

The Mercury News Comes Clean

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The San Jose Mercury News made a courageous gesture on Sunday when it admitted that articles charging the Central Intelligence Agency with complicity in the drug trade had been poorly written and edited and misleadingly packaged. The executive editor, Jerry Ceppos, told readers the articles fell short of the paper's standards at every step along the way. His candor and self-criticism set a high standard for cases in which journalists make egregious errors.

Last fall The Mercury News published an inflammatory and inadequately substantiated series of articles suggesting that the C.I.A. abetted the crack epidemic in the 1980's by allowing Nicaraguan dealers to push the drug in America's inner cities. The goal, the series said, was to help finance the C.I.A.-backed contra rebels then fighting the Sandinista Government in Central America.

There was little hard evidence to support these claims. Even so, the series was suggestively titled "Dark Alliance: The Story Behind the Crack Explosion," and appeared with a logo showing a man smoking crack superimposed over the C.I.A. insignia. The material, which spread quickly with the help of the paper's Web site, sparked outrage from elected officials and provoked investigations in Congress and at the C.I.A. After other newspapers cast doubt on the articles, Mercury News editors and

reporters began an extensive internal investigation.

Mr. Ceppos suggested that editors got too close to the story while it was being written and lost the ability to detect flaws that might have been obvious had they maintained a more skeptical distance.

The series was reported by the paper's investigative specialist, Gary Webb, who failed to include available evidence contradicting the assertion of C.I.A. complicity. "Although members of the drug ring met with contra leaders paid by the C.I.A. and Webb believes the relationship with the C.I.A. was a tight one," Mr. Ceppos wrote, "I feel that we did not have proof that top C.I.A. officials knew of the relationship. I believe that part of our contract with our readers is to be as clear about what we don't know as what we do know."

The Mercury News experience dictates caution and care in sensitive articles, but it should not discourage investigative projects. On other such pieces, The Mercury News has done solid work in the past and should not shrink from trying again. At a time when life-style and personality articles command ever greater space, efforts to uncover government and private sector misconduct are all the more essential. Newspapers are among the few institutions in America with the resources and commitment needed to expose betrayals of the public trust.

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