How the Los Angeles Times Really Decided to Publish its Accounts of Women Who Said They Were Groped

~ By Jill Stewart

Now that the California gubernatorial recall election is over, one debate is still raging--the question of how much bias the Los Angeles Times allowed into its coverage and polls. I am offering three items below, not my normal "Capitol Punishment" column, exploring this issue.

The first item is my response to John Carroll, executive editor of the Los Angeles Times. On Sunday, Oct. 12, Carroll published a bylined justification for his decisions to run eleventh-hour bombshells that alleged Arnold Schwarzenegger had groped women. Carroll used his Opinion section to attack me, Los Angeles Weekly political commentator Bill Bradley, and other commentators who criticized the way the Times has handled itself--but Carroll did so without actually naming any of us.

The second item is an illuminating interview I conducted last week with a longtime, well-respected Timesian who was involved in the Schwarzenegger probe. This source contacted me after hearing me discuss the Times bias against Schwarzenegger, and its longtime protection of Davis, on a cable network. My description of Times bias, this inside source says, "is exactly how it's been, except it's been three times as bad."

The third item is commentary on this controversy which I sought from Dr. Paul Fick, author of the best selling "The Dysfunctional President: Inside the Mind of Bill Clinton." Fick is an expert on why powerful people behave the way they do. He comments on Schwarzenegger's possible mindset and the motives of Carroll and the Los Angeles Times.

Item One:
My Response to Times Executive Editor John Carroll

Carroll's attack on me was partly over my contention that the story could have been published two weeks beforehand, which I was told by employees at the Times who called me out of frustration over how the story was handled. Carroll denies this and says the story was published as soon as it was done.

However, my sources insist that Carroll made conscious decisions that delayed the story—decisions which a sophisticated journalist such as Carroll would realize could easily create publication delays that would make it too late for the Schwarzenegger camp to have time to credibly respond.

According to two of my sources, the huge team of reporters that Carroll eventually tapped to dig dirt on Schwarzenegger had plenty of examples to publish their story when they got a tip, late in the game, about a woman who was allegedly groped.

My sources say the woman repeatedly refused to talk to the Times. A lead reporter on the Arnold swat team was assigned to cajole and call the woman over many days. The story could easily have run without this anonymous tale, which resembled the stories of other women. But Carroll, obsessed with piling on more stories even as the clock ran out, pushed onward. The reporter repeatedly pressured the woman for her story. This woman finally relented in order to make the journalist stop harassing her, and her story was added to the pile.

Despite the obvious need to get the sex harassment story in the paper well before the election so that it would not act as a last-minute and unfair smear, another source says that Carroll then made a very conscious decision to hold back the article while a story about Schwarzenegger's steroid use was edited (see interview below). The steroids investigative piece was a disappointment to editors, this source says, because it did not portray Schwarzenegger in nearly the horrific light that they had hoped.

The editor handling both pieces, Joel Sappell, put aside his work on the sex harassment story to edit the steroids article. It ran on the Monday eight days before the election. Only when that piece was edited could Sappell turn his full attention to editing the sex harassment story, which ran the Thursday before the election. Carroll's decision to push the steroids story ahead of the groping story seriously delayed publishing of the bombshell, this source says.

Carroll claims that the groping story was published as soon as it was done. In fact, in journalism, a story is done when the boss says turn it in. Carroll himself saw to it that the story was strung out until the last. That is why some staffers continue to insist to me that the story was sufficiently nailed and should have run two weeks beforehand.

Carroll also takes issue with my claims that the paper has had chances over the years to dig up glaring dirt on Davis' violent fits and attacks upon his staff. I claim that the Times digs just so deep before backing off and abandoning these touchy stories.
First, Carroll made a phony claim on Sunday so he could knock it down, writing, "it was written that the paper failed to follow up on reports that Davis had mistreated women in his office." Hey, John Carroll, I wrote precisely the opposite. I clearly wrote, in a special column for the Daily News of Los Angeles, Long Beach Press-Telegram and Ventura County Reporter, that the Times did follow-up on the alleged mistreatment, and that I crossed paths with their reporters while I too investigated the story. But the Times never published any articles---while I did publish my findings about Davis' secret personality, in New Times Los Angeles in 1997 and 1998.

Here's the full, phony, Carroll paragraph: "It was written that the paper failed to follow up on reports that Davis had mistreated women in his office. Fact: Virginia Ellis, a recent Pulitzer Prize finalist, and other Times reporters investigated this twice. Their finding both times: The discernible facts didn't support a story."

Besides his gross inaccuracy, check out that last sentence about discernible facts. It is meaningless doubletalk. A California state bureaucrat might as well have written it.

Carroll was not employed by the Times back then. Maybe this is why he fails to mention the reason one of the reporters gave me, when I called in the late 1990s to find out why the story on Davis' bizarre dual personality never ran. The reporter told me Times editors dropped further pursuit of Davis' office violence because the Times editors were opposed to attacking major political figures using anonymous sources. Obviously, things have changed. At least for one side of the political aisle.

Moreover, Carroll focuses only on attacks by Davis reported in New Times Los Angeles in the late 1990s. Why didn't the Times do a Schwarzenegger-style probe of earlier Davis bad behavior and much more recent Davis bad behavior? For example: how about the widely rumored violent fit Davis threw on election night in November, 2002 at the Century Plaza Hotel, which got a lot of airtime in the Bay Area this year when a radio talk show in San Francisco went public with it?

As a guest on the Oct. 12 edition of CNN's "Reliable Sources with Howard Kurtz," I pointed out that the Times never published a word on that reported Davis meltdown. A Times editor based in Washington, D.C. insisted the Los Angeles office checked out the story---that Gray Davis destroyed a TV set---and found nothing. Naturally, they'll forgive me at the Times for doubting that they did a Schwarzenegger-level scouring. But maybe the discernible facts didn't support a story.

More on this is discussed in the interview, in Item Two, below.

In addition to Carroll's criticism of me, Carroll misreported what Bill Bradley's stunning story said last week in the LA Weekly. Bradley told me he has left messages for Carroll, pointing out the factual error Carroll made. Bradley deserves a published correction in the Times.

Bradley dropped a real bombshell last week when he reported in the Weekly that somebody at the Times, who was tied in closely to the paper's Arnold hit team, leaked key details of the Schwarzenegger groping piece to Democratic Party insiders before the Times published its story. (Bradley did not report that somebody at the Times kept the Democrats "apprised of the newspaper's probe, step by step," as Carroll erroneously wrote on Sunday.)

A leak about the story's contents from the Times to the Democrats might explain why Democratic operatives seemed able to mount an incredibly fast and coordinated attack on Schwarzenegger the moment the story appeared.

Leaking by a journalist to help a political campaign would be a firing offense at most newspapers. Yet Carroll appears to be utterly dismissive of Bradley's story. Bill Bradley and I both specialize in writing about the Sacramento power elite, but we have almost never seen eye-to-eye on politics or politicians. We do not socialize, and at times our relations have been poor. However, both of us can clearly see that something went wrong at the Los Angeles Times.

Item Two:  
A View Inside the 'Get Arnold' Newsroom

The overriding issue is the out-the-gate bias with which the paper conducted its coverage. The Times ultimately created a huge---wait until you hear how huge---team dedicated to digging dirt, of any kind, from any decade, on rumored and reported personal behavior by Schwarzenegger. Yet while the newspaper poured massive resources into this effort, (is it too crazy to suggest a pricetag of $100,000?) it did not create a similar team, or even seriously discuss a team, to dig dirt on rumored and reported personal behavior by Davis. (See my Oct. 4 column at www.jillstewart.net.)

It's fine that John Carroll is pushing the Times local staff toward investigative reporting. However, Carroll's own behavior, as described below by someone who was there, and the manner in which the Times staff gleefully seized upon personal dirt about
Schwarzenegger while avoiding personal dirt about Davis, does not instill confidence that the Times will use its investigative powers wisely.

Here is the inside story from a longtime, respected Timesian involved in the Schwarzenegger coverage. The following comments from this source are verbatim, except that I have added a few brackets for clarification and removed my own occasional interruptions:

"Toward the end, a kind of hysteria gripped the newsroom. I witnessed a deep-seated, irrational need to get something on this guy [Schwarzenegger]. By Wednesday before it was published, I counted not fewer than 24 reporters dispatched on Arnold, and this entire enterprise was directed by John Carroll himself."

"Carroll launched the project with the words: 'I want a full scrub of Arnold.' This was fully and completely and daily driven by Carroll. He's as good as his word on being balanced and trying to make this paper more balanced, he really is. But not when it came to Schwarzenegger. Carroll changed completely. It was visceral, and he made it clear he wanted something bad on Schwarzenegger and he didn't care what it was."

"The air of unreality among people here was so extreme that when they did the office pool, of something like 113 people who put in a dollar to bet on the outcome of the recall and on who would be chosen governor, only 31 bet 'yes' on recall and 'yes' Schwarzenegger to win. All you had to do was read a poll to know how wrong that was, but inside this place only about 25 percent of the people could see the recall coming."

"People inside here are far more detached from the new media reality. They are generally unaware that the Times is reviled by large numbers of Southern Californians."

"What I know for a fact is that they could have published the story much, much earlier. First of all, they had the Wendy Leigh story, the highly detailed story from a British writer, with highly detailed groping allegations, from which they got the Anna Richardson anecdote. She was named in the L.A. Times. They had enough stories from his past, very early on, to have the story in the bag many weeks before they did."

"Second, they fucked around with the Mark Arax story on steroids use by Schwarzenegger. Joel Sappell edited that, and it went on Page One, instead of trying to get the groping story in the paper fast. The steroids piece had been meant to be something much more than a portrait of his rough behavior in his bodybuilding days. It was a disappointment that much, much worse things about Schwarzenegger weren't found. They certainly tried. They should've finished up the big attack story on groping instead of slowing down to wrap up the steroids piece. It pushed the big attack story right into the final days of the campaign. It was incredibly, incredibly irresponsible for John Carroll to do that."

"It all happened amidst a poisonous atmosphere here against Schwarzenegger—a blatant political undertone that was everywhere in the newsroom. These are people who have been in the building a long time and have formed a culture together. It's easy for all of us to start thinking very much alike."

"The reporters probed everything they could think of about Schwarzenegger: his health, his businesses, his charities. They couldn't find out anything horrible about his charities, but they tried very, very hard. His business empire made him look good—so the business empire story was buried in the paper. It ended up on something like, I don't know, Page A36. And as these issues got abandoned because they produced no dirt on Arnold, as desired by Carroll, the team going after him got more and more focused on sex and steroids."

"It was awful to watch Carroll. It became a Capt. Ahab and Moby Dick thing where they felt an increasing need to nail those points that could most hurt Schwarzenegger. At times, it made me physically uncomfortable to be in the newsroom."

"There was a building roster of people assigned as this frenzy grew. By the week the story ran, a roster of more than 24 reporters had been fanned out over all aspects of Arnold in a flat-out effort to turn him upside down, and Carroll was openly visible in the newsroom in a way I have never seen before. That was really incredible to see. He was out of his office and in the newsroom, and this was his show, not Dean [Baquet's] show. And when reporters saw that he [Carroll] just needed to nail it and get whatever information toward that goal, it turned into a frenzy. People were running across the newsroom, people were racing out to knock on strangers' doors."

"The things that you have reported about Gray Davis attacking and throwing things at staff members are not the only things Gray Davis did that are well known within the Times. Not at all. There was more personal behavior to look into on Gray Davis that would have hurt his candidacy, if the Times had pursued it. They knew, and they didn't pursue it. As you said on FOX or CNN, Carroll very obviously did not create a team to dig into Davis' background. Mass hypnosis is the way it felt to me, when responsible people
begin to suspend their responsible judgement like that. I don't really believe it was a conscious decision to help the Democrats over the Republicans. It didn't feel like partisan politics to me at all. I don't think it was that conscious. These are not bad people. An unthinking mass response, completely unthinking, is the only explanation I have."

"If you want to hang onto your job, you can't have an open discussion about this. If an editor really did make a speech at the A1 meeting [where stories are picked for the front page] that the Los Angeles Times was going to be hurt far more by this attack than Arnold Schwarzenegger, I really pray that is true, that somebody spoke out. I cannot confirm that. When they see Jill Stewart on a TV screen here, there is open, blatant antagonism. There is absolutely no self-examination going on at the Times."

"The mainstream press critics like those published on Romenesko are asleep as to what has happened here. They are defending the L.A. Times in every way. There should be no defense by media critics of what happened here. One woman did not sleep for two nights after a Times reporter showed up at her door, with the thinnest evidence, demanding to know if her child was Arnold's love child. It never panned out, it was untrue. Why has the L.A. Times become a tabloid, knocking relentlessly on people's doors for tabloid gossip? And would John Carroll have run a front page Love Child story if it had been true? Could we sink any lower?"

"At the end, the tabloidy bias leaked out all over the front page, even infecting the headline writers. You probably saw the story where Schwarzenegger announces his plans for his administration, and we headlined it something like, 'Actor Behaves As if He's Won.' That front page was pure tabloid."

"The paper used methods as if they were trying to crack a criminal enterprise. That is fundamentally what happened here. They took the rules of criminal investigation and overlaid them onto a political campaign, as if we had an organized crime figure running for office. One of the lead reporters is a good, seasoned Pulitzer journalist, who had not covered California, and it was his first week or so at the Times. He had taken a two-year hiatus in Alaska before arriving here. He really walked into this, and it's not his fault, and it's a shame. He got caught in an ugly dynamic that people above him created."

"I was deeply ashamed of the final days, after our first attack story ran. After that, we ran daily, unverified claims of groping against Schwarzenegger. Some people here insist that we couldn't run the first attack piece on Schwarzenegger any sooner than five days before the election because the groping claims took so long to verify. How were those groping claims of all those women at the end checked out in a few hours and pushed into the paper by next morning? What happened here, from day one, was deeply aberrant. Yes, our political coverage is skewed, like most papers, and so what? It's a fact of life. This was aberrant. It was outside of bounds. It was intense and real. To get something on him was the goal. No question, and no other goal."

Item Three:

A Clinical Take on Arnold and a Dysfunctional Newspaper

This is commentary from Dr. Paul Fick, author of "The Dysfunctional President."

"I would like to echo Jill Stewart's concern regarding the L.A. Times' selective reporting. Clearly, one can argue that the public had a right to know the sexual allegations directed at Arnold Schwarzenegger. However, the suspect timing of the publication of the articles coupled with the apparent inordinate manpower (possibly 24 reporters), at best raises eyebrows, and at worst smacks of an obsessive vendetta. Was the Times so anti-Schwarzenegger or so pro-Davis that it lost a sense of objectivity? It would appear so. How else does one explain the Times' decision not to inform the public about Davis' alleged physical attacks upon female workers? I don't think the Times would like to argue that sexual assault is any better or worse than physical assault.

"The reality is that we don't know whether or not Schwarzenegger's sexual behavior is indicative of a psychological difficulty that could impact his governorship. Despite the Times' inordinate efforts, no complaints of sexual impropriety were made after 2000. Since Schwarzenegger had considered an earlier gubernatorial candidacy and decided against running, it is possible that he recognized the behavior could become an issue and gained control of his behavior. If so, his ability to change his behavior would imply that he does not exhibit sexually compulsive behavior. In other words, when he recognized that a potential consequence to his behavior existed, he discontinued the behavior. The Times did not contact me (I'm not in the Rolodex) to discuss Schwarzenegger's behavior. But then, the Times was one of very few major newspapers that did not contact me regarding Clinton's sexual behavior, either." -- Paul M. Fick, Ph.D.