



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Dog Bites Man; News?

My journalism professor in college once told a story that was apocryphal. It appears that a young reporter was all excited about the fact that he had written a story about a dog biting a man. He was trying desperately to get on the front page of the local newspaper and be noticed so he approached his editor and asked if he could get on the page, above the fold. The editor escorted the man out of his office and admonished him by saying the following. “Young man, dogs bite people all the time, if you want to show me news, give me a headline that reads man bites dog”.

The theme behind that particular anecdote is that what makes news is not always the repetition of the same old story over and over again, but a new twist on the old story. Some authors often refer to that as the stories “slant”. One of the reasons for writing slant to a story is to get people to be able to stop long enough to read it. Once they begin to recognize that a news story is repetition, redundant and for the lack of a better term, not very informative, the reader often moves on to another section of the publication and completely disregards the rest of the news article.

In many ways, we in California are experiencing a similar phenomenon when reports talk about the big fires. What I am talking about, of course, is the major fires that strike our state in the urban wildland interface. Going back over my many years of either responding to or preparing reports on these fires; I started to collect newspaper clippings. In later years started to collect news briefings on Television. My intent was to capture the essence of how news was being portrayed as it relates to our ability to inform the public through the media during times of emergency. But, unfortunately what I found was that there is not a lot of originality and creativity when it comes to reporting major wildland fires.

As a matter of fact, if you take the headlines and read them they are almost like the boring dog bites man. It happens all the time. The headlines often read exactly the same; the only thing that has often changed is the place. And even that doesn't change that much. In my career I have seen fire back into the same canyons and in the same areas multiple times over multiple decades.

You probably know exactly what I am referring to. If you are listening to the news, you will hear statements like “homeowners forced to evacuate their homes last night with only moments warning”, “evacuees frustrated by being kept out of the area that they evacuated due to ongoing danger”, “weary firefighters put up a valiant battle against major wildland fire”. I can go on with other examples but by then you probably would have the point.

The news media unfortunately lacks any specific sense of what constitutes real news when these events occur. For example, I have had conversations with some of my associates in the media and asked them the question of why they don't focus on success stories instead of tragedy. By success stories, I am



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talking about focusing on neighborhoods where buildings didn't burn, such as the Rancho Santa Fe scenario of a couple of years ago. Whether it is good or bad, good news doesn't seem to resonate at 6:00 or with film at 11.

I will give you a very specific example on how the media can really sometimes drop the ball on good news. You might have heard of a fire that occurred recently in California, called the "49er Fire". This fire which started in an area right outside of the city of Auburn destroyed 60 homes in a matter of a couple of hours. The response was rapid. Fire suppression personnel did everything they possibly could to suppress every avenue of fire codes. Yet 60 homes burned to the ground and we had a repeat of the news media lamenting this tragic loss but adding absolutely nothing new to the discussion.

Yet, staring them right in the face was a success story that was totally ignored. I refer to the Shultz Tire Company. The Shultz Tire Company has a major commercial building sitting at the intersection of Highway 49 and Lindsley Lane. The street address is 12000 Lindsley. If you drive by that building today you will see a large sign on the outside of the building that reads "tenant fire damage, temporarily closed".



What's the news here? Well, the first item is that this building was a potential victim of the fire also. It was right on the very edge of the assault from the wildland fire spread. And, not only that, the building did catch on fire. There was a very large storage area to the back side of the building that was ignited and there was not a single fire apparatus on the scene to do anything about it.



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So, where is the news? The sprinkler system put the fire out. Yes, that very device that is being maligned by many as being ineffective and counterproductive by the National Association of Homebuilders, actually kept that place from burning to the ground saving not only the insurance company a huge property loss but also saved jobs and a tax base for the community. Now isn't that news? Well, it certainly didn't get treated that way. I reviewed almost every publication I could get my hands on and could not find one mention of that success story. It is unfortunate that right across the street from the Shultz Tire Company was a large building that was burned completely to the ground that was unsprinklered. They, of course, can be counted amongst the tragic figures until the news media has been lamenting and "sending out their thoughts and prayers to".



Forget the thoughts and prayers. Start thinking about what works and what doesn't work. In this particular case, the sprinkler system activated appropriately and kept the fire from entering the building. It is not that the fire didn't attempt to compromise even that the double pane windows were broken, there were examples of where the fire actually did worm its way into the interior. I personally went there and witnessed it. The difference is that the building didn't burn down because the sprinkler system activated and kept it from doing so.

As I go back through my clipping files and my reproduction of 11 o'clock news broadcasts, I hardly ever hear of anybody talking about success. Yet, it is those success stories that need to be leveraged and distributed among the mindset of the next generation of people who are going to suffer these fires. I can't help but wonder what would happen if a news reporter stood up in front of a burning



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neighborhood and said “in the background are homes that are being burned to the ground because of a failure of the property owners to clear their defensible space, refuse to get rid of their combustible roof coverage, and continue to turn down tax initiatives to raise the level of service in this neighborhood.” The sprinkler head in the next photo kept the fire from entering the building. Isn’t that significant?



I would like to be as sympathetic as the next guy but it is my belief that mythological editor from a long time ago was probably right. It is not news that a fire can burn down buildings. What is news is that fire can be prevented from burning down buildings. Describing a pile of ashes is dog biting a man. Talking about a puddle of water and a structure that remains standing after being assaulted by a fire from the outside is man biting the dog.