

Chicago Tribune Editorial

Disabling the squeaky wheels of journalism

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In a suburb far to the north, where some captains of industry and scions of society reside, lives a squeaky little wheel named Howie Samuelsohn.

An odd fellow, Samuelsohn is one of those guys who is not afraid to take a risk.

He's partially blind, wears a black eye patch and thick aviator glasses. And armed with a television camera, he is known to make both noise and news at the bimonthly meetings of the Highland Park City Council.

In fact, he made supporters of Highland Park Mayor Mike Belsky so mad, Samuelsohn faces the possibility of six months in jail and a \$5,000 fine.

Why?

All because of a little documentary he made about

the April 2003 Highland Park mayoral race.

First though, let's pause for some history on Samuelsohn.

In 1970, long before there was cable TV, there were small UHF stations with tiny audiences. Samuelsohn was the director and producer of "Underground News." It began as a 10 minute, midnight broadcast that developed a cult following for its reporting on Vietnam, the anti-war movement and classified documents that contradicted what the U.S. government was claiming about how that war was going. John Lennon, Jane Fonda and Woody Allen were some of the guests on the show.

Today, Samuelsohn's broadcast passion focuses on the environment. He began "The Earth Network," a sort of one-man-on-a-mission cable access show that has been known to expose the questionable conduct of big companies.

Back in February of 2000, he set his camera sights on Waste Management Inc., the giant trash-hauling company that had the contract for garbage removal in Highland Park. Part of the deal was that Waste Management was supposed to properly recycle.

As they say in the television trade, they were "caught on tape" by Samuelsohn doing what they weren't supposed to be doing. There were Waste Management workers taking separated containers of glass and cans and paper that environmentally conscious citizens had carefully set out and tossing them all together into the gaping maw of a waiting

garbage truck. Recycling? What recycling?

But Samuelsohn was hardly hailed as a hero by the Highland Park City Council. It took a year and a half of Samuelsohn's relentless pursuit of this issue, not to mention his protests of the closed meetings between the council and Waste Management, before the council ordered the company to pay a \$20,000 fine.

Samuelsohn is one of those guys who just by walking into the room can raise the blood pressure of some elected officials.

Which takes us to his current problem. Last week Samuelsohn was hauled before the State Board of Elections, charged with a criminal violation of the state election code, a class C misdemeanor that carries a maximum penalty of \$5,000 and six months in jail. This is all related to his TV show and the 2003 Highland Park mayor's race.

It was a two-man race between Highland Park City Councilmen Steve Mandel and Mike Belsky.

Each candidate was given time on the Highland Park Public Access Ch. 19 to talk about himself. This is hardly "The West Wing" in terms of audience draw.

Belsky was interviewed on a show called "Cooper's Corner" and Mandel was interviewed on Samuelsohn's show, "The Earth Network." In the world of cable access, short of showing up naked and spewing expletives, hosts and guests have wide latitude in what they say or do on the air. The 1st

Amendment, you know.

But Samuelsohn went a step further. He made about 100 copies of his Mandel interview and passed them out to local merchants. Any customer who wanted a free video could pick one up.

Written on the tape jacket were the words, "Free video, please watch this very soon, vote on April 1st."

It turns out most of Highland Park did not vote at all. Though there are about 22,000 residents of voting age in that suburb, fewer than 7,000 turned out.

Belsky won in a landslide.

You might think that's where this story would end.

But last week in a hearing room on the 14th floor of the James R. Thompson Center, Samuelsohn was ordered to appear to answer charges that his cable-access documentary was in fact an in-kind campaign contribution to Steve Mandel. The charges were initiated by the Belsky campaign.

I'd love to tell you what happened at that hearing, but Board of Elections officials wouldn't let me in.

Samuelsohn and his attorney, Rick Halprin, seem to think, based on what the hearing officer told them, that the charges may be ruled unfounded and the matter closed.

I hope so.

We've all known someone like Howie Samuelsohn. Growing up, it was the kid who didn't blend in and wouldn't back down. Or that squeaky wheel that seemed sometimes just a little too loud. You don't have to agree with people like Samuelsohn to know you need them.

But even someone like Samuelsohn wears out after awhile.

Though he has lived in Highland Park for 30 years, he's seriously thinking of moving next month.

It's Highland Park's loss.

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