



Now revealed, Albany Eye founder has new point of view

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If a tree falls in a forest and there's nobody around to hear it, does it make a sound? And if one of the best-kept secrets in recent Capital Region media history is revealed on an abandoned blog, does anybody care?

Apparently not, based on the muted response to Rob Madeo's recent revelation that he was the phantom blogger known as Albany Eye.

Although it lasted barely more than two years, the Eye (<http://albanyeye.blogspot.com>) was an early hit among local blogs, and a regular coffee-break destination for members of the local media and wannabe insiders. The Eye tracked hirings and firings, drew attention to everything from poor grammar to overhyped stories, and poked merciless fun at an enemies list topped by former WROW host Paul Vandenburg.

It was frequently thoughtful, occasionally outrageous, almost always funny -- and then it ended badly.

Madeo launched Albany Eye in September 2004, when blogging was still one of the Internet's wild frontiers (the Times Union didn't launch its first blog until early 2005). "I thought it was going to be like the millions of other blogs out there," said Madeo. "where 10 people would read it and after a month I'd get sick of writing it."

As marketing and promotions manager for WNYT Ch. 13, Madeo was looking for a way to express "a smart view of the media" infused with the unique brand of hard-boiled humor that blooms in a newsroom's humid atmosphere.

He decided to do it anonymously.

"Not as a devious thing, really -- it just seemed like the way to go at the time," said Madeo, 46. "I'd be lying if I said I put a lot of thought into it when I started."

For the first few months, Madeo even kept his wife in the dark about his alter ego -- which should have been more of a tip-off that he was in murky ethical waters. He understood that his anonymity fed speculation that he was a local media employee running down the competition from a covert hidey-hole. Madeo's defense, in essence, is that his methods were questionable but his heart was pure -- an odd line from someone whose blog showed a keen understanding of journalists' reflexive skepticism of motive.

"It wasn't intended to shill for the station or to attack other media with the intent of hurting their audience or turning people away from them," Madeo said.

"Was it still wrong ethically? You know, I think so."

Traffic to the blog ebbed and flowed with the news cycles. The summer of 2006 might have been its creative peak, as Madeo tracked local coverage of the Porco trial and got a lot of mileage out of a gallery of images of then-Rep. John Sweeney looking a bit sleepy-eyed at a Union College party. That November, the Eye received 35,000 page impressions -- meager by today's blog-mad standards, but quite respectable for an unaffiliated site.

Madeo finally went too far in December 2006, when he arrived at WNYT on a Friday morning and learned the station was preparing to report that Phish frontman Trey Anastasio had been arrested in Whitehall on a variety of drug-related charges. Madeo pulled the mug shot from WNYT's data server and posted it on Albany Eye with an excerpt from the police report -- blowing the station's exclusive claim to the story almost two hours before it was slated to lead the noon news.

"I'll say flat-out that was a stupid thing to do -- I just wasn't thinking," Madeo said. "Had I realized that (the mug shot) had not been widely distributed I would not have touched it. ... I recognized how important it was to people in the newsroom to have that story, and to be the only ones with it. Having compromised that, I felt a lot of remorse and guilt."

Madeo also knew an internal investigation was afoot, and it wouldn't take long before the electronic trail led to him. First, he canceled his blog account. "I wanted to hide the evidence, and flush the blog down the digital toilet," he said.

But he knew that wouldn't be enough. "I went to my boss and laid it right on the table. ... I figured that was it."

Madeo was disciplined -- he'd rather not offer specifics -- but not fired. And while the station couldn't order him to stop blogging, "It was strongly suggested that I not do that anymore."

Amazingly, Madeo's abandoned Web address was scooped up within 24 hours by another anonymous blogger; the usurper went to a great deal of trouble to make it look as if he or she had taken over the existing blog instead of rebuilding it from scratch. "It was like somebody stole my wallet and then began charging things," Madeo said.

Not only was the would-be Eye pretty bad, Madeo had assured his employer that the blog would be falling silent. He appealed to Google's customer service: "I made up some crazy story about how somebody stole my blog, and within a day they ... restored my account," Madeo said.

And that's where things stood until last month, when Madeo quietly outed himself as Albany Eye. "I felt that so much time had passed that (the secrecy) really wasn't relevant," he said. "In a strange way, I wanted to be able to take whatever equity there was in being Albany Eye and ... acknowledge that this was my work."

At the same time, he launched a new site called Keyboard Krumbs (<http://keyboardkrumbs.com>). This time around, he made sure WNYT's management -- and his wife -- knew what he was doing.

The new blog is devoted mainly to family life in Glenmont -- soccer games, auto repairs, Mother's Day mortification. It's funny, it's thoughtful. And it steers well wide of anything that approaches cutting commentary on Capital Region media. Seiler can be reached at 454-5619 or by e-mail at cseiler@timesunion.com