

# A 20th anniversary history Society of American Business and Economic Writers



Less than a quarter century ago, anyone who suggested that many business news stories belonged on Page One of daily newspapers would have been laughed out of most cityrooms. And that's about the only place the chortles would have been heard. Other than at the dailies, hardly any publications carried business news at all.

And at the dailies, business news ran in the financial section--usually behind sports. It took a mighty big break in the stock market or some major business scandal to get a financial story "up front."

There were exceptions, of course, the Wall Street Journal being the outstanding example. And the business magazines, such as Fortune, Business Week and Forbes, already were making their marks.

Radio and television? Except for a scattered few stations, the electronic media seldom, if ever, carried business news. Contrast that with today's media climate. Business and economic news often is the lead story on Page One of dailies large and small, as well as on radio and network television. The wire and supplemental services and the syndicates have stepped up their coverage of business and economic news, as have general circulation magazines. Regional business publications and specialized television business shows have become growth areas. Newspaper business sections have been steadily expanding, increasingly winning cover-page or separate-section status instead of being buried and sometimes confused with the classified advertising.

No one can doubt that business and economic news has come into its own.

What else came into being over the same period of time? The Society of American Business and Economic Writers (SABEW), that's what.

Of course, even its most strident supporters can't claim SABEW propelled business news onto Page One. But, the emergence of business news writing from the backwaters of the news trade to prominence in virtually all media does parallel SABEW's organization and development.

The Society was organized in 1964, but its roots go back to 1958. The seed was planted in the fertile mind of R. K. T. (Kit) Larson, who, it is interesting to note, was not a business writer.

Kit, now retired, was associate editor for public service at the Virginian-Pilot and Ledger-Star, Norfolk. While attending a course in advanced management at the Graduate School of Business (now the Darden School) at the University of Virginia, he had a conversation with Dean Charles C. Abbott about what both felt was "the generally poor reporting of business news in the country's press."

Kit recalls, "I suggested he put on a seminar and he shifted the task to me." Unlike some reluctant volunteers who let things quietly fade away when their proposals are put back on their shoulders, Kit got cracking.

He organized several small seminars and, in October 1961, put on a three-day session in Norfolk that attracted 60 business editors and writers. Vermont C. Royster, Wall Street Journal editor, and Pollster George Gallup were featured speakers.

The meeting turned into a full-blown workshop on business news, with many of those attending voicing their views on what was right and what was wrong not only with business news coverage, but also with the businesses covered.

J. A. Livingston, syndicated columnist and then financial editor of the Philadelphia Bulletin, stressed the importance of the business news reporter as the public guardian of morality in big business.

He detailed examples of the breakdown of personal morality in big corporations, such as the electric industry's price-fixing scandal then making headlines. (That was one story making Page One. A joke of the time went: "Can you be pure if it's Westinghouse?")

Robert E. Bedingfield, New York Times financial writer, told about his experiences riding boxcars for a week to learn more about his railroad reporting beat. His conclusion: "A lot of railroad public relations men are doing a great job of telling the public how hard up the railroads are, when much of their operations are simply inefficient."

Comments such as these and the give-and-take among the seminar's participants were the most popular part of the 1961 session. As a result, a second and similar seminar was held in Norfolk in March 1963.

At the 1963 gathering, the editors and writers present determined to form a permanent organization. And the Society of American Business and Economic Writers was conceived.

The birth took place in May 1964, when the Society of American Business Writers held its first annual meeting at New York City's Drake Hotel. "And Economic" wasn't added to the organization's name until 1976.



The chore of putting that first meeting together fell mostly to Gene Miller, at that time both a McGraw-Hill vice president and a Newsday Features syndicated columnist.

Convincing business editors and writers to join a brand-new organization and attend its first meeting was no easy task. But as Gene explained, "I have a mimeograph machine, a secretary and other clerical help. I like to get things done."

Getting top-name business executives to speak before a virtually unknown and scarcely operative business writers group was even more difficult. When asked if he fibbed a little about the new organization, Gene admits, "I lied a lot" about who would be in the audience, because he just couldn't be sure.

Testimony to his success can be found in a column by Don Silver, Cleveland Press business editor. After attending the meeting, Don wrote that Gene was an "authentic organizational genius."

The roster of speakers included E. J. McNeely, president of American Telephone & Telegraph; M. J. Rathbone, chairman of Standard Oil Co. (N.J.); Stuart T. Saunders, chairman of Pennsylvania Railroad; Charles C. Tillinghast Jr., president of Trans World Airlines; Eugene N. Beesley, president of Eli Lilly; Edwin D. Etherington, president of the American Stock Exchange; Sidney Homer, partner of Salomon Brothers & Hutzler, and Dorsey Richardson, president of the Investment Company Institute.

With top corporate brass addressing the meeting, potential members had sure and positive answers for managing editors who questioned

whether spending money and business writers' time at the convention would produce newsworthy stories.

The 1964 gathering did result in worthwhile news and set the tone for subsequent SABEW conventions, which always have attracted speakers from the top ranks of business and government.

The conventions also have provided financial journalists with the opportunity to swap ideas about how to improve their own performances back home. Workshops, surveys and searching discussions about the direction of the profession have been integrated into many of SABEW's meeting programs.

At the meeting in 1964, members elected Joe Livingston, president; George H. Arris, financial editor of the Providence Journal and Evening Bulletin, vice president; Ben Schiffman, financial editor of the Kansas City Star, treasurer, and Gene Miller, secretary.

In recognition of his role in bringing the organization into being, Kit Larson was named honorary chairman for life.

The membership adopted bylaws stating the society's intention to "lift the caliber of business writing." Shortly after the meeting, the high caliber of writing by the organization's newly elected president was recognized. Joe Livingston won a 1964 Pulitzer Prize.

The initial slate of officers was re-elected at the second annual meeting in New York City in May 1965. At that session, members voted to hold the convention in the early part of May and to meet in various locations around the country.

Meetings in Minneapolis in 1966, Washington in 1967, Los Angeles

in 1968 and New York in 1969 proved the society's nationwide stature and set up a four-year rotation of convention locations. This rotation system of "New York, someplace else, Washington, someplace else, back to New York" was written into the society's bylaws in 1971.

As a result, conventions have been held in Boston, 1970; Detroit, 1972; San Francisco, 1974; Chicago, 1976; Atlanta, 1978; Dallas, 1980; Kansas City, 1982. The 1984 gathering is scheduled for Tampa.

Attempts were made to hold regional meetings, with the motive of attracting additional members whose publications wouldn't send them to the May conventions. With the notable exception of a November 1967 gathering in Detroit, the regional sessions either drew few participants or were called off.

The society's determination to improve the quality of business writing began to be recognized by academicians when the Wharton School set up its first seminar for business writers.

At the 1968 convention, William M. Alrich, a society member and editor of The Wharton Quarterly, presented a "prospectus" for the proposed seminar to be "presented by the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce at the University of Pennsylvania and the Society of American Business Writers."

The proposal was accepted with enthusiasm by the society membership. The first seminar was held in February 1969.

The three-day seminar had Wharton faculty members and executives as instructors. It included sessions on accounting, finance, economic forecasting and urban crisis. Many society members and their staff members have attended Wharton seminars over the years.

The Wharton Seminar was the forerunner of many seminars and fellowships now open to journalists who want to improve their business knowledge and their ability to write about business.

At the University of Missouri, the annual INGAA-University of Missouri business writing competition was started at about the time the society was being formed. A three-day business journalism workshop was instituted in connection with the awards ceremony. University of Missouri officials broadened their efforts in the field in 1976, when they established the Henry J. Davenport Fellowships, four-week-long back-to-school sessions for business journalists.

In 1981, the American Press Institute resurrected its week-long seminar on business and economic coverage, with many SABEW members as participants.

Other forms of continuing education for business and economic journalists were established at Columbia University, Princeton University, Carnegie-Mellon University, Rutgers University, the Brookings Institution and the Washington Journalism Center.

The business writing competitions have proliferated, too, starting in 1957 with the Gerald Loeb Awards. Most are sponsored by universities and business organizations rather than media groups, but the American Society of Newspaper Editors moved into the field this year when it added a business writing category to its annual competition. SABEW members have won many business writing contests and the society's officers have served as judges, but the society has always refused to put its imprimatur on any contest.



This policy dates back to the 1975 convention, when Salomon Brothers & Hutzler proposed establishing a business writing awards program open only to society members. A number of awards, worth thousands of daollars, would have been made annually.

At a typical no-holds-barred membership discussion, it was decided the "contest" could open the society to conflict-of-interest charges. The proposal was declined. (The society did get into the contest business in a different way in the 1970s, when it sponsored a financial writing competition for college students.)

Conflict of interest always has been and remains a touchy subject with business writers, as well as a hot topic at society meetings. Early convention programs were replete with mention of "special courtesies" for luncheons, dinners and after-hours entertainment by major corporations and business organizations.

As the society matured, such practices diminished. And, in 1971, a "no free-loading" policy for conventions was put into effect.

At its 1974 convention, the society adopted a code of ethics that, summed up, called on members to "avert even the appearance of conflict of interest." Some of the code's provisions--especially the ban on junkets--went down hard with a few members. One member of the board of governors, admitting his newspaper allowed corporations to pay for out-of-town trips, felt he had no choice other than to resign from the society.

It would be nice to believe that all conflicts of interest have disappeared from the business writing scene. But we know such situations still exist; just last year, 23-year old John Chester was fired after

his first day on the job at the Trenton Times, apparently because he rewrote a big advertiser's press release.

Nevertheless, the business writing profession has come a long way. The corporate puffery so prevalent years ago has given way to solid reporting in many business and financial sections.

Management at an increasing number of publications, as well as at the electronic media, recognizes the importance of good business and economic reporting. Many publications and broadcast operations that formerly paid only lip service to business news now have large business news staffs and specialists covering beats such as economics, consumerism, finance, banking, agribusiness and marketing.

The expansion--some might call it "explosion"--of business news hasn't drawn cheers from some of the areas covered. Many of the business people whose companies are receiving more in-depth coverage don't like their problems spread out in print and on the airways.

The proof of this has come at the Ford Foundation's media-business rap sessions, which in themselves are still more evidence that business and economic journalism is now where the action is. At those meetings, Fred W. Friendly pitted editors and executives in Socratic dialogue and many of the participants came away screaming mad.

Business writers and editors now feel they have a better understanding of business, but many wonder if they will ever understand some of the business people they cover--especially those who remain convinced that business news should be limited to the outpourings of corporate public relations departments.

Meanwhile, the society continues to play a unique role as the only broad national organization of business and economic journalists. Active membership fluctuates between 100 and 150, not large by the standards of some other journalistic groups. But many of the society's members are playing important roles in maintaining and extending the reach of business and economic journalism. In doing so, they are building on the foundation constructed so will beginning a quarter of a century ago by Kit Larson, Gene Miller, Joe Livingston and their associates.

BILL DOYLE

May, 1983

SABEW PRESIDENTS

1964

J. A. Livingston, Philadelphia Bulletin

1965

J. A. Livingston, Philadelphia Bulletin

1966

Ben Schiffman, Kansas City Star

1967

Robert E. Nichols, Los Angeles Times

1968

Ross M. Dick, Milwaukee Journal

1969

William A. Doyle, New York Daily News

1970

John C. Henry, Washington Star

1971

Al Altwegg, Dallas Morning News

1972

David Smith, Ward's Auto World

1973

Hobart Rowan, Washington Post

1974

Hobart Rowan, Washington Post

1975

Dick Griffin, Chicago Daily News



1976

Myron Kandel, New York Post

1977

Larry Birger, Miami News

1978

Robert S. Corya, Indianapolis News

1979

Ray Kenney, Milwaukee Sentinel

1980

Margaret Daly, Better Homes and Gardens

1981

Jerry Heaster, Kansas City Star

1982

John Rumsey, Rochester Times-Union

1983

David L. Beal, St. Paul Pioneer Press and  
Dispatch (President-elect)