professional Standards Committee, using the material developed by The Journal's Donald Pfarrer and a group of Journal staffers issued a report which began:

The Committee "looked into a new subject this year-- contests and awards--and found questions of ethics to which there are no easy answers." The committee consisted of 13 reporters and copy editors of The Journal. What it recommended was that "the newspaper enter only contests sponsored and administered solely from within the journalism profession."

Three of the 13 committee members dissented. The heart of the majority view seems to me to be right on:

"The majority believes that The Journal, its reporters and photographers should not enter contests sponsored by political parties, special interest groups (including benign ones) and commercial entities. The newspaper and its people should not accept awards from such groups when they come unsolicited. The majority believes that a sanitized judging procedure does not make such contests acceptable."

Haplessly, the dissenters offered a more flexible policy "under which contests would be evaluated individually by a committee consisting of editors and reporters, and those of questionable propriety would be avoided."

The newspaper elected to go with the minority. And this seemed to agree with the prevailing attitude of editors across the nation 15 years ago. A survey conducted for the APME committee found "Avoiding all contests except those sponsored and judged within the journalism profession appears to be too strict a policy for most editors, judging from present practices and attitudes. Most editors, if they deal with the question at all, seem to prefer to decide which contests to enter on a case by case basis."