In his latest, Gary Benz takes aim at the PD and their latest manufactured news story. It would be nice to think that newspapers have better things to do with their time than use their increasingly diminishing power to settle personal grudges, real or imagined. But with the hatchet jobs done on Tressel by Bill Livingston recently and today's phony suggestions about Tressel

If there is anything scarier than a slow news day at the Plain Dealer sports desk, it's a bored Plain Dealer sports reporter with not much to write about.

True, that sort of sums up PD columnist Bill Livingston's everyday existence, but it's clear that the malaise is spreading to the rest of the staff as well. Today, we were treated to another front page non-story, this time from OSU beat reporter Doug Lesmerasis. With the kind of uncanny reporting that only comes with finally getting around to reading the fine points of head coach Jim Tressel's contract that were reported over a month ago in the USA Today, Lesmerasis tells us that if Tressel wins the national championship, his contract will get redone. And, in paranoia that only the Plain Dealer can invent, you know what could happen? Tressel could leave. Queue the consternation.

Of course, even in spreading this kind of paranoia, Lemerasis is playing second-fiddle to colleague Tony Grossi who, several weeks ago, suggested that Tressel was seriously being considered as a replacement for the increasingly overwhelmed Browns head coach Romeo Crennel. But the fact that readers of the Plain Dealer were treated to another Tressel might be leaving story is really more of a story than what Lemerasis actually wrote about.

It wouldn't be so bad if their fake news was meant to be funny. But the Plain Dealer is not the Daily Show and Doug Lemerasis is not Rod Corddry. If either were true, that would be a business model worth embracing by the PD brass. No question, the financial pressure on newspapers like the PD is real and significant. With increasingly more sports outlets on television and the explosion of sports information on the web, including from sites like these, the newspaper business has undergone much volatility, both locally and nationally, in the last few years. Consolidation, layoffs and decreasing ad revenues are squeezing profits like never before. While newspapers are unlikely to become extinct, ask yourself this: when was the last time you saw someone under age 35 buy a newspaper at the store?

What all this means, of course, is subject to great debate, but it seems clear that the PD sports section has responded to this downward pressure by opting, at times, to be provocative, even if falsely, in the quest for more sales. Cleveland has been essentially a one-newspaper town for so long, that the arrogance displayed by the PD as a result of this status is hardly a new development. But the fact that this arrogance has turned into abject sloth is a rather new development. Particularly on the sports side, the Plain Dealer seems beset with the kind of laziness that leads to "stories" like that from Lemerasis or the one from Grossi several weeks ago.

You can almost hear how a "story" like this comes into existence in the first place. An editor, looking at the potential Friday front page sits around scratching himself. Realizing that once he runs the Cavs game story, the obligatory Friday pre-game Browns story, something about the Indians, he's still left with a bigger hole to fill than the one in Livingston's head.

The only other thing happening, he surmises, is the Buckeyes national championship preparations, but the game is still a few weeks away and, besides, how many more stories can you run about practice?

Editor: Hey, Lesmerasis, anything else going on over at OSU with the football team?

Lesmerasis: Nah, not much.

Editor: Well, we need a story and we just run our 14th profile on Troy Smith and Ted Ginn, Jr. last week.

Lesmerasis: Well, then, I'm tapped out of ideas.

Editor: Didn't I see some story or another about Tressel's contract in USA Today a few months ago? Maybe we can do a story on that.

Lesmerasis: Do you know where I can get a copy?

Editor: I don't know, try going to USA Today's web site.

(Twenty minutes later.)

Lesmerasis: Found it.

Editor: Anything interesting?

Lesmerasis: Not really. Here take a look.

Editor: Hmm. What about this? It says that if they win the national championship game, OSU has to re-do Tressel's contract.

Lesmerasis: So? That just means he'll get more dough.

Editor: But what if Tressel uses that as leverage to leave?

Lesmerasis: For where? Why would he do that?

Editor: Who cares? Let's take that angle. That will get every one talking about us.

Lesmarisis: Sounds good to me. I have some Christmas shopping to do anyway.

To say that readers deserve better from the PD is like saying fans deserve better from the Browns. It's something we all know and it's something we don't expect to happen.

It may be that Tressel someday leaves Ohio State. But to periodically raise the specter without anything more than connecting dots that were never meant to be connected is simply bizarre. Tressel has neither done nor said anything since he first arrived in Columbus that even hints that his eyes are on a different prize. To the contrary, the Buckeyes job seems to have been what he desired all along.

Why then is that concept so difficult to understand? Surely the job of a good journalist is not to simply accept what he's fed. But it's not a case of Tressel saying one thing and doing something differently. And it's not as if Tressel has ever pulled a Jim Mora, Jr. and openly mused about another job. In fact the only other job that Tressel has been rumored for is the Browns job and the only source of that rumor was the PD's Tony Grossi, at least until Grossi can affirmatively establish otherwise.

It would be nice to think that newspapers have better things to do with their time than use their increasingly diminishing power to settle personal grudges, real or imagined. But with the hatchet jobs done on Tressel by Livingston recently and the phony suggestions about Tressel's potentially limited tenure at OSU, it's starting to look like the PD sports staff won't be happy until they have a different coach in Columbus and a newspaper upon which no one dare rely.