

# When Controversy Roils One Paper, How Others React

**I**T'S not every day that a newspaper prints a correction on its front page – especially a correction to a story that ran in another paper. But this was no everyday story.

The series in the San Jose Mercury News last August on the rise of crack cocaine in urban America, which implied links to the Nicaraguan contras and the CIA, exploded into a huge controversy, fueling African-American suspicions of racial genocide.

CIA director John Deutch flew to Los Angeles to make a denial to a skeptical, mainly African-American, audience. Months later, leading African-Americans such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Dick Gregory, and Rep. Maxine Waters (D) of California kept the issue boiling.

On May 11 the executive editor of the Mercury News, Jerry Ceppos, published a signed column in his paper, saying some of the more sensational implications in the series, called "Dark Alliance," were not supported by the facts and the articles did not meet his standards.

The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times trumpeted the news of the correction on their front pages. Mind you, all three papers had done their own exhaustive evaluations, expressing skepticism about the Mercury News series. So it was not as though they had an obligation to apologize to their readers. Yet they treated the Mercury's carefully worded, partial retreat as though it were a major event in the history of the free press in America.

The New York Times followed up with an editorial, headlined "The Mercury News Comes Clean," which lavishly praised Mr. Ceppos for his candor and self-criticism. Yet somewhere in the course of all the praise, the big newspapers lost sight of the fact that Ceppos had said the series was right on many important points. Indeed, its main point – that a contra leader was involved in cocaine traffic – was based on courtroom evidence.

Odd man out in this controversy is investigative reporter Gary Webb, the hard-working author of the series. He was left to twist in the wind while the press glorified his editor for having some second thoughts about the explosive articles. It was as though the metropolitan papers, battered and bruised from public press-bashing, found a way to cleanse themselves of their sins by symbolically transferring them to one editor who was willing to confess fault in his own paper.

The process of easing one's conscience by extolling the virtues of another who has admitted fault is familiar to psychologists: It is called scapegoating. Is it too early to suggest that the process be institutionalized by creating a new Pulitzer Prize category – "best climb-down under pressure"?

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