

The Pulitzer for Breaking News Photos: Breakthrough for the Post?

There's a line in the "first rough draft" of recent Post-Dispatch history – the paper's own account of winning its first Pulitzer Prize in 26 years on Monday – that sounds a bittersweet note, at least to me.

"The mood in the newsroom became tense as [Pulitzer administrator Mike] Pride read through the awards for reporting," [writes Tim O'Neil](#). "When he started into the next-to-last category, breaking news photography, and uttered the words '...to the St. Louis...,' the room erupted in joy."

The sweet is obvious: "Photographers hugged each other to the cheers of their colleagues." Echoes, to be sure, of 17 other newsroom celebrations held by Post-Dispatch staffers over nine decades, starting in the 1920s when the legendary Daniel R. Fitzpatrick first won for cartooning; reporting by John T. Rogers got an Illinois federal judge impeached for wrongdoing; and Paul Y. Anderson helped bring the Teapot Dome scandal to light.

The bitter? That the remarkable, intensive news coverage by Post-Dispatch reporters and editors – of the same Ferguson nightmare of violence that led to the photography Pulitzer – received no mention, either as winner or finalist. (In one earlier contest, the Scripps Howard Awards, the P-D had been the breaking news winner, with its photojournalism a finalist.) The breaking news reporting Pulitzer Prize went to the Seattle Times, for what [the Pulitzer citation](#) called "its digital account of a landslide that killed 43 people and the impressive follow-up reporting that explored whether the calamity could have been avoided."

Perhaps Monday's joy in St. Louis did overwhelm everything else. "I have heard just one newsroom staffer say later that it was embarrassing not to be included among the Pulitzer finalists for breaking news reporting," Michael Sorkin tells me. Adds the veteran P-D reporter, who in 1993 was a Pulitzer finalist for investigative reporting, as part of a team with Terry Ganey and Lou Rose: "Everyone else in the newsroom seems to be enjoying the win. That includes me – the photographers earned it, pure and simple."

Like Sorkin, who wasn't in the newsroom for that Pulitzer announcement, this Post-Dispatch fan shares the excitement. The Pulitzers are in my blood. Especially those 18 Pulitzers in P-D history.

In 2002 I delivered a talk to the Post-Dispatch staff about the 15 years, from 1937 to 1952, when the Post won an unprecedented five Pulitzer Prizes for Public Service—the gold medals that are America's highest journalistic honor. (For that talk, I researched all its Pulitzers, and finalists, too, from 1991, 1993, 2000 and 2002. There've been four more finalists since: one in 2009, two in 2010, and this year's for Ferguson-related editorial writing by Tony Messenger and Kevin Horrigan.)

So I'm using this space to recap a bit, and put the latest prize in congratulatory perspective.

First some Pulitzer background: The prizes having been endowed through the 1911 will of newspaper pioneer Joseph Pulitzer—then the owner of the Post-Dispatch (and the now-defunct New York World)—that award-granting organization set strict rules to keep interested P-D parties out of award decisions involving their own papers. (The last related Pulitzer board member was Joseph Pulitzer III, who died in 1993.)

The run of five public service Pulitzers started in 1937 with

honors for a remarkable expose of voter fraud in St. Louis, with managing editor O.K. Bovard sending out reporters—including Roy J. Harris, my late father, and his late colleague Selwyn Pepper—to check out abandoned apartment buildings, confirming that at least 40,000 names on the voter roles were phony. It was a reporting performance praised by then-P-D owner and editor Joseph Pulitzer II, who also chaired the Pulitzer Prize board.

Next (1941) came a remarkable campaign to clean up St. Louis's air. That project started with the editor himself, who saw the filth whenever he returned home from his summer estate in pristine Bar Harbor, Maine. The third gold medal (1948) was for coverage of a Centralia, Ill., mine explosion fatal to 111 miners—a tragedy P-D reporters were able to trace to state mine inspectors who'd been paid off to let deadly conditions persist. And in 1950, public service gold medals went to the P-D and the Chicago Daily News, awarded for work by my dad, who teamed with Chicago reporter George Thiem in an unusual (for the time) collaboration exposing dozens of journalists on the state payroll.

The Post's fifth public service Pulitzer, two years later, was largely for the work of investigative reporter Ted Link, with Selwyn Pepper on rewrite. Link disclosed widespread patronage-related corruption in what later became the Internal Revenue Service.

Outside Rogers' and Anderson's prizes and those five of the public service recipients, most other Post-Dispatch winners have been honored in non-reporting roles: Bill Mauldin for cartooning (1959); Robert Lasch for editorials (1966), Marquis Childs for commentary (1970) and Frank Peters for music criticism (1972.)

Then in 1989 came the Pulitzer for freelance photographer Ron Olshwanger—the last prize until this week: for his stunning picture in the P.D. of a firefighter trying to resuscitate a

child pulled from a burning building.

Since then the Pulitzer competition had produced for the Post “only” finalists: celebrated work by Bill Woo in commentary (1991); Philip Kennicott, Bill Freivogel and John Carlton in editorial writing (2000, 2002 and 2010), and Robert Cohen’s feature photography (also 2010.) The sole reporting finalist was in 2009, to the P-D staff, for breaking news coverage of the city hall shooting in Kirkwood.

From my own perspective, I have followed the P-D closely at Pulitzer time ever since leaving the newsroom as a summer-replacement reporter in 1967, moving first to the Los Angeles Times and then to the Wall Street Journal. Over the years, this Post-Dispatch “brat” was cheered by its honored finalists—who illustrated that the paper was staying “in striking distance” – and then by that lone Pulitzer-winning photo. But I was saddened to see no more Post prizes.

So, was this year’s long-awaited Pulitzer for breaking news photography really a breakthrough for the Post-Dispatch?

From afar, I’m sure pulling for the paper, as are many other P-D fans. Like Kathy Best, a longtime Post staffer who left the paper as assistant managing editor/metro in 2005. (One of her memories of following Pulitzer announcements in St. Louis: Finding that the beloved Bill Woo hadn’t won for commentary in 1991. “The day he didn’t win was a really difficult one for everybody there,” she recalls.)

Best now is editor of the Seattle Times.

And watching the Pulitzer announcement from her own newsroom, “I had my fingers crossed for them to win something,” she says. “Selfishly, I didn’t want them to win at the expense of my newsroom. Still, I know what it’s like to have to keep a newsroom engaged and moving forward and enthused, day after day after day.” At the breaking news photography announcement, “I was thrilled for them. I’d been just blown away by the

quality of their photography; they were putting themselves in harm's way every day." She was happy, too, "that such incredible work by the photo staff was honored, and, with editorial writing finalists being named, too, that the paper's work on Ferguson was recognized in more than one way."

In advance of Monday's announcement, Best had prepared her own Times staff for any eventuality: "I told them the Pulitzers are a crap shoot, and win or lose we did great work."

Here's hoping the Post-Dispatch keeps on rolling the dice.

Harris, a veteran of the Wall Street Journal and the Economist's CFO Magazine, is author of [Pulitzer's Gold](#), which tells stories behind the stories of public service prizes. Columbia University Press is publishing a new edition in time for next year's centennial of the Pulitzer Prizes. He also follows the Pulitzers each year for Poynter Online, starting with [a preview of the competition](#).