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COMMUNITIES ADJOIN BUT ARE A WORLD APART

I knew it wouldn't be a pleasant phone call.

"You guys are just out to get Mary Rose Wilcox. Sunday, you come out with a story about 20 officials driving county-owned cars. Hundreds of county workers take their cars home. And who does the editorial page single-out? The Mexican -- Mary Rose Wilcox."

The caller didn't defend the former City Council member and current county Supervisor Mary Rose or husband Earl, the former state legislator, former justice of the peace and current City Council staff member for their seemingly insatiable thirst for the public trough. Nobody can.

And a newspaper has to point out the foibles and criticize politicians. For what other purpose do we exist?

But the barrage of hostile newspaper coverage and editorial commentary will not likely affect Wilcox's electability within her largely Hispanic southwest Maricopa County district.

What these newspapers say about her doesn't matter a whole lot. To a sizable chunk of our minority population here -- one fifth of our residents -- the daily newspapers are largely irrelevant to their lives. We ignore them, they think, so they ignore us. That's quite an indictment.

A few months ago, five candidates ran for the Phoenix City Council seat vacated by Wilcox (yes, we criticized her for that, too). Both The Phoenix Gazette and The Arizona Republic editorial boards invited the candidates for a round-table interview session and debates. Right before the December election, The Gazette recommended one name to city voters.

In District 7, in a light turnout election, that candidate got only a few hundred votes. He came in last. Are we talking kiss of death here, folks?

Unfortunately, many Hispanics in and out of journalism believe daily newspapers ill serve them. We just don't care. We're insensitive, biased, even racist.

Remember Jennifer Montgomery, the pregnant mother murdered in a random drive-by shooting? The whole Valley was stunned, overcome by grief. Well, Hispanic families angrily pointed out the incident was preceded by dozens of west-side drive-by shootings, without anything approaching the community uproar, the moral outrage that accompanied the Jennifer Montgomery tragedy.

Hmmm.

Last summer, when so many county elective offices were open, the stories

about Wilcox invariably noted she had resigned from the City Council to run for a higher paying county job.

At the same time, within local political circles the assumption was that former state legislators Pete Corpstein and Doug Todd were running for county assessor and county treasurer for the transparent purpose of boosting their state retirement pensions. Yet, nowhere did I see that concern noted. (Yes, Todd and Corpstein drive county cars.)

Do you see a pattern here?

"It's not a conspiracy," political consultant **Alfredo Gutierrez** recently observed. "It's just that we're not perceived at all. What coverage there is is dominated primarily by crime news, with Hispanics as the perpetrators, not the victims."

Then too, Hispanics have learned to manipulate the alternately insensitive, guilt-ridden media. "We call things **racism** just to get attention. We reduce complicated problems to **racism**, not because it is **racism**, but because it works," Gutierrez said.

Meanwhile, two parallel societies move along, only occasionally intersecting. Hispanic artists and entertainers come in, some hardly noticed or acknowledged by the larger community. It's not insensitivity, it's just natural ethnocentrism.

Clearly, we in the media have to do a lot better for all minority communities. When journalists arrive at the office each day, we go to work in the biggest room in the world: The room for improvement.

In fact, if schools and governmental agencies desegregated as slowly as American newsrooms, we'd be slamming them every day.

Which is, of course, why I went into editorial writing. Far better to be the slammer than the slammee.

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