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To: Letters Editor, Indianapolis Star; February 28, 2010

BOOSTING MITCH: The Arrogance, Bias, and Cowardice of the Indianapolis Star and Indiana News Media.

Editor:

Ever since the Washington Post broke the “surprising” news, on February 22, that Mitch Daniels is “reluctant but open” to receiving his party’s nomination for president in 2012, the Indianapolis Star has been pushing the “reluctant candidate” line, culminating with Sunday’s double whammy:

A plug from former editor and scion of the previous family owners, Russ Pulliam; and

A gushing Gary Varvel editorial cartoon entitled “Easy Rider” showing the folksy guv Harley-ing in front of an addled-looking elephant posse holding campaign placards, one reading “Mitch the Un-Obama” - the latter so that we’ll know that Varvel takes inspiration from Mona Charen’s column in the right-wing National Review, apparently.

What caught my eye, however, was a revealing website comment directed towards your “political junkie” columnist Matt Tully from one reader dubbed “HoosierPoet”:

“The only reason people outside of Indiana might point to Mitch as a possible presidential candidate is because you and the other Indiana media types refuse or are afraid to expose Mitch and his many flaws. I hope he does run so the national media can not only expose Mitch, but also expose you and the other Indiana media as the incompetents and cowards you have demonstrated during his time in office.”

Words of wisdom and insight! Words you “media types” should heed, if you want to further your professions and your businesses. According to a Pew Research poll last September, “The public’s assessment of the accuracy of news stories is now at its lowest level in more than two decades...” That mistrust is growing among both partisans and independents. Declines in both trust and readership have hit newspapers particularly hard. Still, according to the poll, about three out of five say that the news media has an important role as a “watchdog press.”

The analysis of “HoosierPoet” seems to reflect what the Pew Center found in its poll. With his emphasis being on the Star and Indiana news media generally, of course. Given what I’ve seen of the performance of “Indiana media types” in recent years, particularly your coverage of Mitch Daniels, I can back up that opinion with plenty of examples.

True, you have provided decent coverage of some Daniels debacles. For example, his “Indiana Commerce Connector” private toll road scam of 2006-07, and his other social engineering experiment, tinkering with the privatization of FSSA welfare and food stamp services. But where was any of that context in this last week of presidential hype? And as you further that campaign (which means big bucks for Indiana media), would we ever see either of those plagues on the public mentioned by you again? I doubt it.

If, that is, the My Man 4 Prez campaign SHOULD be furthered. Your responsibility is to give us all the facts, and let us decide. However, for months you’ve been covering up perhaps the biggest Daniels debacle! To this very day! And the reasons for that are exactly what “HoosierPoet” stated. We can add arrogance and bias and greed to that list.

It’s not uncommon, in Johnson County, for reporters to cover public meetings, witness astounding acts by local officials, and not report it. That’s exactly what happened last August 10 at a meeting of our County Council, with two reporters in attendance, one of them yours, to witness a scam being pulled over a library district bond issue. I also sent a tip to the Star’s Kevin Morgan on August 17.

Complaints were sent to state officials, including Daniels’ appointees, starting in September. All of them refused to enforce the law. Todd Rokita and his Securities Division also managed to evade their responsibilities. Rokita knows that - I even spoke directly to him about it in the statehouse. By the way, he’s running for Congress from the very district that includes Johnson County - have you “media types” noticed that?

The Star and a slew of other Indiana news media began receiving press releases about the growing scandal on a fairly regular basis beginning in early November. We discovered in December that a similar scam had been pulled by the library district in 2004, and that thousands of property owners in the district began paying an illegally levied property tax in 2005.

That information was broadcast as well, by email, fax, and numerous telephone conversations with local news media, particularly the Star. Not so much as a sentence about any of this has been written or uttered by you "media types."

Besides Todd Rokita, Greg Zoeller, Timothy Rushenberg (Dept. of Local Govt. Finance), Bruce Hartman (State Board of Accounts), Paul Whitesell (State Police), etc., the other state official who was notified early on about this was... Mitch Daniels! Yep, Ol' Reluctant hisself. He was sent a detailed message on September 21. I visited his office on October 26 to complain further, and was told by a young aide (fresh from college no doubt) to "hire an attorney." His former counsel, Mark Massa - now running for Marion County prosecutor - received a letter on February 10, and another message on February 11. And keep in mind, these are only communications I was involved in - other citizens have been complaining to government and news media as well.

Finally, our entire system of law enforcement having failed us, and with our entire system of "watchdog media" smelling like a dead mongrel, we presented a petition from 116 Hoosiers to Indiana Governor Mitchell E. Daniels Jr., demanding, among other things, that he perform his duty under the Indiana Constitution and "take care that the laws are faithfully executed." It was received by his acting counsel, Anita Samuel, on the morning of February 22. That info was broadcast widely and repeatedly, throughout last week, to the Indianapolis Star and other Indiana news media. If a redacted copy of the petition wasn't sent directly, a website link to it was provided. All of Johnson County's members of the legislature (except "Woody") also received copies, as did Todd Rokita and Greg Zoeller.

I believe we now know why you're covering up these facts. "HoosierPoet" certainly does. But let's take it a bit further regarding the Star.

On December 6, you ran an opinion piece by Editor and Vice-President Dennis Ryerson entitled "An open-door approach to gathering the news". In which he discussed a conversation with a reader who wondered about how news does or doesn't make it into the Star, and who opined "that many important stories in Indianapolis never get told." It's good for the news media to accept criticism and do some self-analysis, one would think, and in fact that's a "best practice" in journalism. But who managed to slip that criticism to Dennis? Some average Joe Shmo? Nope, it was the President & CEO of Community Health Network. (Which advertises in the Star, by the way.) Perhaps while chatting with Ryerson over cocktails and canapes at some fancy shindig. Or maybe over steak at St. Elmo's. Us Joe Shmos don't get that kind of access to lay such "critical points" on media executives. And we see the results, as "HoosierPoet" so eloquently states.

Ryerson also wrote "I remember the days when we practically defied people to talk to us. We didn't provide phone numbers. We didn't ask for help from readers. Arrogance? We helped invent the term." Is his picture next to the dictionary definition yet? I've phoned and emailed everyone from the new South Bureau reporter to the Managing Editor to the Publisher's secretary about the Johnson County/Mitch Daniels scandal, with zero results. I walked into the Star building January 6 and was told by a security guard that I couldn't speak to a reporter or Ryerson, and instead she scribbled a note for him. Oddly, I've had no reply.

I was also there to complain that the Star yanked all of your vending racks in November from downtown Franklin, which the Star wouldn't explain to me. That was followed by Publisher Michael Kane's January 3, 2010 column stating "Our suburban presence and coverage will grow." Which followed his April 19, 2009 column, "These core values guide our commitment to readers". Which delved at length into the Star's alleged pledge to uphold trust and change and empowerment and respect and ethics, and shall I add "yadda yadda" to that hot air, because you've gone out of your way and taken every opportunity, in the matters I've related above, to negate every one of your hypocritical lofty pronouncements, and shaft not only an entire suburban county, but all Hoosiers. Whom you could have helped to fight public corruption and restore the rule of law to our state, simply by reporting the news! And now you're hellbent on foisting our debacle on the entire United States, and thus the world, by boosting Mitch for President.

God help us. But that prayer does not include "you and the other Indiana media types."

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[About Gary W. Moody: Degreed media scholar, former long-time entertainment writer, former San Francisco Chronicle/Examiner employee, former Newspaper Guild member, newspaper strike veteran, military veteran, former newspaper route delivery kid, former public broadcasting employee, former contractor for The Associated Press/Sports Illustrated/NBC etc, eternal gadfly, & etc, not necessarily in that order, now doing my damndest working like hell against all odds and with no money to help bring progress to my hometown and home state!]