

Bill Greider

I think it is fair to assume that everyone here today learned from Bill, as a relative, friend or colleague. But I will claim to be the only person here who after nearly 40 years can still recite three of Bill's basic axioms about news stories and editing:

1-At a breakfast table of four, with newspapers in hand, you can measure how boring a story is by how many heads hit the oatmeal – there are one, two and three bowlers and the ultimate, a four bowler.

2-A story so hot that the expectant reader rushes out in the morning to rip the paper out of the branded cylinder placed on top or below the mailbox. Those stories are called tube rippers.

3-When a reporter bogs down with an editor over of the details of a story, one or the other will exclaim: Jeez, stop picking the fly shit out of the pepper.

The craft of editing – as with so many creative skills – covers a great deal of ground. In a 2006 piece I tried to summarize what I thought about Bill as an editor. Here is the relevant paragraph:

“In the late 1970s and early 80s, William Greider was the Assistant Managing Editor of the Washington Post in charge of national news and, I, as national editor was his admiring deputy. Bill was (and is) a dazzling writer with strong political convictions, but what made him so effective was his ability to make his staff think about what they were doing. Bill was a pipe smoker with a grooved face like Abe Lincoln. Every encounter that Bill had with the multiple egos he led was about their objectives, and not some agenda of his own. He did not intimidate, bully or swagger. Bill reasoned and by doing so managed to get the best out of everyone around him. In the end, Greider was not supple enough as a corporate politician to rise further at the Post (and I can add probably had no interest in doing so) and went off to Rolling Stone, and though called national editor, turned to writing full time. As an editor, in the ways that really count, making other people better at their jobs, Bill was brilliant.”

When Bill died, I was told, but cannot confirm that the Post's senior editors wanted to know the circumstances of Bill's departure from the paper in 1982.

Bill was so respected, so important to the culture of the Post at the time that it was baffling to see him leave – not for the New York Times – but for Rolling Stone, then at the pinnacle of youth culture.

The ostensible reason was publication in The Atlantic of Bill's devastating profile of Reagan administration economic policy. He did share David Stockman's weekly insights with his reporters that spring, but not that he was writing a full-blown expose.

There was a sense at the Post that almost anything was acceptable involving breaking news that was true and first. But there was also for Bradlee, at least, what was known as the "doctrine of no surprises". I'm guessing that Ben, among the most justifiably proud men of his era, did not like having to tell Katharine Graham why a super-star reporter had produced an explosive piece for a journal, that was not hers.

My view, never discussed with Bill, by the way, was that he was declaring independence. His confines at the Post were loose, his stature great. Yet Bill at his core was a radical of the best kind. I think he'd be outraged by the desecration today of values known as populist, nationalist, progressive or liberal.

Bill's perspective was clear. He challenged ideological dogmatism and fashionably conventional views. The title of his column in Outlook was "Against the Grain."

A final thought: One of Bill's most famous books was called: "Secrets of the Temple," the deepest ever assessment of the Federal Reserve Board. And it was critical. In recent years I worked on a memoir with Paul Volcker. When the subject of Bill's book (prominently displayed on Paul's study shelf) came up, Chairman Volcker said it was a very tough account, including of him. But it was, he said, it was the best book ever written about the Fed.

That's our Bill.