

# NEWSBLUEZETTE

A DAILY INSIDER NEWSLETTER FOR TV NEWS PROFESSIONALS

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## SIGNING OFF

On a hot July evening in 1998, your **Surly Editor®** and **Mrs. B** (who were then known simply as **Mike James** and **Mona Scott**), were out for an evening stroll in Columbus, Ohio, trying to decide what to do next.



**Mona** had "lost the fire" and, after 28 years as a television news anchor and reporter, had reached the uneasy conclusion that the time had come to get out while the gettin' was good. Two years remained on her employment contract with **WBNS-10-CBS**, but she'd had enough. The TV news business was changing rapidly, and not for the better. She decided to approach station management about an early release. They graciously agreed.

As **Mona's** husband, I feared for her sanity. I knew that without the daily challenge of TV reporting to occupy her abundant curiosity, she would go mad...and take me with her. I proposed an idea for a website. It would be called "**NewsBlues**," I told her, and it would be a place for TV newsies to bitch and moan about all that was wrong with the business. She wanted no part of it. TV news had been good to her. "Leave me out of it," she said.

On August 11, 1998, while **Mona** was away at her family reunion in Amelia Island, FL, I posted the empty shell of **NewsBlues** on a rented web server. The world yawned. Two weeks passed without comment. In late August, former talent agent **Don Fitzpatrick** (now deceased), posted a brief mention of **NewsBlues** in his daily email newsletter "**Shoptalk**." Within five days, the website was clicking. "Everybody in the business is aware of it," said **Syracuse University** professor **Dow Smith** at the time. "They're all talking about it."



At the end of September, I received a bill for \$67.50 from the Atlanta company that hosted **NewsBlues**, citing "bandwidth overage charges." (It was exactly the same amount as my first weekly paycheck as sports director of **WFTV-9-ABC** in Orlando in 1970.) Visitors to **NewsBlues**, it seemed, were consuming big chunks of the internet highway.

In the final week of September 1998, **NewsBlues** recorded more than a million visits....in **ONE WEEK**...roughly **5,000 an hour**. The site had become white hot overnight, and not everyone was happy about it.



Thousands of anonymous posts poured in from the belly of America's TV newsrooms. Most were critical of their bosses and station owners. Some were libelous. Cease and desist letters began arriving. Attorneys threatened lawsuits. "The site is viewed as pure comedy," said **KCBS** reporter **Drew Griffin**. "Nothing is sourced. You have no idea who is writing in and, quite frankly, a keen ear can hear the same trash in the bathrooms around here." Although we were unaware at the time, **NewsBlues** had become the **precursor for social media**.

By the end of October 1998, **NewsBlues** was averaging **100,000 visitors a day**. But, advertisers wouldn't touch us. The content was deemed radioactive. The bill for bandwidth overages topped \$400. The **Columbus Dispatch** ran an article about **NewsBlues**, incorrectly attributing the website's bilious content to **Mona**. She was crushed.

"We (were) beaten down by the daily wave of anger from all sides," I told the **Online Journalism Review**. "People [are] pissed off about something that was posted; people [are] pissed off because something they submitted wasn't posted... or, worse, was edited to remove libelous statements. But most of all we were beaten down by the demanding arrogance of all involved... the sense that this was their site and we were sometimes standing in the way of their right to vent... never appreciating the fact that we were legally responsible for the content."

After just three months, on November 13, 1998, I pulled the plug. The following day, the moving van arrived, packed up our furnishings, and we embarked on what were to be our quiet "retirement" years in North Central Florida. Fat chance. When the computer was unpacked a week later, I found roughly 1,400 emails urging us to resurrect the site. "I'm willing to pay," many of them said.

And that was when the light clicked on. We could see that there was an unquenched thirst for critical content. We understood that people...and especially those who worked in television...were **becoming evermore disillusioned with the industry's direction**. But we knew we couldn't continue to publish the vitriolic insider reports without some form of filtration. We risked becoming, in the words of **ABC's Sam Donaldson**, "Just another miscreant with a modem."

On January 1, 1999, we moved **NewsBlues** behind a subscription wall and began rewriting the anonymous contributions. The website adopted a more polished, professional look...and readership cratered. Fewer than 200 subscribers were willing to pay the **\$10 quarterly fee**. But, in the move, we were able to regain control of the website's content...and its tone. Legal threats withered. And we stopped losing money.



In the summer of 1999, a year after the website's initial launch, we began producing a daily newsletter called the "**NewsBluezette**," which combined anonymous "insider reports" with rewrites of widely available online newspaper stories. The **Surly Editor**® persona was adopted as a way of injecting snippy comment.



We circulated the newsletter by email for 16 months until spam and content filters forced us to change our method of distribution. The first online edition of the daily "**NewsBluezette**" appeared on Monday, November 20, 2000, and headlined our exclusive coverage of **Fox News** reporter **Shepard Smith's** arrest in Tallahassee. A link on "**The Drudge Report**" caused 340,000 page hits and alerted us to weaknesses in our password security system.

**Mona** added a daily grammar lesson three months later, on February 21, 2001, called "**Mrs. B's Grammar Corner**," which became an outlet for her love of language. To this day, she has never contributed any of the daily **NewsBlues** editorial content (although she does copy edit the text and occasionally groans theatrically when a story doesn't meet her standards).

In the ensuing **18 years, 9 months, and 15 days**, we have offered our readers a front row seat to the unprecedented corporatization of media and the government-approved dismantling of television's obligation to serve the American public. We've reported on the shallow lawsuits and vapid management missteps. We never anticipated the steady flow of stories about newsies in domestic spats, DUI arrests, disorderly conduct, drug addiction, sex abuse and harassment, hallway scuffles, shoplifting, open mics, F-bombs, N-words, and general "problematic behavior." We never fully envisioned the likes of **Larry Mendte** or **Erin Andrews** or **Roger Ailes** or **Bill O'Reilly**. It has been, quite frankly, a target-rich environment.



We have watched the unhealthy transformation of TV news: the steady shift to shallow tabloid content; the casting aside of older, experienced talent; **the headlong pursuit of younger demographics**; the drive to build newsrooms on ethnically-balanced quotas and newscasts on research-driven formulas; the abandonment of investigative journalism out of fear of litigation; the proliferation of 24-hour cable news and its need to fill time with opinion; the politicalization of news and the loss of balance; and the increasingly intense focus to "do more with less."



And that had led to live shots for the sake of going live; mandatory walk-and-talks; **syrupey live TV marriage proposals**; weepy personal medical memoirs; mommy blogs and birth celebrations; newsroom sheet cakes; buyouts and layoffs; adrenalin-infused storm chasers masquerading as scientists; local meteorologists with sleeves rolled up interrupting programming for breathless storm alerts in distant counties; bigger, more powerful radars; mobile weather units covered in advertiser logos; beauty queen traffic anchors; **TelePrompter readers in cocktail dresses**; endless promotion and slogans and shallow branding; verbless **BREAKING NEWS** that isn't; tweets and selfies and sprawling studios meant to overwhelm viewers with style, rather than substance.

We've watched a handful of broadcasting companies **leverage investment money to gobble up local TV stations by the hundreds**, creating ownership behemoths that threaten the public interest by centralizing news production, eliminating competition and diversity, squeezing advertisers, steam rolling retransmission agreements, and generating **obscene compensation packages** for a handful of executives. Meanwhile, news staffs have been consolidated and salaries slashed. Local television, now dependent on scale, has expanded its local news hole to accommodate more advertising opportunities to pay the bills.

We've witnessed the unsound focus on **self-congratulatory industry awards**, the preposterous growth of regional **Emmys®**, and the surrealistic expansion of **Edward R. Murrow** trophies. We've watched major universities move from educating journalists to creating TV personalities, who seem eager to build careers on the shifting sands of social media. And we've watched a small university in America's poorest state become an **online factory for TV weather guessers**.



On our watch, America's trust and **confidence in the news media has fallen to an all-time low**.

We are clearly aware that **NewsBlues** has flourished on the bones of a distorted and increasingly perverted industry. But we are heartened by the fact that without **NewsBlues**, much of what we report here on a daily basis would have been **buried beneath the white noise of corporate spin and management double talk**.

Today is my final newsletter. The new kids on the block take over next Tuesday. But **Mrs. B** remains.

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## MRS. B's GRAMMAR YAMMER

*"A PBS mind in a Twitter world."*

Mrs. B was tempted to ride off into the sunset with the Surly Editor®, but racing just isn't her thing. Grammar is. She appreciates that the new editor of NewsBlues is making space for her lessons, now and then. Her first job out of college was teaching high school English. She still has a passion for using language correctly. Let's look at two sets of words often confused and misused.

To indicate something indirectly is to imply it. The communicator does the implying:

~The senator seemed to **imply** that nothing would change his mind.

The receiver of communication infers.

~Viewers **infer** that the politician's actions were immoral.

"Disinterested" means to be impartial and unbiased.

~Because she was **disinterested** in the outcome of the dispute, she made a good mediator.

"Uninterested" means not interested, bored, or indifferent.

~The reporter was **uninterested** in the story, so the assignment manager gave it to someone else.

Here's one of Mrs. B's favorite quotations to end today's lesson:

You have reached the pinnacle of success as soon as you become uninterested in money, compliments, or publicity.--Thomas Wolfe, novelist (1900-1938)

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