

THE PRESS

Bob Alperin

On any given day the *Washington Post* is more likely to ignore stories about problems in the nuclear power industry than to print them. (See *Gazette* Mar. '82, and Feb. '83.) Unlike many papers, the *Post* news and editorial sections ignored the anniversary of the Three Mile Island accident.

A *Los Angeles Times* opinion piece used cooling vents in reactor safety systems as an example of how the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's initial post-TMI safety concerns have slowed. TMI's vents require manual operation. After the accident nobody could go in to open them. Remote-controlled vents were obviously needed. January, 1981, then July, 1982, were deadlines for all plants to have the new vents. Last year the NRC told Congress the vents were "necessary" but the schedule "unfeasible." Even at TMI's idle twin of the damaged reactor, essential items in the NRC's safety action plan haven't been applied.

An engineer on the management team cleaning up TMI accused General Public Utilities and Bechtel Corp. of trying to circumvent quality assurance requirements for a crane used in the reactor core cleanup (AP-St. Louis *Post Dispatch*; also, *Philadelphia Inquirer*). He said the NRC failed to protect his confidentiality when he complained, and that it showed the companies drafts of NRC documents before official versions were released. A 56-page affidavit with such charges against EPA or many other agencies would have received saturation coverage by the *Post*. This one was ignored.

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AP reported that for the first time in the US nuclear industry's history, a plant's primary and backup automatic safety shutdown systems had failed (*Inquirer*, *Atlantic City Press*, *Miami Herald*). It happened twice within a few days at a Salem, N.J. plant. The NRC blamed poor maintenance and feared the problem was widespread nationally. Since 1973 nationally there had been 35 failures of one system.

The NRC warned that in the 24.5 seconds it took to shut down the second double failure manually, there could have been a severe accident if the plant had been operating at full capacity. (Starting up after refueling, it was only running at 12%.)

After ignoring the story for nine days, the *Post* ran "NRC Orders N-Plants to Test Shutdown Systems." The final paragraph noted the double failure.

Four days later the *Post* had "NRC Cites Safety Device In Reactor Shutdown," hardly as inviting or informative as "Reactor failure called the worst since TMI scare" (*Herald*) or "NRC stresses severity of N.J. nuclear plant incident" (*Baltimore Sun*). Overall, the *Post* had the more informative story.

Neither the wire service accounts nor the *Post* story went beyond NRC personnel as sources. Excellent followups in the *Press* and *Boston Globe* consulted the Union of Concerned Scientists, a group critical of the nuclear industry, and industry sources.

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Printing front page accusations and brief, back page denials isn't unknown even in the better papers. Both the *Post* and the *New York Times* are important research sources. Both are indexed but differences in index policy mean the *Post* back-page briefs have far more harmful ramifications than do those in the *Times*.

A *Post* front pager, based on U.S. intelligence sources, asserted China gave Pakistan sensitive information about designing nuclear bombs. (Would China really help a neighbor develop the bomb?) Two days later, on the last news page, an unheadlined brief noted China's denial.

China's denial wasn't in the *Post* index, which excludes items less than two column inches. (There is an exception to the rule—if the item is "part of a continuing story"—but it wasn't invoked.) The *Post* index appears far more rapidly than does the *Times*; but the latter is far more inclusive and informative.

Curiously, the original front page story was listed under neither "China" nor "Pakistan" in spite of assurances that cross references appear at all reasonable index entry points. By the way, the *Post* recently changed index manufacturers. This example is from the new company's work.

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Post headlines too often obscure what is significant

in a story. *Post* writers must take some blame, when they eschew the traditional journalistic practice of revealing the main point of the story in the first sentence. Indeed, they sometimes disguise the story's topic. But other times editors or headline writers must be blamed. *Post* stories appear in out-of-town papers under far more informative headlines:

- "Israeli Police Block 'Settlement' on Temple Mount" (*Post*) says less than "Police Seize 45 Jewish Militants in Temple Mount Takeover Try" (*Hartford Courant*). The bland "Settlement" hardly prepared us to read in paragraphs eight and nine that the blocked group included out-of-uniform Israeli soldiers or persons with automatic weapons. The *Herald* ("Zealots grab...") and *Globe* ("take over") said more but, like the *Post*, failed to say who was trying to seize the Mount. A diverse array of groups might have done it.

- Two other examples of papers better introducing Mid-East stories than the *Post*: "Hussein Refuses to Join Talks" (*Post*) pales before "Hussein links talks to pressure on Israel" (*Herald*). The first sentence noted he "virtually" ruled out joining the peace talks unless US pressure on Israel sharply increased. "Foes of PLO form group in Lebanon" (*Globe*) outpointed the *Post* head "Palestinian 'Guard' Formed."

- An important story on a Soviet missile test exemplified how a comprehensive story can tell all but the very determined reader less than a briefer one patched together from wire service reports. It showed, too, how headlines can make or dull the story's point. *Herald* readers knew by paragraph two that the Soviet test was important because solid-fueled missiles are more reliable than liquid ones, and that all US land-based ICBM's are solid-fueled. *Post* readers waited until paragraph six. The *Post* headline "New Soviet Missile Failed in First Flight..." hardly was as helpful as the *Herald*'s "Soviets failed in test of solid-fueled ICBM..."

Even with its problems of presentation, this *Post* story should have had an impact on discussions of the strategic balance. It noted virtually all of the Soviet land-based missiles are liquid-fueled "including all of Moscow's latest and most menacing weapons."

- Does "Copycat" Drug Shortcut Cut Off by High Court" (*Post*) tell as much as "Generic drugs must have

FDA approval..." (*Baltimore Sun*)? Compare "New Twist In Tokyo Scandal" (*Post*) with "Former Tanaka aide admits receiving \$2.1 million" (*Globe*) as clues to a new turn in a Lockheed bribery case involving a former Japanese Prime Minister.

- A pattern of toning down the impact of stories is found in some Latin American items. "U.S. Relieves 3 of Salvadorean Duties" (*Post*) was a main heading with a smaller print "Army Advisers Violated Rules" above it. Those two tries missed the point: "3 GIs booted for Salvador combat roles" (*Herald*). While the *Post* had "Panama Charges U.S. Spying" over a short, the *Courant* and *Herald* headlines noted it was the US envoy personally who was charged. (They provided longer analyses.)

- "Returned Body Identified" introduced a minimally-informative brief. "Salvador body is U.S. writer..." (*Herald*) reflected a more informative story—the body was found in "a body dump where right-wing death squads leave their work from the night before" and the parents charged Salvadorean government forces with the killing.

- At least twice *Post* vagueness served to shield talk of murder. They had "Castro Attacks U.S. at Summit of Nonaligned" while the *Herald* wrote "CIA Plotting My Murder, Castro Says." The *Post* story didn't mention any previous US plots against Castro, but the *Herald* ran a separate box listing the eight CIA plots to kill him reported by the Senate Intelligence Committee in 1975.

Similarly, compare "New Charges Reported In CIA Plot on Allende" (*Post*) with "US reportedly mulled plans to kill Allende" (*Globe*), or "Did Nixon give OK to kill Chilean?" plus sub-head "Book claims CIA got green light on Allende" (*Herald*). The stories were about a forthcoming Seymour Hersh book, and his *Atlantic* articles. (The stories differed in their treatment of Kissinger. The others did more than the *Post*'s fleeting reference. The *Globe* added a major feature followup, revealing among other things, Kissinger's remarkable ignorance of, and contempt for, Latin America. Chided by the Chilean envoy for knowing nothing of the region, Super K responded that he didn't care.)

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EUGENE MCCARTHY

Private weather

According to a recent announcement, the Reagan Administration is considering selling parts of the nation's weather service to private companies or possibly even to individuals, such as Gardon Barnes or Willard Scott.

The reasons given for the proposed sale are not quite clear. If reducing the national debt were the objective, it would be better to offer for sale all radio and television licenses as new ones are offered or old ones come up for renewal. The offering could be made at auction, in somewhat the same way that the rights to graze cattle and sheep on public lands are offered. The right to graze on the public mind and will could fairly be treated as something the government might also offer to the highest bidder.

The Reagan spokesmen have not said that they thought the private sector could give us better weather or more of it, as they generally assert in their support of the private sector in other services. Competition among weather analysis and forecasters, beginning with ownership of the instruments for studying weather, might give better results than we now get through the competitive interpretation of radio and television weather persons. That competition is not now judged on the basis of whether the weather expert is right or wrong, but on the size of his listening or watching audience. Professional competence does not seem to be a measure of distinction, Willard Scott does well or better than other weather persons who are "meteorologists." Willard is not.

The early television weather persons were women. Whereas a few women have held on as weather reporters, they are usually weekend and substitute reporters and none that I know of are "meteorologists." There may be an equal rights issue involved here. In the old German and Swiss weather forecasters, men and women were both included, although there was some discrimination. Usually bad weather, either approaching or continuing, was represented by a scolding woman,

armed with a broom, emerging or standing outside the weather house, whereas good weather was represented by a jovial, satisfied man.

The second phase of the Reagan Administration's proposal contemplates the transfer to the private sector of weather analysis and forecasting. It has not yet been indicated whether these analysts will have to be licensed, somewhat as meat inspectors are, or under the authority of the Consumer Protection Agency or the Environmental Protection Agency or subject to suits for "malpractice" or whether they will have to restrict their terms and measures of weather and its effects to accepted government standards or standards already accepted, although ill defined, with a reasonable margin for error.

Understanding the weather and interpreting the forecasts may become even more difficult than is now the case. One has to distinguish between temperature measurements in Centigrade and Fahrenheit, with the added factor of wind-chill. One can not get a simple projection of say an inch of rain for tomorrow, but has to give thought to a twenty percent chance, or a fifty percent chance, that there will be any rain. One must know that "heavy snow" is not necessarily heavy, but likely to be deep, and light snow is not in fact "light", but small in volume. The "discomfort index", a mathematical combination of temperature and humidity and applicable to government employees in non-air conditioned buildings, triggering at the critical point the release of those employees, may not be recognized in the private sector. Air quality indexes and the absoluteness of the pollen count, already under challenge, may be destabilized in the new free market weather reading and interpreting. And a new measure, being talked about by the U.S. Weather Bureau, a measure of the stress factor in the weather, may never be tested.

All of which may argue for a return of the *Farmers' Almanac*, as the best source of weather information.

MRS. WEBER'S DIARY



A *Hartford Courant* series, "The Powerful In Hartford," focused on corporate leaders giving examples of their influence on specific government decisions. "Corporate Cash, Clout Flow Through United Way" showed how recipients may modify behavior in anticipation of how corporate givers may use their United Way influence. But UW gives Hartford's major militant coalition 61% of its funds, and is responsive to newer, non-traditional groups more than most UWs. (The DC-based National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy gives it high marks.)

The *Courant*, now owned by the *LA Times-Mirror*, was no longer "intimately tied to the city's power structure," and thus perhaps less inhibited from examining in detail, yet respectfully, the private elites' effects on public decisions.

"Courant Rules As Dominant News Source" was a frank self-examination of problems common on metropolitan papers nationwide. Statewide the staff was younger and more affluent than its audience. The average age of reporters covering Hartford was but 28, few had roots there, and "almost none" attended its public schools. In a city with a black majority and 30,000 Hispanics, few reporters were black and none on the news desk were fluent in Spanish.

The editor thought the city wouldn't be covered properly until minorities were in some of the paper's decision-making posts. It hired an affirmative action officer and used summer internships as minority training programs. The paper's record was said to be better than most Hartford employers, and "slightly better" than the newspaper industry's average.

The *Courant's* examination of private power reminds us how seldom such structures are examined in comparison to the often relentless pursuit of political figures. Thus, the public is regularly subjected to derogatory information about politicians and the political system, while little is said about the private sector's overall power positions. There are, of course, stories of private groups lobbying or involved in some illegal activities, but such scrutiny is passing rather than persistent.

On the eve of Vice-President Bush's Ottawa trip, Prime Minister Trudeau said the Canada-US weapons test deal did not obligate Canada to allow cruise missile tests in its territory. He was replying to US envoy Robinson's claim that refusal would be a breach of the agreement (UPI-St. Louis Post-Dispatch). The *Post* ignored the exchange even though briefly noting the agreement the next day, and later running the lengthy "U.S. Missile Test Plan Worries Canadians."

The promised subject appeared briefly after four inches. Then there was a three inch detour. Eventually there was minimum information on the agreement, and on the Canadian public's opposition to cruise and support of disarmament. It ignored possible Canadian motives for the pact (fear of US lumber duties, NATO

obligation). The article illustrates the *Post* practice of working ignored stories (April *Gazette*) into later ones. As the Mar. 28 article noted: "Ottawa and Washington last month signed a framework agreement..."

• South Africa's expulsion of a Dutch journalist (Jan. *Gazette*) had an ironic twist. The reporter left his passport for routine renewal and attended the Foreign Correspondents Association lunch with the Minister of Constitutional Development who talked of SA's progress. The returned passport had an order to leave within two weeks. The FCA revealed three other correspondents were "under the same threat" (*Rand Daily Mail-Johannesburg*).

• The *Post*, which ignored the above affair, reported and editorialized when the SA police raided the home and office of their SA correspondent and warned him of possible criminal charges. Perhaps they'll now take an interest in banned black SA newsmen. On the other hand, a week after the police raid coverage, they ignored the death in a SA prison of a 20-year-old black woman arrested for not having her passport. Her brother said she was a diabetic who died because she couldn't take her insulin. Officials were investigating (*Reuter-Globe*).

• The SA Defence Force reported the death of Lt. Alan Gingles fighting terrorists in the "operational area" (the area between Angola and Namibia). The *Observer* (London) argued that the Sandhurst-trained ex-British officer actually died on a sabotage mission in Mozambique, 300 miles from SA. A photographed page of a handwritten novel of Northern Ireland, his birthplace, led to his home and handwriting comparisons.

Noting that SA said Gingles had been stationed at Phalaborwa, the paper said that allegedly was a training place for the Mozambique National Resistance which has carried out sabotage raids in Mozambique.

• UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar hit at SA's stalling on Namibian negotiations and its "hostile acts aimed at destabilizing Zimbabwe's economy" (*Arab News*).

• SA has asked universities to comment on proposed legislation that would establish quotas to limit the number of blacks at white universities (*Globe*). Currently non-whites may attend white universities with government permission. The main reason for granting it is the unavailability of particular courses at the applicant's non-white university. Increasing numbers of non-whites are at white (usually English-speaking) universities.

Two *Post* miniatures: Mar. 13—Philippine Cardinal, in conciliatory move, says he'll help establish broad-based advisory council for national unity. Mar. 24—Cardinal says Filipinos being "slaughtered" with foreign weapons, asks US to stop sending arms. These shifts in approach towards the Marcos government rate more explanation.

In reporting the politics and scandals of the Environmental Protection Agency, the *Post* publicized many environmental problems, but politics sometimes seemed to shove aside the latter. Who suspected that the head "Recruiting for EPA Intensifies" and the sub-head "Reagan Officials Say Acting Chief May be a Liability" would introduce news that EPA delayed for over 18 months the cleanup of lead contaminated soil in a poor black Dallas neighborhood.

The lead story briefly surfaced in paragraphs eight and nine, then sank for 16 paragraphs. Although some concentrations 60 times the supposed danger threshold were found, the now-ousted official saw no emergency. He went with blood tests and admonitions to plant grass and keep clean homes. The *Herald*, which did a separate lead story, said the three lead-smelting companies in the area offered to pay for the clean-up. The *Post* vaguely spoke of their being "willing to go forward."

When EPA closed down the only national laboratory testing hospital disinfectants, the *Post* had a great story, noting both possible health problems and the protest from "state officials, industry leaders and scientists." But the same day, a report that EPA charged Dow with polluting a Michigan river, said the EPA study was completed in 1981. It was a preliminary report of a new study, backing the earlier findings (*Inquirer*). The latter noted Dow's refusal to allow EPA on its plant grounds for testing.

• In reporting the Lebanese Army's entry into Christian East Beirut, the *Post* made passing note of continued Christian militia control of the city's busiest port area. The *NY Times* explained that pier fees brought the Philangist party \$250 million annually. Shortly afterward, unreported in the *Post* or *NYT*, the army took over the remaining port areas. The *Inquirer* report placed past militia annual income at \$250 annually, and wondered what they received in return for leaving so lucrative an area. The Christian forces still controlled Dubayeh, five miles east of Beirut, where they smuggle weapons and collect pier fees. (They charge less than official rates.)

• On several occasions the *Post* didn't report deaths or wounding of Israeli troops in Lebanon. At least once the Israelis flew mock bombing runs over Lebanon (*Herald*). Such omissions deny readers an understanding of some of their concerns over the abilities of the international peacekeeping forces.

• The *Post* ignored two stories dealing with defining who is Jewish, both of them have considerable potential for affecting relations between Israel and Jews elsewhere. US Reform rabbis broke with tradition and ancient law which defined Jews as being a child of a Jewish mother, and said any children of mixed marriages should be presumed to be Jewish if they perform public, formal acts such as bar mitzvahs or confirmations. Israel's Law of Return, using the traditional definition of who's a Jew, bestows citizenship on those who come