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Interview with Sandra Duerr

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Sandra Duerr

INTERVIEW WITH SANDRA DUERR

Executive Editor of SLO's *The Tribune*

Sandra Duerr has been executive editor of *The Tribune* since July 1998. She began her newspaper career in 1975 as a reporter at *The Waukesha Freeman*, a community paper near Milwaukee. In 1983, she joined *The Courier-Journal* in Louisville, Ky., where she stayed for 15 years first as business writer and later as business editor and assistant managing editor. Duerr holds a master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University. She was a John S. Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford in 1989-90 and president of the Society of American Business Editors and Writers in 1991-92. Duerr was the recipient of the Knight Ridder General Excellence Award in 2000 for her accomplishments at *The Tribune*.

Moebius: As the premier print medium in the county, what standards does the Tribune use for publishing articles related to the Iraq War?

SD: Our standards are the same as they are for any other story. We seek stories that advance the news and offer context and depth—on both a political front and strategic battlefield—to help readers better understand how the war is going and the impact it has here and overseas.

Moebius: Since the Tribune does have foreign correspondents in Iraq, what are your major sources of information?

SD: We rely on several wire services—our own Knight Ridder Washington Bureau, The New York Times News Service, the Washington Post-Los Angeles Times News Service and the Associated Press. Together, these offer us top-notch coverage. In particular, the Knight Ridder coverage has been praised nationally for ground-breaking work on the Iraqi war. Since the fall of 2002, Knight Ridder has broken a series of stories on intelligence failures leading up to the war in Iraq. The New York Review of Books said: almost alone among national news organizations, Knight Ridder had decided to take a hard look at the administration's justifications for war.

Moebius: Do you attempt to localize a particular event in Iraq? In what ways? Do you have a recent instance where news from Iraq was localized to heighten interest?

SD: We have regularly localized a wide range of issues that deal with the Iraqi war—from profiles of soldiers, family support groups and individuals working or volunteering in Iraq, to anti-war demonstrations and pro-war stances to the impact the war is having on local families, companies and our military bases—Camp San Luis and Camp Roberts. Recently, for example, we wrote how the Internet is changing how soldiers communicate

with their loved ones back home and about a local man whose nephew's letter supporting the war was featured in a presidential address.

Moebius: What types of war stories seem to generate most reader interest?

SD: We get strong reader reaction from conservative readers who think we don't report often enough all the positive outcomes of the war to date, such as improved infrastructure and rebuilt schools. Generally speaking, readers are interested in the daily battles, which yield deaths and injuries, and the broader impact our military and reconstruction efforts are having on life in Iraq.

We received a fair amount of reader reaction more than a year ago when we began publishing a daily summary of the Iraq war toll that lists Iraqi civilian casualties as well as U.S military wounded or killed and coalition death. But readers no longer comment on it. We are one of the few newspapers nationally to include the Iraqi civilian casualties. We obtain them from the Iraqi Body Count Project, the only known group that's conducting a tally, because we believe readers have a right to know this information as our nation remains involved in this war.

Moebius: The Iraq war has been raging for a while now. Do you find yourself as an editor modulating the types of stories you are publishing now as opposed to a year ago, for instance?

SD: No, I don't try to regulate what stories we publish. Given the duration of the war, we no longer publish ongoing death and injuries on the front page unless a battle was particularly horrific, unusual or resulted in multiple deaths. We continually strive to publish key issues and developments, especially as Iraq's new leadership gets a footing.

Moebius: What types of events you think your readers should know about?

SD: Readers need information that gives them a comprehensive overview of the war, everything from daily battles and impact on soldiers and their families, to the progress of the Iraqi army and leadership to the Bush administration's approach to the war. We are careful to publish stories that ask hard questions about American efforts overseas and the Bush administration's direction.

Moebius: What upsets you most about war stories? What saddens you? News of civilian casualties? Young Americans dying? News of children dying? People being displaced, etc...

SD: I won't answer this question. I don't think it's relevant to what I do.

Moebius: Do you think there is war interest fatigue among the public?

SD: Yes.

Moebius: What are the signs that you detect?

SD: Some people tell us they are tired of the constant bad news.

Moebius: How can you as an editor, keep the interest of the public alive?

SD: All we can do is provide information that we think is significant; the rest is up to our readers.

Moebius: As an editor, what is your evaluation of the Iraq war coverage by the media?

SD: I'd probably give it a B grade. I'd like for the media to get beyond the daily battles and violence to offer more comprehensive stories and assessments of the impact of both the war and reconstruction efforts. But it is difficult for all journalists—here and abroad—to do their work because of inherent violence and military restrictions governing access.

Moebius: Do you think the local public fully understands the ramifications of the events or does the complexity of the situation elude it?

SD: Does anyone? Those who have the best shot at understanding the complexity of these events are historians and political science professor who immerse themselves in such studies. ☺

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Nishan Havandjian, Winter, 2006.