



Street Myths: John C. Dvorak

An occasional insider's look at the digerati, starting with computer journalism's most famous columnist.

By Paulina Borsook

Professional maverick. True.

Trades on being the computer-journalist equivalent of the kid who makes snarky remarks in class, but because he makes the teacher laugh too, isn't sent to the principal's office. MacUser Editor in Chief Maggie Cannon, who first hired John C. Dvorak at Infoworld in 1981, says he "pioneered three-dot computer journalism and has the Rush Limbaugh/Howard Stern image people love to hate." Still, PR specialist Andy Cunningham says that Dvorak is "a lot more reasonable than his image, and if he's caustic, it adds to his career." His irreverence and bad attitude don't subvert the dominant paradigm enough to cost him the hundreds of thousands of dollars per year he pulls in through his Ziff-Davis-based publishing sinecure. Dvorak considers Infoworld's Robert X. Cringely his only true computer-columnist competitor, meaning Cringely also takes a stand of critical distance on the computer industry. Some sources maintain the two writers share other traits, such as journalistic sloppiness, mendacity, and nastiness.

Doesn't write his own columns. Iffy.

Called by more than one source the Mark Kostabi of computer columnists, John C. Dvorak says he writes all 17 of the columns he turns out each month, an attainable feat, he asserts, because the word-counts average out to 500 per day. Wife Mimi is also a collaborator. Probably more a matter of semantics than anything else; depends on how you define "research" as provided by assistants and what it means to "write" a column. Not clear whether he follows the Andy-Warhol-inspired m.o. of having underlings do production that the celeb merely stamps his name on, or if the less venal model of the atelier of a Netherlandish master would apply. There, apprentices did variable amounts of the filling in of canvases, but the master at worst gave everything at least a once-over to make sure that everything leaving the studio had the proper look and feel - and at best, as time permitted, turned out authenticated originals.

Goes for the gold. True.

Fellow PC Computing editor Paul Somerson says that John C. Dvorak is a "great packager of himself, and no one else has the stature [in the computer industry] of his instant name-recognition." Has appeared on Larry King Live several times and has had syndicated weekly radio programs. Turns out books where chapters are largely written - and donated - by vendors. Once turned out an advertorial for Barron's where he asked PR firms to ghostwrite white papers for free, with the material then OCR-scanned into his computer and cleaned up. Clearly into writing for the money, his next venture may involve the creation of airport novels. Admires Danielle Steele's use of structure. To avoid California taxes, recently bought a former timber-baron mansion replete with indoor swimming pool overlooking Washington State's Straits of Juan de Fuca - ironic because, according to San Francisco Examiner publisher Will Hearst, the Walter Winchell of computer journalists has famously trashed Seattle as "the stupidest city in America."

Turns traditional journalistic ethics on their head. True.

Once posed for a print advertisement for now-bankrupt Everex Computer Systems, but only accepted a standard modeling fee for the gig. (The ads, however, ran for months on the pages near his columns for PC Magazine.) Routinely goes on junkets paid for by computer vendors or trade associations; defends junketeering by saying that it gives him greater exposure to the wide wicky-wacky world of computing, thus enabling him to make more informed judgements about products and technologies. The horror other journalists express at his junkets may be in part jealousy (he can get away with breaking the rules and they can't) and part the pot calling the kettle black (computer journalists routinely engage in kindred ethically questionable practices such as taking speaker's fees, consulting, or having vendors pick up the dinner tab).

Performance artist. True.

Hangs with comedians; former rival-columnist and current Infoworld Editor in Chief Stewart Alsop says people "read Dvorak's columns for their entertainment value. How often he's right is not the key issue." Said to use French Catholic philosopher Jacques Ellul's Technological Society as a guide for turning himself into a Coyote-Trickster who profits from the computer industry's media carnival. Used to put on insider/A-list/no-marketers-allowed parties at Comdex, paid for by Will Hearst. Now acts as a show pony for Ziff-Davis' own Comdex parties.

Arrogant and bullying/humble and charming. Both.

Back in the mid-1980s wrote a column explaining why the Macintosh wouldn't sell; a few years later revisited the topic, explaining why the Macintosh did take off. While he may be provocative for the sake of being provocative, Dvorak will go back on the record to admit mistakes. Technically informed (took college-level classes in programming, in the 1970s was involved in early personal-computer companies) and maintains a network of astute technical contacts as backup for his opinions. The amount of hardware and software arriving daily at his house for review is said to require a forklift.

Epicurean. True.

Can always get a table at overbooked Bay Area foodie reliquaries such as the Cafe at Chez Panisse or Greens. Used to write about wine before he became known as a computer journalist. Bill Machrone, vice president of technology for Ziff-Davis, says "it's common knowledge that when John chooses the wine and food, it will cost a lot." The ire in probably his most infamous column, "My Dinner with IBM," came as much from IBM's choice of a stodgy, overpriced restaurant and its PR woman refusing to pick up the check as it did from his outrage at IBM's reported contempt for computer users and the press.

Inspires fear and loathing. True. All manufacturers of computer hardware or software repeatedly contacted for this article maintained radio silence. John C. Dvorak reduces some journalists and PR people to spluttering incoherent rage - or cowering - all off the record. And bad things happen to people who refer to him as other than John C. Dvorak in print.

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