

The free community paper remains relevant and effective

By JOHN GREGORY

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These are fascinating times to live in. We Americans stand at the threshold of a second Gulf War with Iraq, peering over our shoulders at the threat of terrorism in our own homeland.

It brings back recollections of a time about 12 years ago when one ominous night Americans watched a live television report as missiles flew and bombs fell, the United States began bombarding Iraq to begin the liberation of Kuwait. It was January 1991.

Now, familiar names of those days continue to dot the news today: Cheney, Powell, Aziz, Hussein and Bush; this time it is President George W. Bush, son of the commander in chief during the first Gulf War.

The day after we witnessed that display of war reports in 1991, staff members of Beach & Bay Press were dispatched to public gathering places such as the local branch of the U.S. Post Office to ask residents how they viewed the war actions.

It was not hazardous combat coverage on the front line, but it was one way of letting the public utilize the paper as a forum for expression.

A decade later there was another fateful day: Sept. 11, 2001, and the country watched and waited for leadership following terrorist attacks against our own nation. Reporters were once again sent out to record the public's response and to check on security measures at places where large crowds gather such as SeaWorld. Letters and commentaries in response to the attacks began to arrive by post, fax and e-mail to Beach & Bay Press.

Readers were responding with an outpouring of emotion, once again utilizing the free press.

It was a constructive way to cope. Not only did everyone want to express their views, unknown to most readers, an unusually high number of people asked to work for this newspaper as reporters. Applications quickly piled up. It suddenly became apparent that ensuring the successful operations of the free press at all levels was an important and enviable mission.

These instances are but a few examples of the significance of a small, free, community newspaper.

What is a community newspaper? Is it really a forum for expression, a vehicle of communication? Or, is it simply a business, a way for advertisers to thrust their message toward readers in the neighborhood?

A free, community paper such as Beach & Bay Press is all these things in a way, and a lot more. A paper such as this provides a means of recording events; it tells the history of this community as it happens. The paper also defines this community; it defines us as a society. It gives us identity.

While running the risk of overemphasizing the importance of this little paper, it is necessary to also mention the paper's role in ensuring the freedoms granted by the amendments to the United States Constitution, the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment grants all citizens freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to assemble peaceably and freedom to petition the government. The words give us these rights, but it takes people to guarantee them. Beach & Bay Press, by continuing its operation and delivery each week, allows residents, readers and advertisers the opportunity to practice freedom of the press right here in their neighborhoods. Yes, there are those who would rather not have all the information printed and distributed, those who would prefer to censor or twist the information. There are controls on means of gaining information and, in the wake of 9-11, new measures to halt the flow of certain types of information. The modern world is a very dicey place, even at the local level.

Not to be overly-dramatic, but if little papers such as Beach & Bay Press don't uphold the Constitution's First Amendment right here in our own community, then where do we draw the line? Should we leave it up to the Los Angeles Times or the New York Times? No, it begins or ends right here, right in our own backyard.

Today, the question of what defines news is often blurred by the "Information age," the media's massive overcommercialization and the mad rush to gain access to as many readers or viewers as possible, at any cost.

Simply put, news can be defined and placed in three categories:

1. New news; news that no one knows about yet.
2. Important news; accurate information people need to know so that they can make proper decisions.
3. Interesting, unusual news; entertaining and informative news that people enjoy reading.

Longtime journalists could find that most people read the third category more often than the first, and not nearly enough pay attention to the second.

Furthermore, hardcore journalists might tend to think most of the news covered in a paper like Beach & Bay Press is not in the "life or death" category, too trivial to be of any real importance. But the truth is that a paper like Beach & Bay Press will continue to cover all three categories of news, as long as it happens within our beach communities. Obviously, Beach & Bay Press covers all the events occurring in these communities so that residents will know what is happening in the very neighborhoods in which they live; they are informed on a local scale.

After all, if this paper didn't provide such neighborhood coverage each week, who would?

Finally, if an incident as horrific as 9-11 ever occurs again, the readers in these communities have a paper that listens to them and allows them a chance to express their views, a vehicle of communication that is delivered to their own home and the homes within their own neighborhood, where it really matters the most.