

## TRUTH OUR MISSION?

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**Publication info:** Editor & Publisher 138. 6 (Jun 2005): 62.

[ProQuest document link](#)

**Abstract:** The Spokesman-Review of Spokane WA not only uncovered allegations of past sexual abuse by Mayor Jim West, a former Republican state legislator and outspoken opponent of gay rights, but also revealed that he had been "trolling the Internet," as the paper puts it, for young gay men in recent months, and perhaps offering one or more of them jobs. It seems that the Spokesman-Review should be praised for its work, which apparently began years ago with background checks, source-building, and good old-fashioned shoe-leather hoofing. Hopefully, editors are not too worried about their newspapers' images, when they should be worried about their papers' relevance.

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**Full Text:** Headnote Shoptalk Headnote 'Spokesman-Review' deserves credit for its undercover work SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT. THE SPOKESMAN-REview of Spokane, Wash., not only uncovered allegations of past sexual abuse by its mayor, but also revealed that he had been "trolling the Internet," as the paper puts it, for young gay men in recent months, and perhaps offering one or more of them jobs. Mayor Jim West, a former Republican state legislator and outspoken opponent of gay rights, was found not only to be a hypocrite, but at the very least, a participant in some tawdry, secret, highly questionable behavior on public time and on the public dime. It seems to me that the Spokesman-Review should be praised for its work, which apparently began years ago with background checks, source-building, and good old-fashioned shoe-leather hoofing. Any paper that uncovers so much about its city's highest-ranking elected official (after endorsing him in the last election) should be held up as an example of what newspapers can do best. But not everyone agrees. When EUP asked 10 top editors around the country what they thought of the most controversial aspect of the SpokesmanReview's probe, no one said they would have done the same. The key complaint focused on the paper's decision to hire a computer expert to pose online as a 17- and then 18-year-old gay man looking for love, or at least sex, As the paper explained in its coverage, which began May 5, this online snoop logged on, began to search, and eventually found Mayor West on a gay Web site. Continued Web reporting found that the mayor had apparently met several male companions online, and allegedly offered at least one of them gifts, favors, and even a City Hall internship. Obviously, if the online muckraker had not disguised his identity, he would not have gotten the information. And if it is later determined that West actually abused his power during his Internet dalliances, then the paper's work will prove even more worthwhile. But most top editors we spoke to didn't like that type of undercover work. "We have a rule against that," said Leonard Downie, Jr., executive editor of The Washington Post. "It would take extreme circumstances to break that rule, but I don't foresee them." Most echoed Dennis Ryerson, editor of The Indianapolis Star, who simply said, "It is not something I would have done." Well, I'm sorry to hear that, because it looks like the Spokesman-Review did what newspapers are supposed to do: dig up the facts, expose wrongdoing, and hold those in power accountable. In just one week after the paper's initial stories, the mayor took a leave of absence, Spokane's city attorney called for an investigation, and the FBI launched a preliminary inquiry into potential corruption by West. So I find the alleged sins of Mayor West to be much more serious than the smaller sin of the paper disguising its reporting to catch him if that is even a sin at all. In recent years, newspapers have been under attack for using anonymous sources. While many have admitted that they are often used too much, those who defend them argue that, in many cases, stories cannot be nailed any other way. That would appear to be the case here with the

undercover reporting. Next to West himself, no one has been under more scrutiny because of these stories than Spokesman-Review Editor Steve Smith. Criticisms have been coming in daily from around the world to the paper's offices. Smith's defense: the reporting is solid, and reader response is running approximately 15-to-1 in the paper's favor. "It has built trust in our readers and Spokane citizens," Smith told the Pressthink blog. "I think this may be a sign of how disconnected some editors are from the sensibilities of citizens who want their newspapers to watchdog government and do it aggressively." I agree. It seems that newspapers may have gotten a bit too timid and are reluctant to go out on a limb and expose corruption, deceit, and hypocrisy. The way the press has been hammered in recent years for alleged bias and lack of credibility, one can understand the apprehension. Then there is the recent string of reporters being fired for alleged ethical misbehavior - from having a few beers while on assignment at a college party to incomplete or falsified reporting. It makes one wonder if some journalists are reluctant to take a reporting risk, fearing backlash or sharper scrutiny of their work. But that does not excuse any paper from doing everything it can to expose politicians when evidence of criminal activity, misuse of power, or downright lying is found. Are editors too worried about their newspapers' images, when they should be worried about their papers' relevance? Hopefully not. And if the SpokesmanReview is an example of how papers can be watchdogs rather than lapdogs, more power to them.

**Subject:** Sex crimes; Newspapers; Mayors; Investigations; Gays&lesbians

**Location:** United States--US

**Company/organization:** Name: Spokesman-Review-Spokane WA; NAIC: 511110

**Classification:** 9190: United States, 8690: Publishing industry

**Publication title:** Editor&Publisher

**Volume:** 138

**Issue:** 6

**Pages:** 62

**Number of pages:** 1

**Publication year:** 2005

**Publication date:** Jun 2005

**Year:** 2005

**Section:** - 30 -

**Publisher:** Nielsen Business Media

**Place of publication:** New York

**Country of publication:** United States

**Journal subject:** Communications, Journalism, Printing, Advertising And Public Relations

**ISSN:** 0013094X

**CODEN:** EDPUAW

**Source type:** Trade Journals

**Language of publication:** English

**Document type:** Commentary