

A Watershed Pulitzer Year

The Pulitzer Prize board gives its journalistic seal of approval to collaborations and online-only content

By Mark Fitzgerald



THE JOKE GOES THAT EVERY PULITZER PRIZE-winning journalist knows how the first sentence of his or her obituary will read. But it might be noted that in 2010 a prominent Pulitzer mention showed up, if not in the birth announcement of online-only journalism, then at least in a coming-of-age ceremony.

By awarding the Pulitzer for Investigative Reporting to a reporter for ProPublica, the Pulitzer board for the first time honored a non-profit, independent online news organization that does not print or broadcast on its own, but often seeks out collaborators for its stories. In addition to its outright win, ProPublica work was a finalist for the most prestigious Pulitzer of them all, the Gold Medal for Public Service.

And with its award for editorial cartooning, the Pulitzer board similarly honored SFGate's Mark Fiore for work that not only appears only online, but is animated.

The Pulitzer board often sends messages with its choices, and this year they sent a strong signal of approval of collaborative journalism, says Roy J. Harris Jr., the former *Wall Street Journal* reporter who wrote *Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism*. (See an exclusive excerpt from the book on page 33.)

"The rise of ProPublica, which did very well, was a sign that collaborations have a very real future and a terrific present," Harris says. "That's a very strong signal that collaborative journalism is here to stay as a way to make up for declining investment in homespun investigative reporting."

But the Pulitzers also contained a mixed message for online-only, Harris adds. He notes that work from online-only local

sites — think Voice of San Diego or MinnPost — did not make the cut. "I think it's a maturing process," he says. "It's still early, and I suspect there will be a breakthrough."

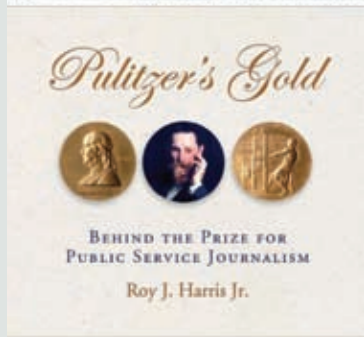
There were other notable omissions. ProPublica was widely regarded as a front-runner for a Prize — but for its collaboration with *The Times-Picayune* and TV's *Frontline* for reporting on police shootings in the aftermath of Katrina. And for the third consecutive year, *The Wall Street Journal* failed to win a Pulitzer.

The *National Enquirer's* much-hyped entry of its reporting on the John Edwards paternity scandal also struck out with the board. Harris' theory: "My view was that the sourcing was the great void there, that by and large, editors and readers don't want to see stories with lots of 'a person close to John Edwards' quotes. It's a signal the Pulitzer board is very standards-oriented."

This year's Pulitzers also stood up for the little guy, picking two reporters from the scrappy *Philadelphia Daily News* as co-winners of the investigative reporting prize with ProPublica — and awarding the Gold Medal for Public Service to the 33,000-circulation *Bristol (Va.) Herald Courier*.

Pulitzer boards like stories with impact, and both those papers delivered. The *Daily News* triggered suspensions and an FBI investigation with its yearlong series about a rogue police narcotics unit. And Virginia is well on its way to changing the law that the *Herald Courier* discovered allowing coal mining companies to short-change, or even evade entirely, royalties due to landowners.

A Pulitzer won with blood



Roy J. Harris Jr.'s book, Pulitzer Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism, now out in an updated paperback edition, tells the stories behind the stories that won the most coveted Pulitzer Prize of all: the Public Service Gold Medal. This condensed excerpt recounts the terrible price paid to win the Gold Medal awarded in 1927.

IN 1926, CANTON DAILY NEWS EDITOR DON R. MELLETT had been doing the nitty-gritty work of dedicated editors everywhere. A newcomer to the eastern Ohio town, he decided to keep track of local underworld figures and to try to make their operations known. It was work in the tradition of watchdog journalism. For a criminal with a house to plunder, however, the first step is often to kill the watchdog.

Mellett arrived in Canton in 1925. *Daily News* owner James M. Cox, had wanted Mellett, then 34, to help the paper narrow the circulation gap with the market-leading *Canton Repository*.

Crime was no stranger to Canton, as Mellett found in pursuing stories about various unsavory characters in town. Canton had its own bootlegging, gambling and prostitution underworld, managed by a character named Jumbo Crowley. With the combination of visiting thugs hiding out and local crooks running their rackets, Canton was a nest of vipers.

On Jan. 2, 1926, Don Mellett stepped right into that nest (with an editorial attacking Police Chief Saranus Lengel for failing to clean up Canton). As the publisher's knowledge grew, so did the boldness of his editorials. The March 1 paper carried an editorial [saying], "Jumbo Crowley must be put out of business."

He went on, naming names — a dozen more in this editorial, and in later ones — for four-and-a-half months. While the *Daily News* did sell more papers, the attack on graft didn't make him popular in much of the town of 107,000.

Mobsters were upset, of course, to see themselves identified by name. But town leaders, too, were displeased that their town was portrayed as crime-ridden. It was bad for business.

One July night, after he and his wife returned from a dance, Mellett was putting his car in the garage when he was shot three times, once in the head. He died instantly.

The local police, not surprisingly, were somewhat lax in their investigation of the crime. Chief Lengel had been reinstated earlier, and a local grand jury failed to bring any indictments. It took the intervention of a special investigator from Chicago to get five men arrested, tried, and convicted. One was Chief Lengel, and another was an out-of-town mobster named Patrick "Red" McDermott, both eventually convicted of first-degree murder. McDermott said that a plan to beat up the publisher had escalated into a shooting.



Chief Lengel, however, was eventually granted a new trial and freed when a witness against him at the first trial refused to repeat his story.

Of course, there was no Don Mellett to hammer away at the need for results. And soon, there was no *Daily News* either. While the Gold Medal was sealed in the cornerstone of a new building for the paper, Cox sold both the *Daily News* and the building three years later, and it was combined with the *Repository*, which took over the new building.

Another mystery was the reaction of the community. Even in its shock over the murder, Canton's citizens were cool to Mellett.

But to the nation's journalism community, the *Canton Daily News'* Pulitzer always will serve as a stark reminder of the ultimate price that editors and reporters can pay for working on behalf of the public.

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