Censored

By Rory O'Connor
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There are at least two constants in the opinion column trade. The first is that it's usually bad news when you get a call from your publisher prior to publication. The second is that it's almost always bad news when you opine about Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Last Sunday, when my phone rang, I got the double whammy.

Russel Pergament was calling. Pergament publishes AM New York, a new daily newspaper, aimed primarily at 18-34 year olds, with a circulation of 210,000. This column appears every Monday in AM New York – or almost every Monday, as I was about to find out.

"I'm killing this week's column," Pergament began without preface.

The column in question (Good News, Bad News) examined the writing of David Brooks, an op-ed columnist for The New York Times. But to Pergament, it was all about Israel, and his perception that my opinions were anti-Israeli.

I had half-expected the call, since Brooks' column extolled the "Good News" behind an Israeli incursion into Gaza that left forty Palestinians dead and hundreds more homeless. Moreover, I knew from previous discussions about columns concerning Israel that Pergament's political views were conservative in general and, on the subject of Israel in particular, veered even further to the right.

I told Pergament that his aggressive response seemed inappropriate, and asked what his specific concerns were. He responded by claiming that my column was unbalanced and that there was "nothing in there about the Israeli soldiers who had been killed in Gaza recently, or why the troops had to be there in the first place."

Rather than 'killing' the column, I suggested a more journalistic approach – namely, editing it. I pointed out that no AM New York editor had been in touch with me about any perceived problems with the column; that I was open to a discussion about changes that might improve it; and that refusing to run an opinion column because you don't agree with the opinions expressed amounted to censorship. In the end, I thought I had persuaded Pergament not to kill the piece, but instead to delay its publication for a day until we could iron out any problems. He even agreed to run a note in Monday's paper explaining that my regularly scheduled column would run on Tuesday instead.

After consulting with several trusted regular readers – some of whom agreed with Pergament's assertion that the column suffered from not placing the Israeli incursion in proper context – I rewrote it to add details about the killing of thirteen Israeli soldiers in Gaza and the Palestinian weapons-smuggling tunnels that had led to the incursion. In the end, I thought the column was improved by the additions.

But Pergament apparently didn't agree, since Tuesday came and went with no column in AM New York, and no explanation from Pergament. At week's end, as I was still puzzling over what would be an appropriate response to being censored – Should I resign in protest? Should I leak the details to the press? Then I received an email from Pergament stating, "I appreciate the trouble you went to respond to my comments – you did as I asked and, despite that, I had an uncomfortable instinct."

Pergament's "instinctual" response of summarily "killing" my column called to mind once again Liebling's famous remark about the power of the press belonging only to those who own one. After all, it is Pergament's paper – but then again, it's MY column.

And you are my readers – thanks to power of the Internet, where anyone can be a publisher, and where control of the means of distribution is (not yet) reserved only to the powerful. So I ask you: How should WE respond to AM New York and its publisher?

Enter the debate on O'Connor's censorship at MediaChannel's Citizen's Media Watch (www.mediachannel.org).

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