

To err is human, to correct errors is newspaper's duty

MICHAEL ARRIETTA-WALDEN

Oregonian Public Editor

I recently made perhaps the most embarrassing mistake possible in The Oregonian: I allowed an error to appear in a correction fixing an earlier error.

I apologize to you, as readers, for my mistake. My sloppy editing allowed a misspelling of the name of the late tenor Franco Corelli to appear.

I felt sick to my stomach when I discovered the error. Many journalists do when they make a mistake, not because of the public embarrassment but because they are committed to accuracy and know their work reflects on not just their own credibility but also that of their colleagues and the newspaper.

Readers should expect the newspaper to get the facts straight, yet because journalists are human, we can't always do that. Perhaps more important, readers should expect and insist that the newspaper will admit and fix its mistakes.

Readers don't always believe journalists do that.

A Pew Research Center survey of 1,201 U.S. residents earlier this year found that 62 percent said news organizations try to cover up their mistakes. Only 27 percent said newspapers are willing to admit mistakes. A survey of readers at 16 newspapers by The Associated Press Managing Editors after the debacle at The New York Times last spring found many readers reluctant to report errors because they didn't believe that newspapers would correct them.

The Oregonian is more aggressive than most newspapers about correcting mistakes, thanks to the work of past public editors and to the staff's high level of commitment to accuracy. The newspaper published 679 corrections last year, and already has published 706 so far this year, including 76 in October.

In recent months, The Oregonian has corrected facts such as these: It's Molalla Buckaroo, not Buckaroo. A picture was of Edgar Martinez, not Bret Boone. And, appropriately, bug watchers are entomologists, not etymologists, who are word watchers. The details may seem picayune, but correcting the errors is profound, and perhaps little we do is more important.

For each correction that appears in The Oregonian, a form is filled out by those who handled the information to identify how the error occurred and what could be done to prevent such an error in the future. We look for trends in answers to those questions to try to fix systems. In the case of my error, I found a flaw in failing to follow a system for comparing EVERY fact in the proposed correction with the original story. Because of that simple discovery, I shouldn't make that type of mistake again. Each person at The Oregonian looks for similar breakdowns when he or she makes an error.

We modeled our corrections program after the one at The Chicago Tribune. Editors there closely track the percentage of errors reported by the staff as opposed to sources or readers; the higher the percentage, the better the newsroom culture of accuracy. We recently began tracking our own rate, which usually is about one in four.

Our rate of reporting could be better. As the public editor who handles the corrections for The Oregonian, I occasionally encounter reluctance to fix mistakes: Reporters and editors say no readers have pointed out the error, so there is no need to correct. Or they say the error is so insignificant that it doesn't need correcting.

That is wrong. And the newspaper must keep working to change those attitudes, to commit fully to accuracy.

Our renewed emphasis on corrections ironically gives us hope about improving our credibility with readers. A 1999 study for the American Society of Newspaper Editors actually found that 78 percent of readers who saw corrections "felt better" about the quality of the news coverage when they see them.

Ultimately, it's readers who are the key to our accuracy. If you see a mistake in The Oregonian, please call.

I'm willing to be embarrassed for the mistakes by myself and the newspaper, and I'm always bracing for another stomachache. Frankly, I will feel worse if you don't call because you don't think it will make a difference.

Michael Arrieta-Walden: 503-221-8221; publiceditor@news.oregonian.com; or 1320 S.W. Broadway, Portland OR 97201.