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In journalism, byline isn't bottom line

SOAPBOX • The use of uncredited freelancers for gathering information is commonplace in newspaper game

By Steven K. Wagner
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The resignation of New York Times reporter Rick Bragg under a noose that continues to tighten within the grand old paper's shrinking newsroom should never have happened. I should know. Nearly a quarter-century ago, I similarly helped New York Times reporter Wallace Turner who, like Bragg, was a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. I was working as a bureau chief for The Oregonian when first contacted by Turner for assistance in covering the eruption of Mount St. Helens. I, like J. Wes Yoder, the journalist who helped Bragg, provided the legwork in a freelance capacity and was paid as such. I received no byline.

My contact with Turner was brief. Shortly after Mount St. Helens erupted in 1980, I was contacted by an editor at The Oregonian, where Turner had earned his wings, winning a Pulitzer in 1957. The editor noted that Turner was covering the eruption for The New York Times from loaned space in The Oregonian newsroom and asked whether I'd be willing to provide him with any pertinent details I was able to glean from the daily news briefings in Vancouver, Wash. I was glad to help.

The likable Turner called me on more than one occasion over several days. Each time, I passed along details of the erupting volcano given to reporters by U.S. Forest Service personnel and U.S. Geological Survey scientists. I paraphrased quotations and provided details that were general at best, and given on the fly due to the myriad deadlines I was trying to meet for my own newspaper. I never knew how Turner used the information. Much like Yoder did for Bragg, I interviewed sources and provided Turner with the fruits of other reporting I was doing. My payment for the effort? A modest \$25.

Though I wondered at the time how useful the information I gave Turner really was, he seemed to appreciate it, and I never considered my assistance inappropriate. After all, Turner had established The New York Times' Seattle bureau, and I was asked to assist him by my supervisor, a midlevel editor at The Oregonian Ñ where Turner's achievement in winning a Pulitzer Prize was well-known. My editors respected Turner, had given him space in which to work and clearly supported our arrangement. Turner, obviously a high-level correspondent at that time, saw nothing wrong, either. Why should I have objected?

Bragg, suspended by the Times last month in the wake of the (Jayson) Blair witch-hunt project, came under fire for his handling of a June 15, 2002, feature story on Florida oystermen, which included substantial information gathered by Yoder, without giving the freelancer credit. Though maintaining that the Times often uses freelancers, interns and other nonstaffers to report from the scene of stories without byline credit, Bragg resigned May 28 rather than face the pressure that is mounting in the newsroom.

Twenty-three years ago, more as a courtesy than anything, I passed along what I had to Turner, who was gathering information from his end and wrote the stories under his byline. Turner's use of information that I, as a freelancer, provided for his coverage of the erupting volcano seems to back Bragg's contention that such arrangements are not without precedent at the Times.

Why didn't I find the arrangement unusual or unethical? Simple: While working as a reporter for United Press International during the late 1970s, I had used a cadre of freelancers who provided information on stories that broke in the venues they covered. My bureau simply wasn't staffed well enough to cover every story that broke, and these were trusted journalists. That was all that mattered.

I left The Oregonian in 1983 and have been freelancing exclusively since 1989. In the past 14 years, I've learned many things about the freelance business, and it is a business. One is that freelance journalists don't expect bylines. Sure, bylines are nice, providing a legacy for our children and a pat on the back for those of us who spend our lives working in a journalistic vacuum. However, earning a living in a world where freelance journalists pass like the weather is the overriding goal.

Turner understood that Ñ Rick Bragg probably does, too. The New York Times' overreactive handling of the Bragg matter, which ultimately led to his resignation Ñ and surely played a part in the resignation of Editor Howell Raines Ñ deserves a retraction.

Steven K. Wagner is a freelance writer living in Claremont, Calif. A graduate of Oregon State University, his work has appeared frequently in the Los Angeles Times.

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