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Pounding the Pulitzer Beat

The online edition of *E&P* has become the go-to site for prize-related scoops. (You'll find [a list of 2007 winners here.](#))

By [Roy Harris](#) ([more by author](#))[More in this series](#)

As the stage is set for Monday's announcement of the 2007 journalism Pulitzer Prizes, tension runs high for reporter Joe Strupp.

Not that he has a chance to win one. As a reporter and editor for *Editor & Publisher*, Strupp is not eligible for an award in any of the 14 journalism categories. Neither is his publication. Those prizes go only for newspaper or wire-service work. ([Pulitzer winners for 2007 are listed here.](#))

This time of year, though, no reporter follows the Pulitzer process more closely than Strupp -- or has as much riding on the ability to break Pulitzer-related exclusives.

This year's online coverage started with [E&P's handicapping of possible frontrunners for the prizes](#) in February, and broke through [the secrecy surrounding the finalists](#) in March (for the fourth straight year). The next challenge for the Web site will be to name the actual winners on Monday a few minutes ahead of Associated Press and the Pulitzer Prize organization itself. After the official announcement and distribution of a press release in the World Room at Columbia University's Journalism Building, the organization typically waits about 15 minutes before putting the complete list on the [Pulitzer Web site](#).

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Covering the Pulitzers is an assignment that Strupp, a self-described newspaper junkie, relishes -- especially when it involves leaking the names of finalists. Almost invariably, he gets that job done within a day or two.

"The leaks make such great material for scoops, and so far we've been right," says the 41-year-old Strupp, who graduated in 1988 from Brooklyn College ("Geraldo Rivera's school," as Strupp describes it.) and went to work at the old Elizabeth, N.J., *Daily Journal* ("where Carl Bernstein once worked").

Then, there was a succession of newspaper jobs in northern and southern California -- and some freelancing for *E&P* -- culminating in a post at the *Riverside Press*-

Enterprise before he got married and headed East, eventually landing a job at *E&P* eight years ago.

"From the beginning, I always had a piece of our Pulitzer coverage" in the then-weekly magazine and on the Web site, he says. (*E&P* became a monthly three years ago.) His work covering the Pulitzer process of selecting the prizes increased sharply as the Web site began to respond to the day-to-day interest that readers expressed in the Pulitzers.



E&P senior editor
Joe Strupp

Soon, Strupp found a source who could provide a list of finalists selected by the 14 separate Pulitzer jury panels. And he tapped into a group of journalists, calling itself The Cabal, which for a time was devoted to "outing" the Pulitzer jury selections.

"We wrote that first story very carefully, disclosing that we had this list," he says. "We weren't sure how close it was."

Kentucky Mix-Up

The list turned out to be very close to the actual group of finalists. Since then, however, Strupp has developed multiple sources who have inside information. He declines to identify any of them, except to note that he cultivates numerous jurors each year, and his list of sources keeps changing.

The finalists in some categories elude him. (As of April 9, he had none for editorial writing, breaking news photography or feature photography.) But he recalls getting a wrong finalist only once: in a Kentucky cartooning mix-up two years ago, when sources named Joel Pett of the Lexington *Herald-Leader*, when the actual finalist -- and eventual cartooning winner -- was the Louisville *Courier Journal's* Nick Anderson.

The leaking of the Pulitzer finalists is "so revealing -- and an endearing part of the industry. [Journalists] leak to each other and they love the inside baseball."

-- Greg Mitchell, Editor & Publisher

Strupp freely shares his views about the leaking by journalists. "These are all newspaper people," he says of his juror-sources. "And it's a part of their make-up to want to find things out, and tell other people about what they know. In fact, it's just like what I do."

Adds *E&P* editor-in-chief Greg Mitchell, "Part of the reason we do this is that it's

so revealing--and an endearing part of the industry. [Journalists] leak to each other and they love the inside baseball."

The currency in such a reporter-and-source relationship is, of course, information. One juror shares a list of finalists from one seven-member jury in exchange for the scoop on finalists in another category -- perhaps a category where his or her own publication is in the running. Such news spreads extremely fast.

The Pulitzer organization and its administrator, Sig Gissler, however, would rather that the finalists and winners first become known at the same time on Monday. That is the reason for the signed secrecy promise that jurors make.

When the *E&P* online short lists first appear, "Sig Gissler kind of moans about it, but he's certainly never called me," says Mitchell. "He probably feels that we're doing our job." Gissler has said in the past that "jury proceedings are confidential, as are the results of them," and he calls any leaks "regrettable."

In an e-mail comment sent late Friday, Gissler said that he tells judges before their work starts that "especially in an era when journalists are defending the sanctity of confidentiality, an editor's word should be an editor's bond." He added: "So, in that sense, jury leaks can erode trust in editors. At the same time, I think most jurors honor their pledges and say they are perplexed by leaks." (Poynter Online addressed the confidentiality issue in [this piece](#) just before the Pulitzers were announced two years ago.)

The more Strupp covers the prizes, the more awed he is by them and the system that brings so many great reporters and editors together as jurors. "The judging is a remarkable event," he says. "If a bomb went off, you'd lose a lot of the nation's top journalists."



E&P editor Greg Mitchell

E&P's Web coverage strategy was designed by Mitchell, who came to the magazine in 2000, and was named editor-in-chief in 2003. "A couple of years ago he had the idea of looking at who the contenders were for Pulitzers, and seeing what other prizes might suggest about potential winners, and then talking to editors about it," the reporter says. "Greg has a good eye for seeing what stories there are to do, and devising good angles."

Mitchell himself sees the approach as common sense for a Web site whose audience is eager for advance word on the Pulitzers. "It's not really a plan," he says. The development of the Web, corresponding roughly with his taking the editor's chair, "just made the Pulitzers a bigger story for us." With his small staff of five staff writers and editors -- the online editor is David Hirschman -- "we've had to pick and choose what we can do. But the Pulitzer prizes fall into the category of something that's really on our beat. It's a combination of Joe really having a feel for it, and that we're good at having people pick up the phone and return calls."

A Classic Tradition

Strupp and Mitchell may not know it, but in leading the nation in Pulitzer coverage they continue a classic tradition in American journalism. The 123-year-old magazine (originally called *The Journalist* before becoming *Editor & Publisher* in 1901) respectfully reported on the first Pulitzer Prizes, in its June 9 edition in 1917. Before the prizes gained wide respect in the 1920s, many in the press thought of them as little more

than an arm of Joseph Pulitzer's own newspaper empire. (The New York and St. Louis newspaper pioneer, who died in 1911, had provided for both the prizes and Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism in his will.) *E&P* has provided extraordinary coverage of the prizes ever since.

These days, *E&P* starts its coverage in the prior fall with "the pre-season," as Mitchell calls it. Strupp provides online reports about any changes in the Pulitzer system. After last year's awards, for example, online entries were allowed in all categories. Before, only the public service prize had an online component.

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-- Joe Strupp, Editor & Publisher**

This year, Strupp [tried to capture a sense of what it's like in the jury room](#). A week later, he reported the peculiar story of [two Los Angeles Times staffers \(art critic Christopher Knight and classical music critic Mark Swed\) who made the finals](#), even though the paper had nominated

three others in the category. Knight and Swed, Strupp learned, had nominated themselves.

What Strupp reports about the finalists is not very deep. For example, a two- or three-word summary of each of the stories is all the reader gets for now. In the Pulitzer public-service category, finalists are identified as *The Wall Street Journal* for "backdating investments," *The Washington Post* for "farm subsidies" and *The Birmingham (Ala.) News* for "community college corruption." The *Journal's* extensive 2006 campaign, which already has won several other awards, focused on the backdating of stock options for corporate executives.

Not as Big as Colbert

Mitchell doesn't know the exact number of page views generated by *E&P's* online Pulitzer coverage, but "it is never our absolute top day for traffic," he says. "Top days have included more than half a million page views on one day for some of our Katrina coverage" in 2005, "and for being first on Stephen Colbert's White House Correspondents' Dinner routine last year."

The *E&P* editor was particularly proud when for several years his online outlet was first by a few minutes to identify the official winners on Pulitzer Monday -- and garnered extra traffic because of it. Last year, AP managed to edge out *E&P*, he says. But he hopes to be back in the lead this year, with a grid system that is set up in advance in the New York office, fed by Strupp as he listens to Gissler's announcement from the World Room.

Mitchell and Strupp then have about a week to prepare broader coverage of the Pulitzers for *E&P's* May print deadline.

The *E&P* website has written in the past about how Pulitzer winners and their papers often are tipped off by board members, with champagne mysteriously appearing in newsrooms before the official announcement. Would *E&P* run the winners early if it got that ultimate Pulitzer scoop: a

report over the weekend about how the 19-member board had voted?

"I don't think so," says Mitchell. "We want to show some respect. Besides, if you got one of those wrong, it would really be bad."

Roy Harris is the author of "Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service," due out this fall from University of Missouri Press. A senior editor for The Economist's CFO magazine and a former Wall Street Journal reporter, he regularly contributes to Poynter Online at Pulitzer time.

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