

Veteran reporter and political advisor Tom Andrzejewski , offered *Writer Week* (online SPJ newsletter sent by email to SPJ members) the following commentary on the recent Cleveland mayoral campaign.

## **Cover a campaign like a campaign, a city like a city**

**By Tom Andrzejewski**

If one definition of news is the unusual and extraordinary, then the way Clevelanders were informed by the major media about last year's mayoral campaign ' likewise the campaigns for City Council ' should be news in itself. With only a couple notable exceptions, Clevelanders were subjected to a virtual news blackout for all but the waning moments of the campaigns.

Will the media's policies for city coverage continue into this new year ' If the campaign coverage was a barometer, then don't expect to see much reporting of urban news. If it isn't something happening with downtown living ' about 1 percent of the city's population resides downtown ' it doesn't seem to merit editors' attention. It didn't very much in 2005.

While the Plain Dealer's editorial and forum pages devoted considerable space in the final weeks of the campaigns to the mayor and council races ' mostly through endorsement editorials in the latter ' a reader of the news columns might not even have known campaigns were taking place. Many major papers devote practically daily coverage to their core-city mayoral campaigns, as the PD used to do.

But the PD was not the only medium that largely ignored the campaigns. Viewers of Fox 8 news and Channels 19/43 stations with relatively large amounts of news time ' were shorted on campaign news as well. The weekly Sun Newspapers were also remiss. The three papers that cover sections of Cleveland missed numerous weeks of mayoral coverage, and at least once a story on the mayor's race did not run in all three papers. That neglect was remarkable for a news organization whose foothold in the market is local news. The weekly Call & Post, on the other hand, did pay attention. Overall though, media coverage was, as one editor said about the PD's coverage, 'thin.?

Should news operations therefore share the blame the deplorably low voter turnout? (It was not quite 17 percent in the primary and around 30 persist in the general election, following bombardment by television ads on state and local issues.) The impression left by the media was that the city of Cleveland mayoral and council campaigns were without issues. Communication theory says in part that if you repeat something often enough, people will believe it even if it is wrong. I would also propose that if you don't communicate something often enough, people won't believe it even if it's right. The message seemed to be: We don't care, so why should you?

For example, while former Cleveland Municipal Judge Robert J. Triozzi was universally credited with presenting a volume of thoughtful ideas, one opinion piece whittled them down to one: Windmills as an alternative energy source. Then-candidate Mayor Frank G. Jackson, who also presented detailed plans and vision, was similarly dismissed in an editorial as perhaps not being able to handle ceremonial functions. If coverage were more vigorous, the campaigns would have taken different shapes.

In a sense, the media weakened their standing in the community and their influence on public affairs. They were looking for one or two big issues and overlooked the many smaller but significant ones that affected people's lives day-to-day. Problem is , the big issues tend to be the ones that comfort the comfortable. Ignoring street-level concerns in effect can further afflict the afflicted.

Deficiencies in coverage were not necessarily failings by front-line reporters. The amount of time that I saw reporters following the campaigns generally did not translate into news reports in their papers or newscasts. The exception was the top-notch political reporting of WKYC-TV's Tom Beres and its support by the high-grade news operation at Channel 3. Channel 5 was the only other TV station that assigned someone ( Tony Gaskins ) to the campaigns. WTAM/Clear Channel and WCPN/ Ideastream were equally conscientious about informing the public.

The Internet had a presence, as Web loggers, or bloggers, were prolific in this campaign, even holding candidate webcasts ' unpolished, but at least attempts at informing the public. Given the so-called digital divide, bloggers brandish a rather short sword in our poverty-stricken city. The alternative weeklies had some interesting pieces and items, but they don't have much voter reach either.

What happened at the decision-making levels at most of the mainstream media? In the case of newspapers, it probably had to do with the size of the news hole, that is, the space available on any given day or week. On TV, it was probably advice from consultants about which stories people will watch or surf away from. And maybe some newspapers have fallen into the trap of believing they must compete with the sound-bite media even though newspapers don't have sound or video (or even color on every page) and aren't the first choice for infotainment at newsstands.

Several days before the general election, then-candidate Jackson and I discussed the impact of voter turnout the next Tuesday, and brought up the dismal turnout in the primary, in which he and Mayor Jane L. Campbell were the victors. If turnout were high, Jackson believed, he and Triozzi would have left the other six candidates, including Campbell , in the dust. 'Then the discussion would have been all about the issues,' he said.

He might have been right, if most Cleveland media actually covered the campaign like 'well, a campaign. As to the future for coverage of the urban condition, both the good and bad, will last year actually turn out to be the best we can expect?