

THE JOY OF CORPORATE JOURNALISM, BY J. IVES TURNKEY

by
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Let's get the moral of this story out of the way right up front.

Big money always means big headaches, and when corporate image walks in the door, the possibility of individual integrity flies out the window.

My first inkling that I was being observed from afar by intellects vast and unsympathetic came in the form of an e-mail from Mark Frauenfelder, circa April 20, 1998. Mark, as all discerning undergrounders know, is a major Good Guy, one of the genies behind pioneering neurozine *BOING-boING* and other Happy Mutant products. Mark has also been, for many years, an editor at *Wired* magazine, responsible for their "Tired/Wired" feature among other duties.

"Paul--I've shown your casino piece from *SF Eye* to the editors at *Wired*, and they might be contacting you about an assignment. Good luck!"

After relocking my jaw in the closed position, I thought to bless Mark's kindly, networking soul. I also cast a hosanna in the direction of Steve Brown and The Mighty *Eye*, where the piece in question had first appeared. Together, these two friends seemed to be conspiring to fulfill an ambition of mine.

I had been idly dreaming of getting work from glossy, influential, high-paying *Wired* ever since Bruce Sterling mailed me their first issue six or so years ago. It seemed to me I might have something valid to contribute to their technophile journal, a voice in their chorus. I had once come tantalizingly close: a couple of years ago, the magazine had commissioned me to do a one-page interview with Clarke-collaborator Gentry Lee, and I had turned in what I thought was a spiffy, skiffy piece. But the effort had been spiked and I had collected only a kill-fee. So this news of a possible assignment was, while unexpected, most welcome. It represented a new challenge for my fledgling journalistic chops, recently honed by a series of articles for Scott Edelman at *Sci-Fi Entertainment*. Also a sweet paycheck and a showcase appearance for the old Di Filippo byline. Like a typical *Wired* futurist scenario, my prospects all looked positively Utopian.

But two facts should have alarmed me: anonymous editors had driven a stake through my Gentry Lee interview, and I had actually pitched the admired casino article to *Wired* before I did it for Steve, and they had rejected it. Now they loved it? Something was potentially screwy. But I ignored all tremors of doubt in my anticipatory greediness.

My first contact with *Wired* came hard on the heels of Mark's e-mail, from a male editor we'll call Stan. (All names have been reconfigured to avoid installation problems.) As he informed me that I was indeed the magazine's choice to handle a certain job, Stan and his whiskey voice reminded me of an amiable boomer pothead, and I felt at ease. He outlined the task before me: to travel to Chicago and Florida gathering the facts, then to write as much as 5000 words of text--all in less than three full weeks, since the piece would be due by May 11th. He also told me that he was only my temporary handler: a woman whom I'll codename Rainbow would be my official editor once she got back to town.

Eager yet still a trifle wary, I consented to everything, including the tight deadline. I soon had a contract dated April 22 in hand. The next few days involved a lot of phone calls along the San Francisco-Chicago-Providence circuits, trying to get all the ducks in a row. I began to feel a little nervous as my available research/ writing time trickled away.

It was only on the 30th of April that all the pieces fell into place, and I rushed to my local travel agent to make all my own arrangements, somewhat leery of having *Wired* handle bookings at a remote distance. Also, I wanted to go the extra mile and save the magazine a little grief by taking on any drudgery I could spare them.

Before leaving, I finally got to talk with Rainbow. She was a perky soul of some youthfulness (later, I would learn that she was a Gen-X graduate of a prestigious college), intent on cheerleading me through my trepidations. "Don't worry, Paul. Just write this exactly like the casino story and it'll be wonderful. Give us a real 'you-are-there' feeling."

That much I thought I could do. I set off with high hopes.

The on-the-road experience you'll read about below. I've resisted any temptation to retrofit minor improvements into the text. What you're seeing is exactly what I delivered in fulfillment of the command to cast the story along the same lines as the casino essay. But let's resume this anecdote on Friday, May 8th.

Back home, I awake with lingering flu symptoms and plunk my airline-seat-squeezed butt down before my computer. I've got a headful of short-term memories, pages of notes, eight ninety-minute cassettes of interviews and recorded meetings, and several reference books, all of which I have to integrate and spin into a story. Over the next four days, expending massive energies I was unaware I possessed, I crafted 8300 words that I was naive enough to imagine presented an intriguing, coherent, accurate account of the past few days and the issues involved. Late in the afternoon of the 11th, my deadline, I faxed it to *Wired*.

Exhausted yet proud, I turned my attention over the next couple of days to other projects. On the ill-fated 13th, I heard from Rainbow by phone.

"Paul, we've got a few problems with your article."

"I know it's too long. We can cut--"

"That's not it. We feel that you're not focusing on the real heart of the story here. And the piece reads too much like a diary. We need to eliminate the first-person angle and shift things around just a little."

"Eliminate the first-person? But I thought that's what you guys liked about the casino article?"

"It was. But now we don't think it works here. Listen, I'm going to fax the manuscript back to you with my suggestions."

Stunned, I hung up. A short time later, I had a sheaf of hot fax in my hand. Every page was overscribbled with commentary. Some of Rainbow's editorial adjustments were on-the-mark: simple, standard attempts to impose concision or clarity where the author had wandered. Others related to breaking down the strict linear chronology I had chosen, shifting incidents and descriptions around. Those were more problematical. But a third class consisted of absolutely boneheaded or misconceived admonitions, clustering around an ulterior goal I was beginning to vaguely apprehend. (My favorite among these: "Fewer literary allusions, please." I began to lose confidence in Rainbow's editorial acumen. I was tempted to ask: If you didn't want literary allusions, why didn't you hire a plumber instead of a novelist, honey?)

Stifling my dismay, I buckled down. Time for the Hardened Professional to take over the helm. I had worked with more than a dozen editors over the years, and felt I knew how to satisfy the most stringent requests for changes. So: out went any reference to my humble person. No ego, right? The author is just a conduit for the story. Mercilessly, I began to cut my text, graciously incorporating a few phrases offered by

Rainbow. That was a fatal step on a slippery slope, it turned out. Over the next two days, I produced a 5800-word version I still felt happy with. Via the Internet this time it flew to California. Not long thereafter, Rainbow called.

"Paul, we're still not there."

I'm afraid I lost it. My voice shot up in volume. Two weeks of conferencing, travel, and flat-out brain-draining composition had taken their toll. (I was now sporting a hivelike rash around my neck from the atypical level of vocational stress.) "Not there? What can I do? Do you want me to manufacture information out of nothing? I've reported everything I saw. What's the exact problem?"

Rainbow became semi-inarticulate. "This has to be a creation myth, Paul, a creation myth."

"Listen, Rainbow, I'm not Neal Stephenson following cable-layers around the globe, or Bruce Sterling at Burning Man. Florida is not Singapore. This is about two guys building a house for a rich businessman. I can't pretend there's more to this story than there is."

"I'm sorry you see things that way. I'll get back to you."

I felt awful, and was sure Rainbow did too. We had reached an impasse. From my perspective unreasonable demands were being made and a perfectly satisfactory essay was being fiddled with unnecessarily. On her part, some nebulous vision of perfection was being ignored by a haughty author. A third party now intervened, Rainbow's superior, Gerda Gekko. Gekko called the next day to stroke me, and reassure me that with a little more effort, a really superior article would result.

"Don't worry, *everything* here goes through four drafts. I used to work at *The New Yorker*, and articles there underwent nine drafts. You've got it lucky."

So much for Kerouac's Spontaneous Bop Prosody. Why insist on four drafts, even if something near-fine was turned in? Forget *my* piece even--hell, I was willing to admit I wasn't perfect--but what about someone else's carefully considered prose? At first, so many sequential revisions struck me as editorial makework, a job security move, mucking about for the sake of mucking about. (My story would eventually sport four different opening lines, any of which would have sufficed.)

What I didn't realize at the time was that four drafts allowed *Wired* to accomplish one vital thing: the imposition of its house template, the application of its party line, and the homogenization of individual voices.

Shortly after Gekko hung up, Rainbow called. She informed me she'd be sending another set of editorial prods and pointers. I meekly agreed, my back broken by this two-pronged assault.

During the remainder of May and into June, I would generate two more complete drafts, deleting lines that had once been deemed wonderful by all editors, adding new material culled from additional conversations with the principals. I grew more and more dispirited and uncaring with each version. To my eyes, each pass increased the incoherence and tawdriness of the story. Rainbow, or course, reassured me that we were asymptotically approaching *Wired's* ideal, a notion that only accentuated my misery. I reached the point where I grimly installed whatever new brainstorm Rainbow provided. (Although around about draft 3.5, I do recall telling her, "This article now says things I would never say in a manner I would never say them." I was constantly reminded of a famous passage from a Delany essay: "Let me change one word in every grammatical unit of a sentence, replacing it with a word that 'means more or less the same thing,' and I

can diminish the excitement by half and expunge every trace of wit. Let me change one word and *add* one word, and I can make it so dull as to be practically unreadable.")

Eventually, the article came to contain about twenty-five percent wordage not of my devising. Its entire ending, in fact, was dictated. Each alteration pushed the piece further away from my original conception and closer toward a standard *Wired* approach that I finally realized--what a genius!--had been functioning as a strange attractor before I even put word one to paper.

Here's what I believe was done to my original story to bring it into a state of supreme *Wiredness*. I think than anyone willing to read both the version here and the version that appeared in *Wired* will second these assertions.

* **All references to "the little people" were eliminated.** The elite world that matters according to *Wired* is full of Big Actors. Whether professor, millionaire, artist, manager, engineer, hacker, or eccentric, they are all Important People. The grunts and--God perish the thought!--the "unwired" who actually keep things running are unnamed, invisible and unworthy of attention.

* **Ambiguity was minimized.** Everything in the *Wired* universe is known with certainty. *This* is good for you, *that* is bad. You're part of the Movement, or you're out in the cold. No dissenters from the reigning cyber-Babbitry are allowed, no grey areas permitted.

* **Facts were cloaked in "hipness."** It's not enough to convey the information, but it must be delivered in such a way as to inculcate the feeling that both the writer and his readers are already intellectually above whatever scene is being described, more expert than the experts. This results in a prose that reads as if written by a team of Austin Powers and Dustin Hoffman's *Rainman* character, and paradoxically gives the majority of *Wired* articles a curious sense of "been there, done that" even if the topic is brand new.

* **The past was dismissed as unimportant.** History does not matter except as prelude to the future. Even the present is merely a waystation toward Technotopia.

* **Quotidian matters were de-emphasized.** Boredom does not exist in the *Wired* cosmos. Only "peak" experiences count. The immense amounts of hard work involved in getting from conception to reality--work which can even have its own simple meditative pleasures--is just something to skip blithely over.

* **Drama was injected into basically undramatic situations.** This is a corollary to the previous problem, and perhaps the one flaw in this list shared by magazines in general. "Why are we devoting space to this story? Because it's *exciting!*" Are we having fun yet? We'd *better* be, or our advertisers won't feel they're getting their money's worth!

I'm not paranoid enough to imagine that any of these dicta exist as a written stylesheet. If quizzed, *Wired* editors would probably deny that they had any agenda other than to present "cool" stuff to their audience. But when a well-funded, image-conscious juggernaut like *Wired* gets rolling, it's inevitable that all of the harnessed team has to pull in unison. The corporate attitude becomes just something in the air, inhaled like Strontium-90 and passed down from veteran to novice to freelancer.

For a few bleak days, I toyed with having my lobotomized story published under a pseudonym. "J. Ives Turnkey" was going to be my choice. I thought the byline would leap out fairly effectively as "jive turkey," a kind of analogy to Cordwainer Bird. But in the end, I chose to go with my own name.

After all, nobody's more responsible for this mess than I.