

THE COMMUNITY PAGE

Responsible Journalism or Misleading Propaganda?

Last fall, shortly before the 2004 Presidential Election, Dan Rather of CBS News broke a story that, if true, had the potential to devastate President Bush's reelection bid and change the course of history. The story, centered around allegedly undiscovered records of the President's military service, seemed to confirm previous accusations of desertion and dereliction of duty. As the story aged and more people had the opportunity to analyze the records, it became increasingly clear that the documents were mere forgeries. CBS and Dan Rather dug in their heels, and even in the face of mounting and increasingly credible evidence to the contrary, stuck to their story, standing behind the veracity of the documents. Only when their position became completely untenable did they finally relent and admit that perhaps they did not perform sufficient verification and due diligence on the story.

More recently, *Newsweek* found itself in the bullseye of public controversy. Michael Isakoff, a well-respected and accomplished journalist, wrote a story about the treatment of terrorist detainees at the United States detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The story, citing anonymous but reliable sources, alleged that United States interrogators had flushed a copy of the Koran down the toilet in front of a detainee in an effort to obtain information by upsetting or intimidating the prisoner. When the story circulated, reaction in the Muslim world was quick and violent. Outraged by America's treatment of their holy book, massive riots erupted, resulting in the deaths of dozens of people. Subsequently, after the damage of the story had been done, evidence surfaced that the story about the mistreatment of the Koran could not be confirmed and that the story was probably untrue. This story lit the well-known powder keg of Muslim sensibilities and people died as a direct result of the irresponsible reporting. Although *Newsweek* apologized for its poor decision to run with the story, it was too late to undo the damage.

Fortunately, in both the CBS and *Newsweek* debates there were those who challenged the stories until the truth came out.

In a small community like ours, I believe it is important that we all make a sincere effort to understand each other so we get along and enjoy the associations we share. When inaccurate information is presented to the community about an individual or organization, it has the potential to needlessly strain the relationships we have with friends and neighbors. It appeared to me that the articles by the Post Register about the Boy Scouts contained inaccurate information. I felt that it would be wrong for anyone to stand by and let the powerful Post Register attack innocent people who do not have the means nor the finances to defend themselves.

I decided to find out the truth for myself. I engaged members of the reputable Idaho Falls law firm, Thomsen Stephens Law Offices. My specific instructions to them were to review the case in its entirety and to analyze the records with a critical but objective eye in an effort to determine whether the *Post Register* had reported accurately. Jason Wood, a firm partner, along with firm associate attorney Brian Boyle and third-year law student Jake Wessel, poured through the voluminous records full time for more than a week and compared the evidence with the story presented by the Post Register. What they found is alarming! While a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis of their findings would be impossible to lay out in the space provided for this piece. This page contains a summary of some of their key conclusions.

I want to make clear that I am not in any way a spokesperson for the Scouts or the LDS Church. I have not spoken to any National or local Scout or LDS Church leader regarding this article. I am writing only as a concerned member of this community. I admit to being a great fan of the scouting organization and I became a member of the LDS Church when I was seventeen years old. The church has had a very positive impact on my life. But I believe I would feel just as strongly about correcting the record if individuals from any other organization were being unfairly attacked.

When I reviewed the great lengths that various Scout leaders and church leaders had gone to, to learn the truth about what had happened at that single incident 17 years ago and their efforts to determine the truthfulness of the Scarborough accusations, I can only hope that if I had been in that situation, I would have been as diligent as they were in trying to determine if Brad Stowell had the tendency to molest boys. Hours of phone calls, interviews, discussions, and investigations were made to determine the facts in an effort to make a safe but fair decision concerning Brad Stowell's future with the scouts. In hind sight, a wrong decision was made. We know that now. But the Scout leaders' decisions were made based on the facts that they had. Good executives should not make career decisions about their employees based on rumor or innuendos. To do so would be immoral, wrong, and grossly unfair. After all the research, investigation and debate, these Scout executives made the only decision they could have made given the facts they had then. As far as anyone knew, the single incident, years previous, had been an isolated incident. Whatever had happened there, the police had not found it serious enough to file any charges. Even the experts who had worked with Brad Stowell had given him a clean bill of health. As far as anyone could determine, nothing had happened since. Both Scout and Church leaders believed Brad Stowell had served an honorable mission and that if he had ever had a problem, it was no longer a problem.

We must keep in mind that these events happened over ten years ago when we knew much less about pedophilia than we do today. Given the same facts they had ten years ago, any fair-minded executive would have made the same decision that the Scout leaders did. They should have watched Stowell closely and required someone to be with him at all times, but they probably should not have fired him.

What Brad Stowell did was horrible! He is a very dangerous and devious man! He needs to be in prison. But we should not try to make a case to blame others for his crimes.

There is still a question as to how quickly the Scouts called the police when Adam and Ben Steed, (the true heroes in this case) reported they had been molested. There is conflicting testimony as to whether it took 12 hours or 3 days of investigation before the police were called. There is a recently filed court case involving that issue. We hope that the *Post Register* will cover that story fairly and objectively.


President/CEO, Melaleuca, Inc

Scout's Honor

In late February and early March of 2005, Idaho Falls' only newspaper, the *Post Register* ran a series of related articles entitled "Scouts' Honor." The series sought to tell the story of Brad Stowell, a Boy Scout leader who was convicted on two counts of lewd conduct with a minor, arising from his molestation of minor boys as a summer employee at the Boy Scouts' Camp Little Lemhi in Bonneville County in 1997.

The apprehension and conviction of a sex offender is newsworthy, however, the article implies the Boy Scouts of America, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and even Stowell's mother were complicit in an effective cover-up that allowed the predator, Stowell, to operate unfettered as an employee of Camp Little Lemhi.

If these allegations are true, they are indeed big news and worthy of report. However, if untrue, the mere allegations in the *Post Register*, probably the most influential news source in the area, would cause undeserved damage to both the organizations and the individuals within the organizations named in the report. The way the facts are presented, the way they are interpreted, and most importantly, facts that are left out or taken out of context, can often be the points that differentiate between truth and skillful manipulation of the facts.



The *Post Register* has reported, in some cases, directly and in others, by clear inference, that both the LDS Church and the local Boy Scout officials knowingly and in cooperation sheltered a known pedophile. This is an extremely serious charge against two of Southeast Idaho's most respected and oldest organizations. The reporter skillfully tells a compelling tale, backed up by references to court documents and reliable sources. *Post Register* publisher Roger Plathow and editor Dean Miller as well as Zuckerman all claim to have a part in the Scouts' Honor story. It is not clear whether Plathow and Miller received this information from Zuckerman or if they did their own research, either way all three men are responsible for these articles being printed.

The *Post Register* article "Where Are They Now" listed Brad Stowell's mother as well as several Scout and LDS Church leaders along side of the child molester and explained where each person is today as if the public had the right and the need to know where they are today. The clear inference that these good people are dangerous and should be placed in the same category as child molesters went too far. This was not good journalism. At that point it became evident that Peter Zuckerman and the *Post Register* had an agenda.

The Reporter: The Post Register's Peter Zuckerman

Peter Zuckerman is a fairly new reporter for the *Post Register*. He recently graduated from Poynter College in St. Petersburg Florida. He currently is assigned to cover "cops and courts" stories for the *Post Register*. While in Florida, he wrote an article entitled "Navigating between Silence and Speech" which appeared in a publication called *PointsSouth*. In this article he declared to the public that he is homosexual and admitted that it is very difficult for him to be objective on things he feels strongly about. He explained that other reporters have the same challenge. You can read his article at www.pointssouth.net/2003ps/staging/000249.htm. Much has been said on a local radio station and throughout the community, speculating that the Boy Scout's position of not letting gay men be Scout Leaders, and the LDS Church's position that marriage should be between a man and a woman may have caused Zuckerman to attack the scouts and the LDS Church through his journalism. We think it would be very unfair for anyone to conclude that is what is behind Zuckerman's motives. It would be wrong to do. The only known facts are, that for whatever reason, Zuckerman chose to weave a story that unfairly, and without merit, paints Scout leaders and church leaders to appear unscrupulous, and blame them for the molestation of little children. That too, is wrong and the editors of the *Post Register* should not have allowed it.

The Facts

Of critical import to the *Post Register's* allegations of a cover-up are the existence of "multiple warnings." Zuckerman reports that there were multiple incidents, beginning with an episode in 1988, that were allegedly known and ignored by both Scouting and LDS officials. On February 27, 2005, on the front page of the *Post Register's* Sunday edition, there was a feature entitled, "Multiple Warnings, 1988-2005." As one reads through the list it is apparent that most of the "warnings" are not warnings at all but appear to be added only to create a longer list. Many of the legitimate facts on the list are taken out of context and are made out to be something they are not. It appears that Peter Zuckerman, writing for the *Post Register*, constructed facts in a way to lead the reader down a path to conclusions the *Post Register* wants the reader to reach. Compared to the evidence, some statements by Zuckerman appear to be out-and-out false. Others are misleading at best and appear to be taken totally out of context, painting a picture that there was substantiated evidence of repeated offenses by Stowell prior to the Scouts hiring Stowell and that the scouts had that evidence. The *Post Register* would have us believe that his own mother "knew he had a problem" but

concealed it from the Scouts, and that the church "knew he had a problem" and didn't stop him. The *Post Register* also created the impression that several people had come forward to warn the scouts that Brad Stowell was a pedophile and that the scouts, the LDS Church and Brad Stowell's mother somehow worked together to let Brad Stowell keep his job and keep molesting the scouts and then, later worked together to cover their tracks. None of the above allegations are supported by the facts.

Two Questions:

The real questions that have been distorted by the *Post Register* are: 1) What did Scout leaders really know about Brad Stowell before they hired him and while they continued to keep him in various leadership positions? And 2) How much substance is there to the so called "multiple warnings" that the Boy Scouts were supposed to have received about Brad Stowell?

Fact:

The record indicates there was a single "incident" that was known both to church leaders and Scout leaders as well as to Judy Stowell, Brad Stowell's mother. That is important! One incident! Not several, as the *Post Register* suggests. And what was known by Scout and church leaders about this single incident is substantially different from what the *Post Register* claims.

The Incident:

In 1988, a 6-year-old boy reported to his parents that 16-year-old Brad Stowell had done something inappropriate to him. No one knows for sure what that incident involved, but we do know the police were called and they did not believe there was enough substance to file charges. Stowell's mother Judy Stowell and his LDS bishop, Lorin Talbot, were told some things, but not everything about the incident.

Multiple Warnings:

The *Post Register* leads us to believe there were several people who had warned the Scouts that Brad Stowell was a pedophile and that he should be fired.

Fact:

Stowell's neighbor, Richard Scarborough, did write several letters to church and scout leaders accusing several people including Brad Stowell of being child molesters. The only other person that told the scouts that Stowell was a child molester was Richard Scarborough's wife.

The Illusion:

The *Post Register* appears to leave important facts out of its story in an attempt to create an illusion that there were "multiple warnings." One example is the comment on February 28, 2005: "Even though a teacher at Stalker Elementary School in Blackfoot warned him Stowell had abused a 6-year-old neighbor." This statement appears to try to conceal the fact that the "teacher" was really Richard Scarborough's wife. Had the *Post Register* given readers that information, the reader would have known that all of the "multiple warnings" and allegations came from the Scarboroughs. The *Post Register* used this and other tactics to create an illusion of multiple warnings. This is only one example of what appears to be several unfair tactics by the *Post Register* to lead the reader to believe what Peter Zuckerman wanted the reader to believe.

The Allegations:

The article blamed the Boy Scouts for first hiring and then not firing Brad Stowell. It alleged that the Scouts had known all along that Brad Stowell was a child molester and had hired him anyway. The *Post Register* also claimed that Stowell "used church, Scout, and family connections to prey on boys" and that the Scouts and the church had ignored repeated warnings about Stowell. The article also gives the impression that some type of cover-up had occurred because the judge had sealed the records of a case involving the molestation of minors.

The Bishop's Actions:

Although the police did not find the "Incident" serious enough to take any action, Stowell's bishop took the 1988 incident much more seriously. He sent Stowell to counseling at LDS Social Services. They worked with Stowell for several months until he received assurance from the "experts" that Stowell was unlikely to repeat what had happened.

The Letters:

Richard Scarborough's letters reveal a great deal about his thought processes and some of the many issues that church leaders had to confront when dealing with Scarborough. Given his scattered approach, many reasonable people may not have taken Richard Scarborough's accusations seriously, but to their credit, contrary to his accusations, church officials did take him seriously. They spent several hours trying to determine the truthfulness of his accusation only to learn that his accusations were based only on hearsay. It is noteworthy that in his deposition, that was taken on August 30, 1999, Scarborough gave information that differed from what he had stated in his letter. The Scarborough letters and much more information about this case can be found at www.CommunityPageNews.com. The portion of these letters that the *Post Register* chose to leave out in its printing of the Scarborough letters changes the entire nature and message of the documents.

The Coincidence:

In the case of Brad Stowell, Richard Scarborough was right. Even though Scarborough did not have true evidence to call Brad Stowell a child molester back in 1991, it turned out that he was indeed a child molester. Given what we know now, it is easy to say it would have been better if Scout leaders had acted on the rumor that Scarborough was promoting. But if all employers were to base hiring and firing decisions on rumor rather than substantiated evidence, what a threatening and chaotic world our employees would have to live in. It is difficult to imagine what more Scout leaders could have done to uncover the truth about the rumors that the Scarboroughs' were promoting. They tried, but were unsuccessful. Even Brad Stowell testified that he had not been truthful with his Scout leaders or his bishop. They had no true knowledge of the incident between Stowell and the 6-year-old boy in 1988 and in the case of some leaders, no knowledge at all, of that incident. To this day, the only ones who know for sure what happened are Brad Stowell and the 6-year-old boy.

Conclusion:

The *Post Register* is Idaho Falls' only newspaper. As such, its publisher, Ron Plathow, and editor, Dean Miller, have a tremendous responsibility to this community to not let reporters' individual biases taint its articles in a way that unfairly damages innocent individuals or reputable institutions. No institution should be exempt from scrutiny by the press, but that scrutiny should be fair, balanced and accurate. As Dan Rather learned, it's a difficult task, but it comes with the territory.

Documentation and other important details concerning this matter can be found at www.CommunityPageNews.com.