

## 1. Columbus Dispatch Rides Skybus

On April 4, 2008, Amy Saunders, a business reporter for the Columbus Dispatch (Ohio), received an unusual assignment. She was to fly from Columbus to Ft. Lauderdale on an 8:00 PM Skybus flight. Another Dispatch reporter had received a tip early that evening that Skybus, a ten-month-old low cost airline based in Columbus, would quit flying at midnight. The tipster required that no announcement of the impending bankruptcy could be made until 9:30 PM, after the last flights were in the air. Saunders was instructed to abide by the news embargo and to report on passenger reactions to the announcement once the flight landed in Florida. On landing, Ft. Lauderdale passengers heard the usual 'come back and fly Skybus soon' speech. When they deplaned, they discovered that the airline would cease operations at midnight and that any return legs of their tickets were useless. Saunders interviewed them and published her article on April 5.

Dispatch readers later criticized the paper for not telling the Ft. Lauderdale –bound passengers, *before* their flight, that Skybus would permanently cease operations that night. Matt Fisher, in a letter to the editor on April 22, condemned Skybus for deceiving passengers. He claims that the Dispatch, whose first function should be as a watchdog, "essentially made a deal with the burglar: 'We won't bark until you finish robbing Skybus customers.'"

Dispatch Editor Benjamin Marrison justified the paper's 'Silence on Skybus' in an April 13, 2008, editorial. He explained that the paper must uphold "two fundamental tenets of what we do. We don't violate agreements with sources or break news embargoes. We don't interfere with the course of news except in extreme circumstances, such as when our silence on an impending event would put someone in harm's way." Marrison explained, "The nature of what we do sometimes means that we have information that we can't report until a certain time. Typically, such restrictions involve the release of research. Organizations or institutions provide us their findings so that we can thoroughly analyze them. That way, we can have stories and explanatory graphics ready to go."

Skybus claimed it embargoed the news so that it could tell its 450 employees before they heard it elsewhere, and to avoid distressing airborne passengers.