

# Carolina COMMUNICATOR

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THE PHIL MEYER LEGACY | RAISING THE ANTE

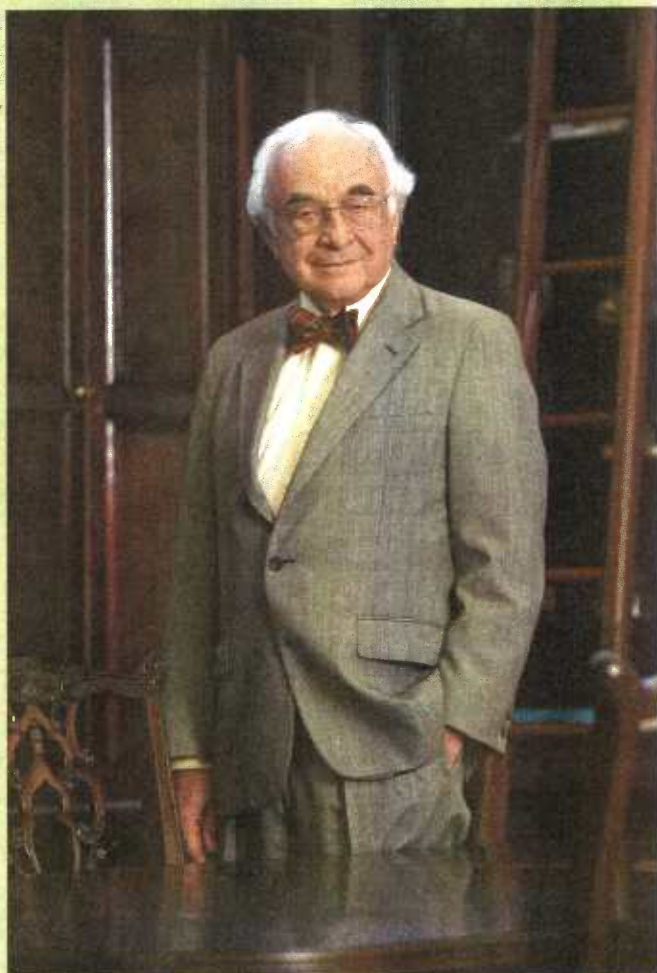
DIALOGUE ON DIGITAL MEDIA ECONOMICS

REPORTING ON A WORLD STAGE | STUDENTS COVER BEIJING OLYMPICS

# The Phil Meyer legacy

BY JOHN BARE

Photo by Steve Ekum



Phil Meyer

**Covering Detroit's 1967** riots, Phil Meyer designed research to identify who was rioting, and why. A Pulitzer followed for the Free Press.

Directing surveys for decades, Phil discovered horserace polling's power. It stirs citizens to act.

Peering down the regression line, Phil's 2004 book, "The Vanishing Newspaper," warned that at the current rate of decline there would be no daily newspaper readers left as of March 2043. Then he offered a remedy.

Somewhere about here the late Gene Miller would interrupt this puff piece with a revelation: That this Phil Meyer fellow is actually a lout.

He's not.

Phil taught all of us the Miller Chop. Sharing tradecraft from his Knight-Ridder tours, Phil told us about Gene and Al Neuharth and Derick Daniels and Kurt Luedtke, reporters as fascinating as the newsmakers they covered. »

» Nothing on campus was as dashing as these guys from Biscayne Boulevard. A journalism Justice League, they were freeing innocent men from death row, inventing USA Today, running Playboy magazine, counting their Oscar nominations and never apologizing for having so much fun.

There was Phil, with a yarn from his Navy days about learning writing from a wheeler-dealer who learned from Hemingway; we were learning from Hemingway, twice removed. And the one about measuring the tolerance of Flagler Street passersby who reached for a pocketbook on the sidewalk, only to see it yanked away. It was Phil down the street, pulling the string.

Now Gene and Derick are gone, both passing in 2005. Knight-Ridder was sold in 2006. Phil last saw Kurt in 2000, at the Lee Hills funeral in Miami – one of the great gatherings of newspaper talent ever, by the way. These days both Al and Phil make appearances on the op-ed page of USA Today, a safe house for innovators who separate themselves from the reporting pack.

The spring 2008 semester was Phil's last on faculty at Carolina. He is retiring. He and his wife, Sue, have vacated their house, where so many students benefited from their grace, in favor of a more manageable town home. Now Phil, 77, is vacating the Knight Chair he held since 1993.

Most of us are lucky enough to show any sparkle in one career. Phil has done it in three.

Phil worked as a newspaper reporter from 1950 to 1978, relying at first on shoe leather and wits. Then with a master's degree in political science from UNC, a Nieman year at Harvard and a year on Park Avenue with the Russell Sage Foundation, Phil peered across the academic disciplines and the craft of journalism and realized he could borrow from the former to improve the latter.

Published in 1973, "Precision Journalism: A Reporter's Introduction to Social Science Methods" changed both journalism education and the way reporters around the world gather news.

"MOST OF US ARE LUCKY ENOUGH TO SHOW ANY SPARKLE IN ONE CAREER. PHIL HAS DONE IT IN THREE."

No longer was one newspaper's man-on-the-street wisdom left to compete with another's. Assertions could be attributed to the scientific method. Journalists could generate knowledge, helping citizens better govern themselves.

Phil explained his idea plainly enough for nearly any journalist to try it. Demand grew. Journalists began seeking out Phil

## THE PORTABLE MEYER

**Gene Miller (1928–2005)** – A Miami Herald reporter for 48 years, Miller won Pulitzers in 1967 and 1976 for reporting. His stories freed at least five innocent people from death row, with one story requiring eight years of reporting. A talent spotter for the Herald, Miller made regular trips to Chapel Hill on campus recruiting visits.

A Washington Post tribute to Miller described him as "a loud, lusty, likable guy who had two Pulitzer Prizes and two olives in every martini." Miller wrote his own obituary for the Herald, using his trademark short, punchy sentences. He closed his death notice this way: "Swam a thousand yards daily with the grace and beauty of a floating log. Heart beat so slow pacemaker installed. For sexual escapades, see addenda."

**The Miller Chop** – The writer Calvin Trillin described The Miller Chop this way: Miller "would go along gently for a couple of sentences, set you up, and then *poom!* A word or two that landed like a blunt instrument." Here's an example:

Harvey St. Jean had it made. He had money, a reputation as a crack criminal lawyer, and time to tee off for 18 holes at La Gorce Country Club any afternoon he wanted.

Most afternoons he did.

When he left his apartment at the Jockey Club Wednesday morning... he had his golf clubs in the trunk of his Cadillac. Wednesday looked like an easy day. He figured he might pick up a game late with Eddie Arcaro, the jockey.

He didn't.

**Knight-Ridder** – The company formed by the merger of Knight Newspapers Inc., and Ridder Publications Inc., in 1974. John

S. Knight founded Knight Newspapers in 1933 when he inherited The Akron Beacon Journal. Knight-Ridder was the nation's second-largest newspaper publisher in 2006, when it was acquired by McClatchy.

### Phil Meyer's Knight-Ridder Tours –

Director of News and Circulation Research, Knight-Ridder Inc., 1978–1981

Director of Market Research, Viewdata Corporation of America Inc., 1979–1981

National Correspondent, Knight-Ridder Inc., Washington, D.C., 1967–1978

Washington Correspondent, The Akron Beacon Journal, 1962–1966

Reporter, The Miami Herald, 1958–1962

**Al Neuharth (1924–)** – A reporter and editor with the Miami Herald and the Detroit Free Press from 1954 to 1963, Neuharth then joined Gannett, where he became chairman and CEO and built the company into the nation's largest newspaper company. He founded USA Today in 1982. He



The Miami Herald newsroom on March 27, 1959. Meyer is seated near the center of the photograph.

Photo by Bob East

for advice on Tukey's Ladder of Transformations.

Today, journalists compete for IRE's Phil Meyer Journalism Award. The awards recognize the best journalism using social science methods and promote learning among journalists.

From 1979 to 1981, Phil led Knight-Ridder's development of Viewtron, a pre-Internet attempt to deliver electronic news and advertising.

"Timing is everything!" Phil told Poynter in 2003, the 20th anniversary of the venture. "Our vision was ahead of the technology. The ways we found to add value to news and advertising through electronic distribution were, however, right on target and anticipated much of what the Internet does today."

In 1981, Phil signed on as the William Rand Kenan Professor »

founded the Freedom Forum, a foundation devoted to free speech and free press.

**Derick Daniels** (1928–2005) – A grandson of Josephus Daniels, who acquired *The News & Observer* in 1894, Daniels was executive editor of the *Free Press* during the time it won a Pulitzer for its coverage of the 1967 riots. He was a city desk editor at the *Herald* from 1955 to 1961. After becoming corporate vice president for news at Knight-Ridder, he left to run *Playboy Enterprises*. Stories about Daniels often veer toward the gold lamé jumpsuit he wore. In his preface to the original "Precision Journalism," Phil thanks Daniels for giving him the chance to demonstrate the power of social science tools.

The *Herald* began Daniels' obituary: "Derick Daniels, a distinguished newspaper editor and executive whose penchant for fine living and even finer women boded him well as president of *Playboy Enterprises* during the late

1970s..." Gene Miller said Daniels was "a mischievous genius with a blue eye and a green eye, lived life wide open – the way most of us are too timid to attempt."

**Kurt Luedtke** (1939–) – Executive editor of the *Free Press* during the paper's coverage of the 1967 riots, Luedtke left journalism in the late 1970s to write movies. His first script, "Absence of Malice," a journalism tale set in Miami, won a Golden Globe. Phil used the movie in his journalism ethics class, teaching students about slippery slopes and sources. He won an Oscar for his next project, "Out of Africa."

**Biscayne Boulevard** – Highway U.S. 1 takes the name Biscayne Boulevard in the city of Miami. It's the location of the *Herald* office building, opened in 1963 on the edge of Biscayne Bay. Until 1998 when the company moved its operations to San Jose, the top floor of the *Herald* building served as corporate headquarters for Knight-Ridder.

**Flagler Street** – In Miami's downtown business district, the street runs east-west, running into Biscayne Boulevard at its east end. Flagler Street is the scene of one of Phil's field experiments, as described on page 175 of "Precision Journalism, 4th Edition."

**Russell Sage Foundation** – On leave from Knight-Ridder, Phil was a project director for the New York-based foundation from 1969 to 1970. In the preface to the second edition of "Precision Journalism," Phil explains that he began writing the original book from the foundation's office on Park Avenue in 1969.

**Tukey's Ladder of Transformations** – This is the list of options developed by statistician John W. Tukey, for use in straightening out data in curvilinear models. Phil teaches the technique on pages 165–168 of "Precision Journalism, 4th Edition."

Photo by Steve Exum



Phil Meyer

» of journalism. His third career was born. He fixed his place in Chapel Hill six years later by turning down the job as dean of Columbia University's School of Journalism.

What separates Phil from the merely gifted and prolific is his generosity with students.

Phil has advised 72 students through their theses and dissertations. He's taught newswriting, advanced reporting, media management, media ethics, research methods and a basketful of seminars. He is generous with the most valuable commodity on campus: opportunity.

Back in Howell Hall, where Phil occupied a corner, his research assistants worked down at one end of the office. Sitting there, I saw Phil take calls from colleagues seeking his "Precision Journalism" expertise. Often as not, Phil prepared the ground for his students to take up these paying gigs.

Visiting with Phil and Sue in their new home, marveling at the workmanship of the bookcases and their contents, taking inventory of all he has done to help us make sense of the world, one question hangs there: What will Phil do in his fourth career? ♦

*John Bare, a 1987 (B.A.), 1992 (M.A.) and 1995 (Ph.D.) graduate of the school, serves as vice president for sports philanthropy and affiliated funds at the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation in Atlanta.*