

Journalism and plagiarism: The story of how 113 deadly words and an omnipotent publisher ended the career of Tribune columnist Rick Soll

Newspapers essentially are a whore's business. Writers get paid for titillating and satiating their customers. Newspapers don't really exist to inform and instruct and there's not a publisher alive who thinks of his sheet as an extension of the famed Socratic dialogue. Freedom of the press belongs to the man who owns one and news belongs to the man who owns the reporters. Now it appears that due process and justice also belong to the publishers—the Lords of the Chicago Tribune have hanged one of their columnists—without granting him a trial or the opportunity to defend himself.

His name is Rick Soll. On Sunday, Dec. 7, Tribune Editor Clayton Kirkpatrick ripped off Soll's editorial stripes, led him to the scaffold, and pulled the trap before approximately 700,000 readers in a unique column Kirkpatrick published on the editorial page.

Kirkpatrick's story began:

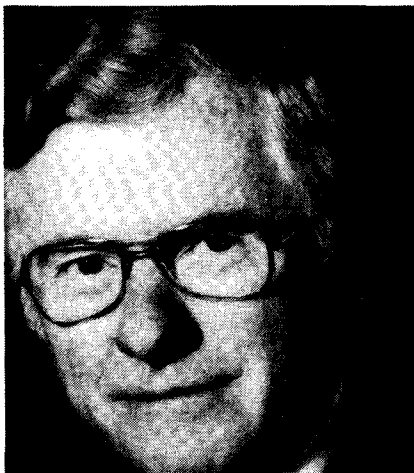
"Rick Soll, a young and talented columnist whose work has won a following among many Tribune readers over the last two years no longer will be writing for this newspaper. His resignation has been accepted effective today."

Kirkpatrick charged Soll with having plagiarized part of a Nov. 23 piece about a young man leaving for the Army. The plagiarism consisted of 113 words Soll acknowledges were first written in 1967 by Pete Hammil for the *New York Post*.

Now regardless of why anybody in the world would want to plagiarize Pete Hammil, I remained curious about why Soll would risk a prestigious \$400 a week job for 113 limp words about a nothing subject. So I asked him.

He told me that since college he has been in the habit of jotting into notebooks, sentences, ideas, and other bits of information from which to draw for future writings.

After Soll's research for the column was completed, he went to his notebooks to find out what he had collected over the years about things military. There he found Hammil's



Madigan: a lost leg and a lost job.

eight-year-old words, thought they were his own musings and used them to lead his Sunday column.

On Monday, Nov. 23, WBBM's acid-tongued media critic John Madigan was on the telephone asking Soll if he'd ever heard of Pete Hammil and if he'd read the collection of Hammil's work.

Soll pleaded ignorance. Madigan explained an allegation of plagiarism against Soll had come in an anonymous letter. He called back in 60 minutes and read Soll the offending paragraphs. The duplication, Soll says, took him completely by surprise.

Soll's column began:

"The kid's name was Bruce Mackiewicz and he was 19 years old and in another hour he was going away. He would walk out of the white house in Tinley Park and out of his childhood. There would be no telephones ringing anymore, no girls in the evenings, no easy words with his dad in the morning while toast popped and bacon sizzled.

"He was going away. In a couple of hours he would be in the Army for four years.

"You want eggs, Bruce?" his mother said.

"Yeah. OK. Eggs."

Now Pete Hammil:

"The kid's name was Johnnie and he was 17 years old and in another hour

he was going away. He would walk out of the second-floor apartment in Brooklyn and out of his childhood leaving all of it behind. There would be no telephones ringing anymore, no girl's voice in the evening, no radio murmuring the news in the morning while the coffee bubbled richly and the bacon crackled on the pan. He was going away: In a couple of hours, this 17-year-old kid would be in the Army.

"Do you want coffee, Johnnie?" his mother said.

"Yeah. OK. coffee."

Madigan's commentary about Soll's repeat performance was broadcast on WBBM-radio that night.

At home, Soll took out his cursed notebook and figured out what happened. He wrote an explanation of the affair Tuesday night to present to Bernie Judge, Trib city editor, both his boss and friend. Before he handed it over Wednesday, Max McCrohon, the managing editor, spoke to the embarrassed reporter about the incident and, Soll says, accepted his explanation of what had happened. In fact, Soll recalls McCrohon said, "I consider the incident closed."

But the heat was on Soll from two directions. The brass at the Tribune and reporters across the city were muttering about the affair and if his professional life wasn't complicated enough, his personal life certainly was: Soll's wedding ceremony was scheduled for the week's end, and Saturday he and his bride were to leave for a honeymoon in Mexico.

About 11 p.m. Wednesday night Soll got a call from Judge telling him there had been a meeting and the columnist was banished from the Tribune until the following Tuesday. Soll protested and suggested he delay his honeymoon and stay and fight, but Judge urged him to behave normally and go ahead with previous plans. (This is Soll's version: Judge was on vacation at the time the column was written and wasn't interviewed.)

"Friday morning I wrote Bernie a memo, in which I said again I thought it would be extremely foolish for me to

go," Soll says. "I wanted to go in and talk to Bill Jones, managing editor of news, and Kirkpatrick. I said I wanted to either delay, postpone, or cancel the trip. I didn't want it to seem like I was running away.

"Bernie called me back and said 'You go, there is nothing you can do here. It will only hurt you to talk to people.'"

So Soll, whose judgment wasn't getting any sharper from the conflicting pressures, went ahead, got married and flew with his bride to Acapulco.

On Tuesday Judge was on the telephone again, telling Soll that a 30 day suspension had been levied against him for plagiarism.

"I argued with him about that," Soll says. "I admitted it was a mistake but it was an unwitting one. I don't need to plagiarize anyone's work for the lousy paragraphs that aren't even important.

"I said 'If I take the 30 days, that's saying I'm accepting I did something wrong.' He (Judge) said, 'It's either that or quit.'"

"Reluctantly I said 'I'll take it.' In the next two days I fell into a morose depression about it. The phone rang Thursday and Judge said, 'I want your resignation on my desk immediately.'"

"He told me that one of my 'friends' at the Trib had charged that a column I had written a year ago was a column that was winging it—which it wasn't. I had changed a guy's name in it and didn't put in the parenthetical expression that it was a fictitious name.

"At the point I was told to hand in my resignation, nobody was interested in what I had to say."

Perhaps more important, Time magazine had called the Tribune asking questions, apparently indicating they planned to write an article about the affair.

Hanging up the telephone, Soll obediently trudged off to the Acapulco Western Union office to transmit his resignation. Finding the office closed, he got on an airplane and flew back to Chicago. He telegraphed in the resignation from O'Hare field.

Kirkpatrick's recital of the incident in his "Reporting the news" column the following Sunday said:

"A decision was made to suspend Soll for a month without pay. The evidence seemed conclusive that it was his first offense and that he had learned a painful lesson.

"Within a day after this decision, however, further evidence was disclosed that another column had contained information that Soll knew was false. The decision was made immediately to accept a resignation that he had offered when the investigation began."

Kirkpatrick told me that Soll "wasn't fired. He offered his resignation and it was accepted."

'To think I would knowingly lift a few paragraphs to risk everything . . . is insanity'

But he conceded that if Soll hadn't offered the resignation he "probably would have been fired."

Kirkpatrick never talked to Soll to get his side of things before he wrote the now famous column.

"It was the equivalent of being barred for a lawyer," Soll says. "At this point I have no idea what's happened to my career. I don't know what the future's going to hold. It's the worst thing that's ever happened to me in my whole life. I worked very hard for those people and they know that. To think I would knowingly lift a few paragraphs, to risk everything I had, is insanity.

"He never heard my side of the story . . . and then he hanged me out in the public square."

Kirkpatrick admits he never talked to Soll. But his column certainly gives the impression that he did, and states, as fact, material he knows only by allegation or hearsay from his employees.

Kirkpatrick, in effect, printed a confession for Soll without having heard from the accused, without talking to the accused and apparently without giving him the opportunity to defend himself before the judges of his crime. Since he finds the role of God so easy to play, the scriptural tones Kirkpatrick adopts for the conclusion of his column are natural ones:

"The basic standards of good faith and veracity, however, must apply to what we call feature writing as well as to more serious reporting.

"Moreover, the standards that we look for in others, particularly public officials, cannot, in fairness, be denied application to us. We condemn deception in others: we cannot accept it among our own without penalty."

It's pretty clear in my mind that Kirkpatrick has standards for reporters that he refuses to apply to himself. That makes him a hypocrite as well as a sloppy reporter. He didn't have the integrity to personally interview a man whose reputation he has crushed. Kirkpatrick didn't even allow Soll's simultaneous rebuttal.

Kirkpatrick displayed a compulsion to hector a sinner in public and bugle his own superior virtues while he was in the midst of committing serious journalistic sins of his own.

But as I said at the beginning of this column, newspapers are a whore's bus-

inc.

So is broadcasting.

John Madigan did a good piece of reporting when he unearthed Soll's transgression. He began undoing himself Dec. 9 in a subsequent commentary that ended:

"After all . . . society gives a lot of serious young criminals a second chance. Even finds them jobs. But Soll is finished in the news business. While the Trib has protected its credibility.

"We will never know—will we—whether the Tribune would have gone public regarding its good name . . . if I hadn't blown the whistle."

That sounded like gloating, even to Madigan's ears, so on Dec. 15 he defended his previous bad taste with a remarkable commentary that united apology with defensiveness, Bill Veeck with Rick Soll, and a missing limb with the loss of a job.

The concluding paragraphs win the year's award for reckless disregard of good taste.

" . . . as to the Bill Veeck matter . . . some people thought it in bad taste when I said that if Veeck believed millionaire Clement Stone that his Positive Mental Attitude is what the White Sox need to win the pennant then Veeck must have a wooden head as well as a wooden leg.

"I don't think I was in bad taste. I know Veeck lost his leg in World War II. He jokes about his wooden leg. I've seen him use it as an ashtray. Sports writers refer to his 'peg-leg.' He wouldn't have been offended.

"Life is a rack . . . I've always said. Rick Soll's loss will be far more difficult to overcome than Bill Veeck's lost leg."

Three journalists, and three journalistic sins. If I were the great editor in the sky I would punish them this way:

Rick Soll would lose his column and be assigned to the copy desk because anybody dumb enough to subconsciously recollect Pete Hammil (much less deliberately steal his fluff) deserves to spend the rest of his days correcting reporter's spelling errors.

Clayo Kirkpatrick would be cast out of the executive office and dispatched to the Little Trib in Hinsdale to learn basic reporting skills. It might be suggested to him that there's a great future for a man of his abilities in the classified ad department.

John Madigan would get hit smartly on his wooden head and told, "Watch your tongue, boy. You don't talk to people like that."

Soll's dilemma is every reporter's nightmare and it could happen to anyone in the business. The whole affair makes my skin crawl. Nobody behaved well. But the audience was entertained, and that's what the news business really is all about. □