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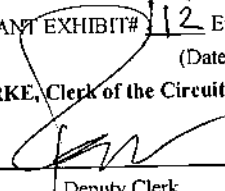
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KEN BURKE, Clerk of the Circuit Court

By: 
Deputy Clerk

Demi Moore cover photo had people talking



■ Mike Foley

"Shock value."
 "I could not believe my eyes."
 "Poor taste."
 "Repugnantly vulgar."
 "Rubbish."

No, friends, this isn't the way my boss describes my job performance. (At least I don't think so.)

These, in fact, are some of the more dramatic words and phrases from the letters and phone calls we received in response to publishing the cover of the current issue of *Vanity Fair* a week ago Saturday. The cover showed a nude and very pregnant movie star, Demi Moore.

It was accompanied by a story about the stir the cover was causing nationwide and the reactions of various magazine sellers. Some stores refused to carry it, others ordered extra copies. But everyone, just *everyone*, was talking about it.

And, that is precisely why we published the photo and the story.

We didn't do it to "sell newspapers," especially since the photo was published on an inside section front and was not visible from the front of the paper. We didn't do it to make people angry, or to corrupt their morals or their children. We didn't do it because we were trying to attract attention.

"It's interesting and people were talking about it," is the short version of our reasoning, cited by Sandra Thompson, assistant managing editor/newsfeatures.

Though some readers obviously disagreed, we didn't think the photo was prurient or offensive. I personally thought it was a beautiful photo, taken by one of the most famous of celebrity photographers, Annie Leibovitz, and likely to interest many readers of the *St. Petersburg Times*.

True, it is a photograph of a naked woman, not exactly standard fare for our paper. But, in our editors' view, it was tastefully done.

It was also different, as letter writer Barbara Gibson of Clearwater noted: "It is a sad reflection of our societal values when pictures of the essence of femininity are considered more obscene than the pictures of dead and mutilated bodies we're exposed to daily by the media."

All the photos we publish are subject to editing, just as the stories we print are. They're edited for content and craft — the quality has to be high enough to print well and clearly — and we don't

use photos that are likely to bother readers unless there is a valid news reason.

That's why we don't routinely run photographs of gory accidents, mutilated corpses and the like.

Editors apply what is generically referred to in the newsroom as the "cereal test." Photos that might upset a reader over breakfast are screened very carefully, and are used only if the subject matter or news value warrants it.

Sometimes that's a difficult balance to strike. During the war, for example, we believed it was important to convey the drama and violence of the event. We ran photos that aren't very pretty.



A nude and very pregnant Demi Moore appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine.

As you might expect, readers sometimes disagree with our choices. (In fact, one of the biggest reader reactions in my 21 years at the *Times* came in response to a photo that showed a snake killing a duck at a St. Petersburg park 12 years ago.)

Making unpopular decisions is part of what we, as journalists, do. Someone once described our function as holding up a mirror to the communities that we serve, giving our readers as accurate and complete a view of the world around them as we can.

We don't set out to offend anyone, and I'm sorry when it happens. But, it would be impossible to publish a newspaper that everyone agrees with. Besides, wouldn't it be boring to read?

Getting back to the naked Demi Moore, I should point out that the cover had achieved no small notoriety well before it appeared in our paper. I had seen it on several TV news shows, for example.

No, we don't let other media sources set our standards. But, the photo was widely distributed from a variety of outlets and that was factored into the decision.

In any event, we're always glad to get reader reaction and, to be totally honest, I would have been surprised not to hear about that photo. It was provocative. It did get people talking and, perhaps, thinking.

And, hey, that's not a bad thing.

■ Executive Editor Mike Foley plans to write occasionally about how the newspaper — all parts of it — operates. If you have a question, comment, compliment (especially) or suggestion, don't hesitate to let him hear from you. Write Foley at the *St. Petersburg Times*, P.O. Box 1121, St. Petersburg, Fla. 33731.

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