

New-look paper, same old bias

IT'S no secret that when you buy a can of Coca Cola, the can costs far more than the tainted water it holds. In the same vein, footwear companies often spend more to advertise their wares than they spend to manufacture them. Today's market is all about the triumph of hype over substance. Hence, it should surprise no one that beneath all the hype surrounding last Sunday's debut of the new improved Buffalo News, was the same tired old Buffalo News. The much awaited multi-colored polka dotted dog was finally, amid great fanfare, out of the cage. But all it did was dart to the nearest hydrant.

I'm not one to expect much from The Buffalo News, but I was greatly disappointed to see that paper's first crispy color cover marred by racist reporting. The cover story, touted by News Editor Margaret Sullivan as an example of her paper's "enterprise reporting," focuses on the disparity in wealth in the Seneca First Nation. It's good reporting based on solid research. The problem is that virtually all of The News's complaints against the Senecas also apply to *their* neighbors in the United States. So one really has to ask, why start out with a series attacking a neighboring nation for the same evils practiced without criticism right here in the US?

The article, which threatens to be a series, starts out with an editor's praise of its authors, who report on "a nation deeply split between rich and poor, powerful and powerless." Sound familiar? It should. Because it's us. And this is where such reporting

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should begin – with introspection, instead of sanctimonious condemnation of a captive nation emulating our economic model.

This would be especially apropos, since The News, owned by the world's second richest person, serves one of the poorest cities in the United States. In essence, the paper itself embodies everything it condemns in the Seneca Nation.

The article opens by describing "a couple dozen Seneca merchants" who "earned an estimated \$162 million last year." Just so readers understand what the number represents, they explained that this is equivalent to what the Neiman Marcus department store chain, with 62 locations in 24 states earned in 2002. Yeah, we got it. It's a lot of money. They quickly juxtaposed this with the fact that "nearly one third of all Senecas live in poverty."

This is all legitimate, and under other circumstances, I'd be praising the News for taking such a strong position against the greed of an unabashed capitalist market. The fact is, however, that they never followed the lead of other American newspapers such as the Philadelphia Enquirer, writing about growing economic disparities in their own community or country.

The \$162 million dollars earned last year by "a couple dozen" Senecas, for instance, pales in comparison to the approximately \$3.5 billion dollars that the News's owner, Warren Buffett, "earned" during each of the last eight years.

And yes, the poverty rate among Senecas is around 30%. And this is shameful. But the poverty rate in Buffalo, according to the pre-Bush II era 2000 US census, was 27%. So why the sanctimony? It gets worse. On the East Side of Buffalo, the poverty rate is over 50%. And things certainly haven't gotten better under Bush. Suddenly the Seneca numbers have a new context.

The News reports that the child poverty rate among Senecas is between 39.8% and 41.6%. The poverty rate for families with pre-school children in Buffalo, by comparison, is 43.3% overall and 65.3% on the East Side. Again – why launch a new regrooved newspaper attacking the Senecas for problems that are more severe in the Buffalo News's own community?

You also can't write this story devoid of history. The US forced this model upon the communalistic Senecas after invading their territories, forcibly dismantling their economic system. The construction of both elite and impoverished classes among the formerly egalitarian Seneca is an all-American construct.

Yes, the current distribution of income in the Seneca Nation is inequitable. But consider this – The Buffalo News's owner, Warren Buffett, "earns" more per year than all of the workers in Buffalo combined (see actual numbers below). In this light, examine this line

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from The News's article: "Those [Seneca] mini-mart barons and others refuse to formally share their new millions – even if the sovereignty that allows them to make their fortunes belongs to all Senecas."

Given The News's new found communism, doesn't this condemnation of the Seneca elite also apply to Buffett, who's wealth is protected by an American sovereignty that belongs to all Americans?

Or, more to the point, when should we expect our checks?

Here are some numbers: Buffett's net worth increased by \$27.9 billion from 1996 to 2004. This is an annual average of \$3.48 billion per year. Buffalo had 223,437 in 2000, earning \$14,991 apiece for a grand total income of \$3.34 billion.