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Upfront

Condescending Coverage: Newspapers do a poor job of reporting on the nonprofit sector

By Alana Conner

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Condescending Coverage

Newspapers do a poor job of reporting on the nonprofit sector

In 2004, Robert Egger, the noted activist and founder of the D.C. Central Kitchen, groused to an audience at Georgetown University: “The nonprofit sector generates \$13 billion at least in revenues a year. Yet the best you get in all the media is the *Washington Business Journal’s* “Good Deeds” section, which reports [that] the proceeds from the spaghetti dinner helped poor kids in Southeast [D.C.]”

He’s right, says Matthew Hale, a professor in the department of public and healthcare administration at Seton Hall University. With several graduate students, Hale examined how newspapers portrayed the nonprofit sector for six months in 2003. He found that although the coverage was copious, it was mostly superficial.

“Most stories just give nonprofits a pat on the back, as if to say, ‘Look at this cute nonprofit raising money for those poor crippled children,’” says Hale. “You would expect this from television, but you would have thought that newspapers would give more depth and context about the role of the nonprofit sector in America.”

Hale and his team analyzed 1,034 newspaper articles from nine major newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. The researchers noted such factors as where the stories took place (local, state, national, or international), whether the stories focused on a few organizations or the nonprofit sector as a whole, and whether the

organizations were the main characters or bit players in the stories. Their report appears in the September 2007 issue of the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*.

Using this analysis, Hale writes: “The media tell us to think about nonprofits as local organizations that hold fundraising events. . . . Although [they] generally portray them in a positive light, they often portray them out of the spotlight altogether.” He further notes that no newspaper is doing a

Individual nonprofits can also do a better job of broadcasting their importance, says Hale: “Reporters don’t make the connection between the work that an individual organization is doing and the work being done across the country,” he says. “Nonprofits should make that connection for them. Understanding how your organization fits into the puzzle is interesting for reporters and important for the growth of the nonprofit sector.”

“Be bold – let the world know what you’re doing,” advised Stephanie Strom to attendees of the Independent Sector annual conference, held this October in Los Angeles. Strom, who writes about the nonprofit sector for *The New York Times*, also related; “I tell people, ‘Did you know that every time you enter Central Park you are availing yourself of the services of a nonprofit?’ Most people indeed do not know that the Central Park Conservancy operates the New York City landmark.

The nonprofit sector is becoming a force with which to reckon, suggest recent figures from the National Center for Charitable Statistics at the Urban Institute. Nonprofits account for 5.2 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product and 8.3 percent of the country’s wages and salaries. And so “the nonprofit sector needs to stop being treated like a child, and more like the adult it is,” concludes Hale.

—Alana Conner



“He’s wooing the press.”

good job of reporting on cross-sector partnerships for social change.

One big obstacle to getting the word out about the nonprofit sector is that most of the public does not know what a nonprofit is. Nonprofit umbrella organizations such as the United Way can clear up this confusion by developing a sector-wide media strategy, which includes training journalists and giving them more facts and figures, Hale suggests.