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DIGITAL NEWSBOOK



21st Century Muckrakers

Who Are They? How Do They Do Their Work?

**'to promote and elevate
the standards of journalism'**

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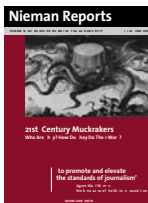
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Melissa Ludtke | Editor

Lois Fiore | Assistant Editor

Sarah Hagedorn | Editorial Assistant

Diane Novetsky | Design Editor



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Cartoonist Udo J. Keppler used an octopus to represent the Standard Oil Company, 1904. *Courtesy of Library of Congress*

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Editorial:

One Francis Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138
Telephone: (617) 496-2968
E-Mail Address:
nreditor@harvard.edu

Internet Address:

www.niemanreports.org
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Seeking New Ways to Nurture the Capacity to Report

‘Without an independent news media, there is no credibly informed citizenry.’

BY CHARLES LEWIS

You journalists live in the reality based community. [But] that's not the way the world really works anymore.... When we act, we create our own reality ... we're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.

—Unidentified senior advisor to President George W. Bush, as quoted by Ron Suskind in *The New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004

Controlling information and public perceptions is hardly a new phenomenon; a powerful few have been doing this literally for centuries. But the global reverberations and almost immediate human impact of decisions made by those now in power is new. And when the truth is deliberately, effectively obscured by secrecy, lies and public posturing, it distorts the government decision-making pro-

cess, mutes popular dissent, and sometimes fatally delays the inevitable, cold dawn of logic, reason and reckoning so fundamental to an open democracy.

We expect in an open, pluralistic society, in a democracy, that journalists will safeguard the broad public interest and ultimately provide truth and accountability to citizens. But unfortunately, in this 24/7 “warp speed” information age, the myriad and imaginative ways in which to propagate a palatable but false reality have substantially increased in recent decades, far outpacing the ability of reporters and other independent truth-tellers to hold those lies up to the harsh light of day.

Each successive White House occupant has been more adept at controlling the message of his administration, technologically but also in terms of additional public

relations money and personnel and “outreach.” And the intricacies of the Bush White House communications efforts, specifically the extent, substance and sophistication of its “on message” coordination and internal discipline, remain substantially murky thanks in no small part to the apparent and possibly illegal destruction of millions of White House e-mails. We do know that, as *Newsday* reported, the Bush administration in its first term hired an additional 376 public affairs officials to package information at an annual cost of \$50 million.

And, separately, \$254 million was spent on “faux news” contracts, nearly double what the Clinton administration spent during the preceding four years. Positive video news releases were sent out to hundreds of commercial TV stations, viewed by millions of Americans, often with no on-air identification or disclosure. Government Accountability Office Comptroller General David Walker criticized the practice as “illegal propaganda,” and the Federal Communications Commission recently has begun issuing fines to broadcasters who have aired it without disclosure.

Unfortunately, the problem of finding verities instead of verisi-

mitudes beneath the varnish has been exacerbated in recent years throughout America because there are, quite simply, fewer varnish removers—investigative reporters—actually devoted daily to monitoring those in power. Of course we all know too well that meticulous information-gathering and editorial quality-control essential for serious, high quality news require time and money—finite resources that many news organizations are increasingly unable or unwilling to expend.

Doing Less—With Less

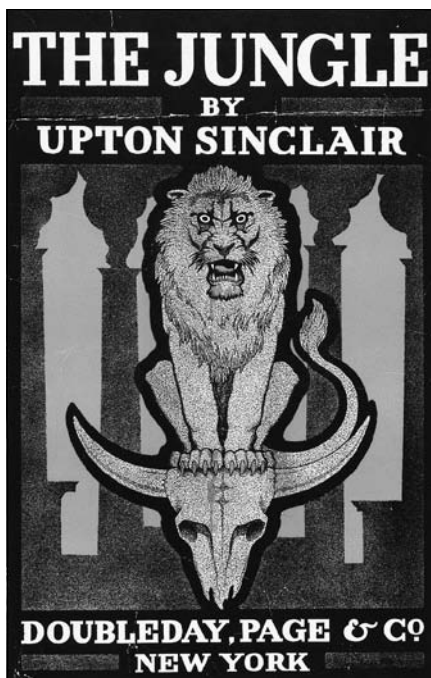
Indeed, in recent years nearly all of our media corporations have been reducing their commitment to journalism, reducing their editorial budgets, early “retiring” thousands of reporters and editors from their newsrooms in order to keep their annual profit margins high and their investors happy, harvesting their investments from a “mature” industry. The net result of this hollowing out process: There are fewer people today to report, write and edit original news stories about our infinitely more complex, dynamic world.

While more and more newspapers transform themselves into “print-

Web hybrids,” as columnist Robert Kuttner and others have written, online advertising revenue must increase considerably if newsrooms are going to be able to remain near their current editorial payroll levels. That prospect is uncertain at best, and layoffs in the immediate years ahead seem likely. And international reporting and investigative reporting, always time-consuming and expensive, increasingly have come to be regarded by management as high-risk, high-maintenance, high-priced impracticalities.

The global reach of the new technologies, the versatility, range and depth of what is possible journalistically because of multimedia convergences, computer-assisted reporting and other technical advances, the ease and relative affordability of high-speed communications in this information age, are all terrifically exciting and historically unprecedented. And the quality of some of the best reporting and writing breaks new ground with each passing year. What gnaws is the realization that there ought to be more, much more, of this unprecedented quality of journalism. Thus far, however, most of the emerging online commercial media ventures are noticeably light when it comes

WATCHDOG GALLERY



On assignment for the journal *Appeal To Reason*, Upton Sinclair visited meatpacking firms in Chicago and wrote about his findings in novelistic form in his 1906 book, “The Jungle.”

to their commitment or their capacity to publish original reporting.

The highly successful Web search engines, such as Google or Yahoo!, merely aggregate, automate and re-

package other people's work. While the world's blogs continue to proliferate and will develop further as a content form before our eyes, hardly any of them at present are solely devoted to responsible reporting and "fact-based journalism." Perhaps new stand-alone, advertising-supported, profitable, original newsgathering and storytelling venues—beyond password-protected, subscription-based, specialized niche publishing—will robustly evolve in the digital age, but that hasn't really happened yet.

Wither the Resources?

If, like an endangered species, there will be fewer sightings of serious, independent, high-impact "truth-to-power" national reporting, will this kind of vital, no-holds-barred truth-telling become a thing of the past, like the dodo bird? No, but what is needed are new, sustainable economic models for in-depth news and a new, much greater ownership and management commitment to publishing it "without fear or favor."

In a 2004 State of the News Media survey (by the Project for Excellence in Journalism) of 547 journalists and news media executives, 66 percent felt that profit pressures

were hurting national coverage—up 25 percent since the question was first asked in 1995. As the world is becoming infinitely more complex, 86 percent of national journalists whose newsrooms have undergone staff reductions believe the news media is "paying too little attention to complex stories." It is deeper than just numbers, though.

My particular interest has been very simple since 1977, when I began working as an off-air investigative reporter, hired by ABC News in Washington in the wake of the Watergate scandal, later as a producer at "60 Minutes," and for 15 years as the founder and executive director of the Center for Public Integrity. All I have wanted to do is find an unfettered place to investigate and expose abuses of power.

I became frustrated in the 1980's and quit commercial journalism to start a nonprofit investigative reporting organization. Too often, investigative reporting did not seem to be particularly valued at the national level, regardless of media form. Occasionally I had seen investigative reporter friends' and colleagues' stories unjustifiably resisted, reduced or rebuffed by their respective news organizations. National news organizations often

seemed to only reactively report the various systemic abuses of power, trust and the law in Washington—from the Iran-Contra scandal to the Housing and Urban Development scandal to the Defense Department’s procurement prosecutions, from the savings and loan disaster to the “Keating Five” influence scandal to the first resignation of a House Speaker since 1800.

In Washington, there was very little aggressive investigative journalism about these or other subjects and, equally galling to me, smug denial by the incurious national press corps despite its underwhelming, lackluster pursuit of these major instances of political influence and corruption.

Regarding the decision by George W. Bush and his administration to initiate a preventive war in Iraq in March 2003, it was unfortunately not particularly surprising that most national reporters and their news organizations were figuratively embedded in official propaganda and misleading statements. There were a few notable exceptions in Washington to this pattern, certainly, such as the fine independent reporting by the Knight Ridder bureau. Some major news organizations have publicly eaten crow,

acknowledging without necessarily apologizing that their coverage was perhaps not sufficiently critical of government pronouncements and information.

Such uncharacteristic humility does not ameliorate the tragic consequences of an unnecessary war and the tens of thousands of slain or wounded soldiers and innocent civilians, including women and children. Could such a controversial war of choice have been prevented if the public had been better informed about the specious official statements, faulty logic, and breathtaking manipulations of public opinion and governmental decision-making processes? On the five-year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, that might be too searing a question to ask, but it nonetheless will likely haunt our profession for years to come.

When Profit Isn’t the Motive

All of this underscores the fundamental necessity of serious journalism to any functioning democracy predicated upon self-government of, by and for the people; without an independent news media, there is no credibly informed citizenry. But what does it say about the cur-

rent state of the commercial news media today that it took a nonprofit investigative reporting organization to research and post online all of the Iraq and Afghanistan contracts and the windfalls of war to the penny, company by company, first revealing Halliburton's bonanza? Why did it take that same nonprofit organization to analyze all of the 935 false statements made by the President and seven of his top officials over two years about the supposedly imminent threat posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in a 380,000-word, searchable, online public and private Iraq War chronology? [See box on page 12 for more information on this project.]

It was the Center for Public Integrity that posted those massive reports in 2003 and 2008.

Why in the Philippines was the corruption of the President, spending tens of millions of dollars to build lavish mansions for his mistresses, uncovered and documented by a nonprofit investigative reporting organization, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journal-

WATCHDOG GALLERY



Making sausage in a Chicago meat factory was a topic of Upton Sinclair's writing. *Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.*

ism, resulting in his removal from office?

There are many nonprofit organizations committed to investigative reporting in the United States and in the world, none older than the Center for Investigative Reporting, begun in California in 1977, and none newer than ProPublica, which just emerged in Janu-

ary 2008, with former Wall Street Journal managing editor, Paul Steiger, as its president and editor in chief. [See articles on pages 18 and 42.] All are limited in various ways, from the caliber or number of experienced personnel to the quality and frequency of their publications or documentaries, to their ability to fully utilize the exciting new technologies and means of distribution.

The net result is that important subjects desperately requiring responsible investigation and public education simply go unaddressed. When that happens, the public is not as well informed as it could be, important truths do not emerge in a timely, relevant fashion or at all, and accountability of those in power essential to any democracy does not occur. These trends are universal, irrespective of geography, climate or the country's economic or democratic condition.

Yet amidst the current, deteriorating state of original, investigative and otherwise independent journalism in America, new, very energizing forces are at play. There are talented and highly motivated journalists, mindful of the stakes involved; entrepreneurial nonprofit and for-profit leaders with vision, a commitment to community, and

financial wherewithal; new media platforms and technologies revolutionizing the means and cost of production and, every day, more and more signs of what is possible journalistically, particularly with the new social networking connectivity of the Web and related, constantly improving technologies.

All of this has set the stage for the recent emergence of some new hybrid entities to emerge, such as cluster relationships between university-based centers and major commercial news organizations committed to high quality journalism that have occurred at the University of California (Berkeley), at Brandeis University, and at Columbia University. [See accompanying box on next page.]

The possibilities represented by these new approaches explain why—working closely with veteran reporter, editor and American University journalism division director Wendell Cochran and the dean of the School of Communication, Larry Kirkman—I have decided to start and lead, as executive editor, an exciting new enterprise, the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University in Washington, D.C.. Not only do we intend to do significant, original, national

Universities and Investigative Journalism

The University of California at Berkeley Investigative Reporting Program is directed by investigative producer/correspondent Lowell Bergman and houses the West Coast editorial and production facilities for the PBS programs “Frontline” and “Frontline/World,” as well as the three Investigative Reporting Post Graduate Fellows who receive stipends during their year of study and training at the journalism school. In September 2004, The Elaine and Gerald Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism became the nation’s first such center to be housed at a university (Brandeis) and is directed by its founder, investigative journalist Florence Graves. [See her story on page 22.] And the newest of these, the Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism at Columbia University, is headed by Sheila S. Coronel. ■—C.L.

and international investigative reporting for multimedia publication or broadcast, the workshop also will serve as a laboratory “incubator” to develop new models for conducting and delivering investigative journalism. We will also partner with other nonprofit institutions or with investigative journalists.

What both journalism and democracy need right now are new economic models—fit to meet the full range of our contemporary challenge—to support the work involved with bringing forth in-depth, multimedia news. These models will succeed if they can nurture a more hospitable milieu

for investigation and exposure of abuses of power and provide real-time truth and accountability to citizens. Because no one in power should ever be able to create their own false reality, or to even think it is possible. ■

Charles Lewis is Distinguished Journalist in Residence and professor at American University and president of the Fund for Independence in Journalism in Washington, D.C.. A former producer at “60 Minutes,” Lewis founded and for 15 years directed the Center for Public Integrity, where he coauthored five books.

Selling the Iraq War: Unearthing False Advertising

For three years, I have been conducting research for a new book about truth, power and the role of journalism today. In the summer of 2005, for a chapter about the Iraq War, I asked researchers, led by Mark Reading-Smith, at the Fund for Independence in Journalism, to begin tracking every single utterance by eight of the top U.S. officials (President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and White House press secretaries Ari Fleischer and Scott McClellan) made from September 11, 2001 through September 11, 2003, regarding Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the al-Qaeda-Saddam Hussein-Iraq link. Since 2004, numerous government reports have conclusively found there were no WMD in Iraq and no significant al-Qaeda ties to Iraq.

Their analysis found that 935 false statements were made by these top officials over the two years. The number of statements spiked dramatically upward in the weeks prior to the Iraq War resolution vote in October 2002 and before the November 2002 mid-term elections, and were twice as high in the January-March 2003 days before the invasion of Iraq. Separately, for context, they gleaned revelatory material from more than 25 government, whistleblower and credible journalist-reported books about this subject, published between 9/11 and the end of 2007. The summary report, written by Lewis and Reading-Smith, and the unprecedented 380,000-word, online searchable, public and private Iraq War chronology, including the public statements interlaced with the internal knowledge, discussions, doubts and dissent known at the time, was offered to the Center for Public Integrity (www.publicintegrity.org) for public release.

For the first time, five years after the start of the Iraq War, journalists and citizens can view what the most prominent Bush administration officials said publicly, juxtaposed against what they knew internally, day to day, prior to the March 19, 2003 invasion of Iraq. ■—C.L.

New Sources of Funding, New Sources of Reporting

As nonprofit investigative models take shape, a journalist surveys emerging possibilities.

BY GILBERT CRANBERG

When I left The Des Moines Register in 1982, I did not leave journalism. I simply moved from the daily newspaper's anonymous editorial essay to other forms, including newspaper op-ed pages, magazine articles, and books. Without the daily deadline and the imperative to fill space, I could spend the time it took to explore issues of interest that the local news media ignored or underreported. I became what could be regarded as an investigative reporter.

The downsizing of editorial staffs around the country has turned loose a lot of people capable of doing similar work. Margaret Engel, who directs the Alicia Pat-

erson Foundation, which makes grants to support in-depth reporting, says, "Get those journalists the money." And it's not only money that makes the difference. Jon Sawyer, director of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting,¹ says finding the space—offering the promise of drawing attention to the finished product—to publish what reporters find is as much of a challenge as the money.

Enter ProPublica, the new nonprofit news organization dedicated to investigative, public service journalism generously financed by a California couple, Herbert M. and Marion Sandler. ProPublica has both money, up to \$30 million over the next three years, and the

¹ The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting was established in 2006 as a division of the World Security Institute to sponsor independent reporting of global issues that "have gone unreported, underreported or misreported in the mainstream American media."

prestige to make a persuasive pitch for space.

ProPublica begins life with a question mark because of the liberal causes supported by its benefactors, the Sandlers, but also with the presumption of credibility by being run by Paul E. Steiger, former managing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*. [See his article on page 18.] The news side of the *Journal* was widely respected during his time there for the quality of its work and for not having an ideological ax to grind. (Steiger, of course, had nothing to do with the *Journal's* editorial page.)

Unlike some nonprofits that work through providing grants to journalists—perhaps most famously, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh was assisted in uncovering the atrocity at My Lai by a \$2,000 travel grant from the Fund for Investigative Journalism—ProPublica will have much of its work done by 24 full-time staffers working out of its office in Manhattan. That sounds like an expensive way to do investigative reporting, but ProPublica spokesman Richard Tofel says annual “news costs will be about 60-67 percent of the total [of \$10 million] when we’re up and running, with ‘news’ including

salaries for reporters, editors and researchers” and items directly attributable to news accounting for the bulk of the budget. Tofel says the split—60-67 percent news vs. 40-33 percent for all the rest—“compares to about 15 percent for news (defined this way) at a leading newspaper or magazine.”

The expense of launching and operating a newsroom in New York is considered worthwhile to foster a “newsroom culture.” Whether that culture will matter or be evident to ProPublica’s outlets remains to be seen. Most of the work produced by ProPublica’s in-house staff will be offered without charge, exclusively initially, to news organizations where publication is likely to have the greatest impact.

Other nonprofits, notably the Center for Public Integrity, also maintain in-house staffs of investigative reporters. Regardless of the model—in-house staff or grants—the work produced will stand or fall on its quality. At a time when the buzz words in journalism are local-local and news holes are shrinking, it could be a difficult environment for ProPublica’s work to thrive, especially the long-form pieces ProPublica is likely to do, even if they are given away.

Foreign subjects would seem an especially hard sell. But the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, which specializes in global reporting, has been successful in obtaining space even for lengthy take-outs. The center, which is financed mostly by members of the Pulitzer family, gets a lot of mileage out of its modest annual budget—\$315,000 in 2006, \$560,000 for 2007. “Our experience shows it is possible to find good platforms for important stories,” says Sawyer. Examples of reporting it has supported include these:

- A four-part series in the Salt Lake Tribune spotlighting working conditions in Chinese factories.² The articles took up more than a page of newsprint each day. For this story, the center funded five trips to China by Loretta Tofani, who won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting she did at The Washington Post. [See more about Tofani’s reporting on page 45.]

- A story about HIV in the Caribbean was displayed on more than three full pages in The Palm Beach Post in November 2007.³ Post reporter Antigone Barton’s travel costs were paid for by the center, which also commissioned the video documentaries and interactive Web materials that go along with the online display of her article.

Unlikely Sources

When I look at my own experiences after leaving daily journalism, I find in some of them the potential for other ways of promoting and supporting such reporting—even when it does not necessarily get done by people who refer to themselves as a “reporter.” When I taught journalism part-time at the University of Iowa, I cowrote two books with Randall Bezanson of the law school and John Soloski, my colleague at the journalism school.⁴ It was a revealing experience. What I called “legwork” my

² <http://extras.sltrib.com/china/>

³ <http://alt.coxnewsweb.com/palmbeachpost/hiv/index.html>

⁴ “Taking Stock: Journalism and the Publicly Traded Newspaper Company” (2001, Wiley-Blackwell). “Libel Law and the Press: Myth and Reality” (1987, Free Press).

coauthors called “research.” They do footnotes. Together we did extensive digging and, with the help of a couple of foundations, our books were published, as well as a large number of articles.

Bezanson is a powerhouse. During the past 10 years he has published four books (another is on the way), three book chapters, 20 academic articles, and 20 shorter pieces. I discovered that he is one of the best investigative reporters I know. Others on the faculty also do outstanding investigative work, and certainly this is the case at other universities, as well. Let me put forth a few examples.

- Erik Lie, a professor in the Iowa business school, played a pivotal role in putting the spotlight on the backdating of executive stock options.
- Gary Wells, a psychology professor at Iowa State, has investigated police line-ups and other police identification practices and shown how they too often produce mistaken eyewitness testimony.
- David Baldus, a colleague of Bezanson’s at the law school, has revealed striking evidence of how the death penalty has been

applied in racially discriminatory ways.

All of their research, and much more, would be Pulitzer Prize material if produced in newspaper newsroom settings. ProPublica intends to publicize investigative journalism by others in an online Romenesko-type format. It would be a major service if it tapped into the rich vein of such “reporting” being produced on the nation’s college and university campuses.

Steiger has written that ProPublica will report on “abuses of power by anyone with power: government, business, unions, universities, school systems, doctors, hospitals, lawyers, courts, nonprofits, media.” His words recall the ethics statement of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, which states that the press was made free “to bring an independent scrutiny to bear on the forces of power in the society, including the conduct of official power at all levels of government.”

In practice, the for-profit, institutional press focuses overwhelmingly on “official power,” giving short shrift to power wielded within the private sector. This seems an anomaly considering that we have a free market economy in which

the actions of the private sector arguably touch the lives of people as much, if not far more, than actions taken by our government do. Such neglect of the private sector consequently caught much of the press flatfooted before the savings and loan crisis emerged, Enron collapsed, and the predatory lending scandals started to unravel.

Private-sector muckraking is hard and time-consuming work, made much more difficult by the absence of a legal right of access to corporate meetings and documents. The Wall Street Journal has

shown, brilliantly, that such reporting can be done. The combination of Steiger's experience and the Sandler's millions hold the promise of being a potent pair. Perhaps together they will lead the way to showing how, in this new era of journalism, more of this kind of reporting can be done and brought into public view. ■

Gilbert Cranberg, former editor of The Des Moines Register's editorial pages, is George H. Gallup Professor Emeritus at the University of Iowa.

NIEMAN REPORTS • WINTER 2008

The Search for True North: New Directions in a New Territory

Just as the motor car replaced the horse and buggy a century ago, the vehicles in which news and information travel to reach their audience are shifting from print to digital, from television to hand-held readers. In this time of accelerating change, how journalists do their work and what elements of journalism will survive this digital transformation loom as questions and concerns. By heading in new directions and exploring the potential to be found in this new territory of interactivity and social media, journalists — and others contributing to the flood of information — will be resetting the compass bearing of what constitutes “true north” for journalism in our time. — Melissa Ludtke, Editor

Going Online With Watchdog Journalism

‘... investigative reporting itself is also on the cusp of major transformation ...’

BY PAUL E. STEIGER

As I write these words late in January 2008, at ProPublica, we are working our way through more than 850 resumés from journalists seeking to join our new nonprofit, nonpartisan, investigative reporting team. I am learning two things. One is that there is no shortage of very talented reporters and editors eager for an opportunity to expose abuses of power. The second is that many see little hope of carrying forward this work at a whole range of newspapers and other news organizations where just a few years ago they would have been delighted to spend the rest of their careers.

By now, everyone who cares about journalism and its role in society understands that the business model that for four decades hand-somely supported large metropolitan newspapers has crumbled as readers and advertisers flock to the Internet. The result is a curious mix-

ture of glut and shortage: an explosion of certain kinds of information available instantly and free of charge on the Web—spot news, stock prices, weather, sports, the latest doings of celebrities and, most of all, opinion—offset by an accelerating shrinkage of foreign reporting and in-depth investigation.

This doesn't mean that investigative reporting is going to disappear. It remains an important part of what many national publications and news programs have to offer. Their audiences expect it, and many of them will give up other things before they cut it back.

Similar approaches to ProPublica's have attracted much interest—and funding—from philanthropists and foundations. ProPublica is the brainchild of California philanthropists Herbert and Marion Sandler and becomes the most recent and the largest experiment in using

nonprofit models. Others—such as the Center for Investigative Reporting in Berkeley, California, and the Center for Public Integrity and the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, both in Washington, D.C.—have been at it longer and do significant work. They could do more if, as I hope will be the case, they are able to attract more funding.

And while most of the big metro papers are shrinking their newsroom staff, many still channel major resources into sustained investigation of issues vital to their local audiences. For example, the Los Angeles Times, which has lost its top editor three times in the past three years amid management's insistence on successive waves of newsroom cuts, nevertheless mobilized a large brigade of reporters on the Norman Hsu story last summer and fall, breaking significant news about the fugitive funder of Senator Hillary Clinton's campaign. The continuing story was of special importance to the Times's readers; many of Hsu's activities and legal problems were in California.

Transforming Investigative Reporting

Even as news organizations are experiencing business upheaval, in-

vestigative reporting itself is also on the cusp of major transformation—in the way it reaches its audiences, how news and information is gathered and distributed, and the topics on which it is focused.

Reaching Audiences: Only at our peril do we ignore Dave Barry's message—"Caution! Journalism Prize Entry! Do Not Read!" The five-part series or the huge take-out (10 inches on the front page jumping into a double-truck or more inside) still works for some readers but for an ever-smaller share of them. More creative communication techniques—humor, irony, photography, video, animation—are necessary to reach readers and viewers with shorter attention spans. This doesn't mean merely adding a couple of pictures and a graph or two to a newspaper narrative and running the package on the Web in much the same form as it would appear in a newspaper. It means rethinking the entire way a story is told—screen by screen—and adding in video clips and interactive graphics at the precisely right moment. These typically must be backed up with such elements as sustained narratives, interview transcripts, and supporting statis-

tics and data sources that the infinite capacity of the Internet makes feasible. Some audiences will read them first; some will skip them entirely—but it's important that they be there.

Reporting Tools: Today's investigative reporters have a dizzying array of computer-aided devices at their disposal—if they have the initiative to master them. True, we are working in challenging times, when some of the traditional techniques of investigative reporting are being undercut. Court documents, for example, are increasingly being sealed. Hedge funds and private capital, which have ever-greater influence on the economy, face far fewer public disclosure requirements than publicly traded corporations and traditional banks and brokers. Even so, opportunities are increasing for enterprising diggers to reach pay dirt.

This came home to me powerfully last fall, when I dropped in on a brown-bag lunch seminar for about 20 Wall Street Journal reporters and editors. It was led by the youngest person in the room, Vauhini Vara, a San Francisco-based reporter just a few years out of Stanford. The topic was how to

use Facebook in combination with other databases to find sources inside major companies. I watched jaws drop all around the table as she demonstrated in two or three minutes that she could identify a dozen present or former employees of a given company who were all within two degrees of separation of a reporter in the room. She convinced many veteran reporters that these people could be reached through friend-of-a-friend contact instead of being cold-called. Presumably the approach would work just as well with a government agency. What I particularly liked about Vara's approach was that it is an aid to old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting, except that it permits vast reductions in the amount of leather expended per interview. Couple this with the more familiar techniques of database mining as ever more information becomes digitized, and you have an environment in which the ability of reporters to find important information grows exponentially.

Topic Choices: Most investigative reporting focuses on government or business or their intersection, because that is where the bulk of the power resides. ProPublica certainly

hopes to do its share of exposing abuses by bureaucrats and plutocrats, cabinet secretaries and army generals. Many other areas seem ripe for probing, however. Other institutions and cadres with great power of their own often get a pass these days—unions, school systems and universities, doctors and hospitals, lawyers and courts, nonprofits and the media. Other large groups of people are frequent targets for abuse or fraud, like the elderly and immigrants.

We now look out at a landscape of many crucial topics ripe for investigation and at a likely smaller number of well-trained reporters to do this work. Does that mean we have a recipe for disaster or, at least, disappointment? Not necessarily. The opinion-rich domain of the blogosphere doesn't offer much in the way of experience-laden reporting. But as bloggers have demonstrated, some have the ability to spot—and mercilessly publicize—errors they detect in what traditional news organizations publish. Bloggers also have the ability to add information and insight to build on what reporters have unearthed. Each contribution—when its accuracy has been tested—can enrich public knowledge in a way that is

many times more powerful than a letters column in a newspaper or a magazine.

In hope of participating in this process, ProPublica will launch a blog of its own this spring, which will be aimed at aggregating any noteworthy investigative reporting that we can find that day. In some cases we will add brief or extended comments; with other items we find and display we will suggest avenues of follow-up or get to work on doing more investigative reporting on the story ourselves. In addition to publishing and archiving this content on our Web site, ProPublica's team of 24 journalists will offer temporary exclusives on our investigative reporting to existing news platforms that we think can give it the greatest visibility. We will also follow-up our own work assiduously. Our goal is to reach not necessarily the largest possible audience but the audience that can best effect solutions to the problems we identify. The challenge is exciting. ■

Paul E. Steiger, the former managing editor of The Wall Street Journal, is the editor in chief of ProPublica, which is based in New York City.

Watchdog Reporting: Exploring Its Myth

‘The myth of journalists doggedly uncovering all the facts is both important—and dangerous.’

BY FLORENCE GRAVES

Once upon a time, the nation was crawling with brave and well-funded investigative reporters who found and exposed wrongdoing wherever it occurred. From Ida Tarbell to Bob Woodward, journalists crusading for truth bravely defended democracy from the incursions of corruption and undue influence. Alas, how we have fallen from those mighty days! As newsrooms slash budgets and publishers demand higher profits, investigative journalism is under attack.

It's a great narrative. But it's a myth.

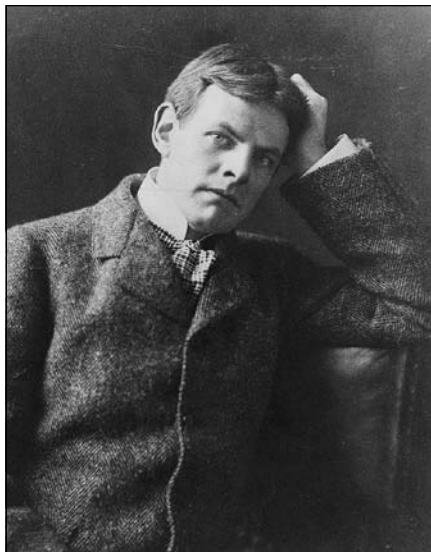
The profit pressures on journalism are very real. In fact, that is one reason I founded the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism in 2004, as one of the emerging nonprofit models for investigative journalism. And the urgent need to expose undue influence, tainted de-

cision-making, and hidden malfeasance is real. Those are among the main goals of the Schuster Institute at Brandeis University, and it's also why I founded and ran Common Cause Magazine with a focus on investigative reporting during the 1980's. We can admire—and aim at—this goal without believing the myth. The truth: Even when news organizations were flush, in-depth investigative reporting has been more an ideal than a reality.

Consider the research done by Michael Schudson, professor at the University of California at San Diego and at the Graduate School of Journalism of Columbia University, and published in his books “The Power of News” and “Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget and Reconstruct the Past.”

- In “The Power of News,” Schudson wrote, “The muckraking

WATCHDOG GALLERY



David Graham Phillips (1867-1911). In 1906 *Cosmopolitan Magazine* published “*Treason of the Senate*,” a nine-part series exposing patterns of corruption among senators. *Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.*

theme has been powerful in American journalism for a century, even though its practice is the exception, not the rule.” He points out that “in the time between Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and Ray Stannard in 1904 and Woodward and Bernstein in 1972 and 1973,” muckraking had “no culturally resonant, heroic exemplars.”

- In analyzing myths generated by Watergate, Schudson concluded that “the press as a whole during Watergate was—as before and since—primarily an establishment institution with few ambitions to rock establishment bonds.” While he concluded that many news organizations’ commitments to investigative reporting began to increase in the 1960’s—before Watergate—that commitment was already dissipating early in the Reagan years.

Government Watchdog

The myth of journalists doggedly uncovering all the facts is both important—and dangerous. “What is most important to journalism is not the spate of investigative reporting or the recoil from it after Watergate,” wrote Schudson, “but the

renewal, reinvigoration, and remythologization of muckraking.” This helps all of us aim higher and dig even more deeply.

Here’s the danger: Many Americans naively believe that Watergate spawned hordes of investigative reporters who are urgently ferreting out all waste, fraud and abuse

of power in the public interest. This fosters a false and complacent public impression that if there is any wrongdoing by government or corporate officials, heroic journalists are doing everything they can to track it down and report it.

While the Washington press corps has grown mightily, is it adequate? Most medium-sized newspapers have a Washington presence, but these reporters often focus on the same few issues and the same few people at the top—leaving significant issues and agencies uncovered. Those U.S. news organizations that do assign a full-time reporter to an agency “beat,” usually assign them only to a handful of big beats such as the Pentagon, Department of Justice, Department of State, and Treasury. Those “beats” usually involve tracking major policy decisions and rarely leave enough time for reporters to make connections between these policies and relevant influence-peddlers or to dig deeply into other agency business. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for these reporters—as well as those who are assigned to cover several agencies at one time—to cover the “official” daily news and the insider machinations about decisions and also track the influence

of hundreds of well-paid lobbyists and well-staffed PR firms dedicated to protecting huge corporations’ interests and who have vast access to policymakers. This doesn’t even take into account the increased difficulties reporters confront when facing the recent and unprecedented government clampdown on the release of information and deliberate slowdowns in response to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, the increasing trend of the government issuing subpoenas to journalists to disclose their confidential sources, and the threat posed by libel suits.

Contrary to the myth, only a skeleton crew of reporters is trying to find out how Americans’ daily lives—what they eat, the medicines they take, the products they use, and the environmental conditions in which they live—are being affected by hundreds of lobbyists, dozens of partisan and “Astroturf” think-tanks, scores of federal agencies, and hundreds of officials all defended by the ironically named “public information officers” who prevent the flow of many important facts out of their offices.

To get a sense of just how bad the problem was becoming, in 2001 The Project on the State of the American Newspaper surveyed newspa-

pers and wire-services to determine which ones “regularly cover” 19 federal departments and agencies.¹ The survey found that apart from the major departments such as defense, state, justice and treasury—which are comparatively well covered by reporters—a surprising number of agencies with huge budgets had either no reporters or just a few, including the following:

- No full-time reporter: Veterans Affairs (\$46 billion budget) and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (\$482 million budget)
- Two full-time reporters: Department of Interior (\$10 billion budget)
- Three full-time reporters: Agriculture (\$73 billion budget), Environmental Protection Agency (\$8 billion budget), and Social Security Administration (\$7 billion budget)
- Four full-time reporters: Labor Department (\$39 billion budget) and Internal Revenue Service (\$9 billion budget).

Congress is where laws are passed, but it is within these agencies that the laws are shaped into realities that affect our lives. Are only three full-time reporters enough to oversee all of the government’s decision-making about environmental protection and monitor all of what lobbyists do to shape those regulations behind closed doors? Consider, too, the spectacular growth in sophistication and influence of a vast number of power centers—multinational corporations, global financial institutions, international governments, and nongovernmental organizations. Then there is coverage of local and state news, when editors and publishers are subjected to even greater pressure from special interests—commercial and otherwise—in their community.

Increasingly bereft of key resources—time, people and money—to do in-depth reporting, journalists have become much more dependent on leaks and tips from people who usually have an agenda that might not always be so obvi-

¹ An article about the project’s original 1999 survey is available at www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=3269. The survey was updated two years later by Lucinda Fleeson, and the new results appear with the original AJR article written by John Herbers and James McCartney in “Breach of Faith: A Crisis of Coverage in the Age of Corporate Newspapering,” edited by Gene Roberts and Thomas Kunkel.

ous. One resulting paradox is that while more reporters than ever are covering Washington, we really know less about many very important things. Consider the press's spectacular failure to find out the truth about the administration's claims about Iraq. Or how long it took to unmask Congressmen Tom Delay and Randy (Duke) Cunningham. Or the overlooked warnings about today's subprime crisis—and in earlier years the Savings & Loan crisis, the Department of Housing and Urban Development scandal, and the Iran-contra arms deals.

This is not to say that investigative reporters have been failing. Press investigations have recently revealed unacceptable conditions for Iraq War veterans at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the CIA's abuses in prisoner interrogations, the use of warrantless wiretaps of citizens' phones by the U.S. government, and other memorable watchdog stories. We can find plenty of other examples of superb investigative journalism—likely more and better than a decade ago—but that doesn't mean there's enough of it.

In our news media's daily practice and performance, watchdog reporting is not keeping pace with

the growing need. While powerful institutions—government, corporate and nonprofit, both U.S. and global—that need to be watched are multiplying and getting richer and more sophisticated, precisely the opposite is happening in journalism: The number and availability of reporters who have the time, institutional backing, and resources to be effective watchdogs are getting pinched. Nor does it seem that this trend is about to change given the faltering financial resources available at most news organizations—and the ways in which these resources are being used in this era of celebrity and entertainment journalism.

Uncovering Corporate Malfeasance

Meanwhile, news organizations have never been very committed to exposing corporate wrongdoing. A convincing argument could be made that today corporations effectively run the country—including what happens in Washington, D.C.—through their campaign contributions, opposition research, careful spin-doctoring, sophisticated public influence campaigns, heavy-hitting lobbyists, and still

more tools. Arguably, corporate titans might be in a better position to abuse the public trust than many government officials. While numerous outlets cover business and report on corporate news, most of what reaches the public is aimed at investors, usually indicating whose business is up and who's is down. The New York Times then-media reporter Felicity Barringer pointed out a few years ago that "more than 250 Pulitzers in journalism have been awarded since 1978. Business figures prominently in about 10." She then asked, "But what about corporations and industries? Are there some comfortable folk there who could do with some afflicting?"

Our own survey of the Pulitzers revealed that out of the 90 Pulitzers given for public service journalism, only about a handful involved primarily an investigation of corporate power. And of the 25 Pulitzer Prizes awarded for investigative journalism, in just two of them did the reporters focus specifically on situations involving corporations.

Even in flush times, the job of systematically and thoroughly covering the government, the corporate sector, and the nonprofit sector would have been a mammoth David-takes-on-Goliath ef-

fort. But these are not flush times for the news business. And that's why there's such an urgent need for what Chuck Lewis, founder of the Center for Public Integrity, has been calling the new nonprofit journalism. [See Lewis's article on page 4.] Each of us who launched one of these new nonprofit models did so independently, albeit with similar reckonings about the need. None of us pretend to be the solution to the ongoing financial crisis that has led many newspapers to eliminate or cut back their investments in investigative reporting. But all of us want to contribute to the solution—albeit in slightly different ways and with somewhat different areas of focus.

Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism

The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism is the nation's first—and only—investigative reporting center based at a university (in our case, Brandeis University) that is intended to help fill the increasing void in high-quality public interest and investigative journalism. As journalists, we research, report, place and publish or broadcast our work. Our ongoing

interaction with students comes in working closely with those we hire to assist us with our investigations; we get superb research assistance, while we mentor them and offer an intimate sense of what is required to do in-depth reporting. We also reveal to them the value this kind of reporting holds for our nation. No matter what these students end up doing, whether it's journalism, law, business or politics, they take with them an understanding of—and appreciation for—the importance of a free and unfettered press in a democracy.

Our goal is to explore in-depth significant social and political problems and uncover corporate and government abuses of power and reveal what we find through “impact journalism,” in which our in-depth projects break important news and jump-start public policy

discussions about underreported social and political injustices important to a democracy. The three prime areas of our interest are:

1. Political and Social Justice
2. Gender and Justice
3. The Justice Brandeis Innocence Project.

Our investigations reach the public via broadcast, the Web, and in newspapers and magazines that have a proven ability to inform the public.² In collaboration with The Washington Post, I explored a whistleblower lawsuit against Boeing. In reporting that story, we found that Boeing—with what seemed like almost a wink from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)—was installing unapproved (and potentially dangerous) parts on its planes. With the freedom I

² The institute pays for the in-depth research that goes into our preliminary proposals and investigations; for our placed articles, we accept freelance fees, which pay for a fraction of our research costs. In the past year, our work has appeared in such media outlets as The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, Columbia Journalism Review, and Good Housekeeping (U.S. and international editions), and has been featured in various NPR radio and TV talk shows. Our investigative work has been picked up by news organizations such as The China Post, The San Jose Mercury News, ABC News online, Chicago Tribune, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, and The Standard (Hong Kong), and linked to or commented on in more than 150 blogs. —F.G.

have through my association with this institute,³ I was able to delve deeply for months. Few reporters would have had the time to study the FAA's regulations and requirements deeply enough to be able to challenge its spin. "Boeing Parts and Rules Bent, Whistle-Blowers Say," appeared as an above-the-fold Page One story in April 2006 and was picked up around the world.⁴ While reporting the story, I discovered many indications that Boeing and the FAA have a tighter relationship than any citizen would want to exist, and I uncovered half a dozen other stories I'd like to pursue when I have more time.

There are certainly other ways to do this work—and plenty of room for many more news organizations and journalists to commit to doing it. The breadth of global "beats" is only going to expand, while it appears likely that crucial stories simply are not going to be done. Last fall, the Columbia Jour-

nalism Review editorialized that, "As newsroom resources continue to contract—foreign bureaus close, staffs shrink, travel budgets evaporate—producing a broad, deep and authoritative news report day in and day out may in some cases require that news operations join forces." The Schuster Institute alone—or even in concert with every other nonprofit investigative journalism entity in existence today—will never be able to fill the growing gap. Doing so is going to require innovative ideas matched with unprecedented cooperation and collaboration among journalists and a commitment to this job by all of us. ■

Florence Graves is the founding director of The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. She was founder of Common Cause Magazine and has been an investigative reporter for nearly three decades.

³ Brandeis University provides our institute with a home firmly placed within an academic tradition that honors freedom of inquiry and independence from government influence and corporate control, with an explicit dedication to social justice and to the pursuit of truth wherever it might lead. —F.G.

⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/16/AR2006041600803.html>

Understanding the Value of Investigative Reporting

A nonprofit director feels frustrated by how difficult it is to find ‘adequate resources for independent investigative reporting.’

By **BILL BUZENBERG**

‘**W**atchdog” and “muckraker” are wonderful words, reflecting both the greatest challenge of a free press and the most compelling need in a free and open society. When done well, investigative journalism improves lives and strengthens our republic, as demonstrated by the groundbreaking work of Ida Tarbell (Standard Oil), Upton Sinclair (meatpacking), Lincoln Steffens (urban corruption), Edwin Markham (child labor), and other standard-bearers of the craft. Certainly, modern-day muckrakers continue in this grand turn-of-the-20th century tradition. While hard-fought, individual battles to ferret out information to tell an important story are being won again and again, the broader war for transparency and accountability is, I fear, being lost. As Joseph Pulitzer once

said, “Our republic and its press will rise or fall together.”

At a time when the American press had largely abandoned muckraking and our republic was in dire need of greater transparency, I took the reins at the nonprofit, nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity (CPI) in Washington, D.C.. That happened in January 2007, nearly two decades after Charles Lewis, its visionary builder, founded CPI, which has set the benchmark for solid investigative journalism. [See article by Lewis on page 4.] As an online pioneer, CPI has put millions of words, thousands of documents, and scores of databases on the Web, most of it made easily searchable by journalists, policymakers and citizens. CPI’s investigations have broken news about the Lincoln Bedroom’s high-roller guest list in the Clinton administration

and have posted—against the explicit wishes of the Justice Department—the previously undisclosed Patriot II legislation crafted by the Bush administration. Altogether, CPI has issued 400 investigative reports and 17 books, including the 2004 best seller, “The Buying of the President.”¹

Digital Documentation

After more than a quarter-century in public radio, including 16 years as head of the news operations at National Public Radio (NPR) and Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), known nationally as American Public Media, I was eager—to borrow author Kevin Phillips’s description of CPI’s work—to shine a brighter light of truth “into so many Washington dirty laundry baskets.” I knew, too, that digital journalism’s tools and technology have enabled us to open up new avenues of in-depth reporting and global distribution of what we find, which has increased the scope of our reporting and the breadth of its influence.

In 2005, I had collaborated with CPI while running American RadioWorks, public radio’s documentary unit based at MPR. After a year of working together with Northwestern University’s Medill News Service to collect travel data from the basement of the Capitol, our three organizations published an online report called “Power Trips.”² Every lobbyist-funded trip during the previous five years for members of Congress and their staffers is made public through a first-of-its-kind, detailed, searchable database of some \$55 million in travel expenses—payments for which sponsoring lobbyists presumably had more in mind than the scenery. As a result of making these records transparent—and the 1,200-plus articles written as a result of our findings—congressional travel behavior changed sharply; most notably, lobbyist-paid travel plummeted. Then, one year ago, Congress toughened the law in an attempt to close this influence loophole.

During this first year I’ve been at CPI, by relying on the Chuck Lewis-

¹ For CPI’s work on the 2008 presidential campaigns, see www.buyingofthepresident.org/.

² This project and others mentioned later in this article can be found on the CPI Web site at www.publicintegrity.org/.

method of unassailable, no-stone-untuned, investigative journalism, I had a front-row seat to observe the impact this kind of reporting can have on government's performance. What follows are two examples of projects released last year:

Superfund Project: CPI exposed the state of toxic-waste cleanup by the Environmental Protection Agency's stalled Superfund program. As part of our massive report, "Wasting Away: Superfund's Toxic Legacy," we revealed the names and political contributions of polluters, complete with maps, a listing of contaminants, and other data for all 1,624 Superfund sites. A large amount of our Web traffic for this project comes from inside the EPA, which claims no comparable, searchable database.

Financial Disclosure Information: On the state level, CPI has for years made available a variety of financial disclosure information. Our most recent release is an updated "States of Disclosure" project, which provides information on every governor, supreme court justice, and legislator in all 50 state capitals. We also grade the states to show which have the weaker and stronger dis-

closure laws. Time after time, CPI has seen state legislatures use our data to address their failing grades.

International Reporting

Ten years ago, Lewis also launched the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), a global membership network whose ranks now include nearly 100 journalists in 50 countries. "Collateral Damage," the most recent ICIJ project, was released last spring after more than a year of reporting and research, which required combing through thousands of foreign lobbying records. This project relied on the collaborative effort of 10 investigative journalists on four continents. What CPI ultimately published is one of the most comprehensive accounts of U.S. military aid and assistance in the post-9/11 era—a project that now features a unique database that combines U.S. military assistance, foreign lobbying expenditures, and human-rights abuses into a single, accessible tool kit. By being able to see all of these dollar figures in the same database, CPI was able to reveal for the first time how Pakistan's \$9 million in military assistance for three years before 9/11 had jumped

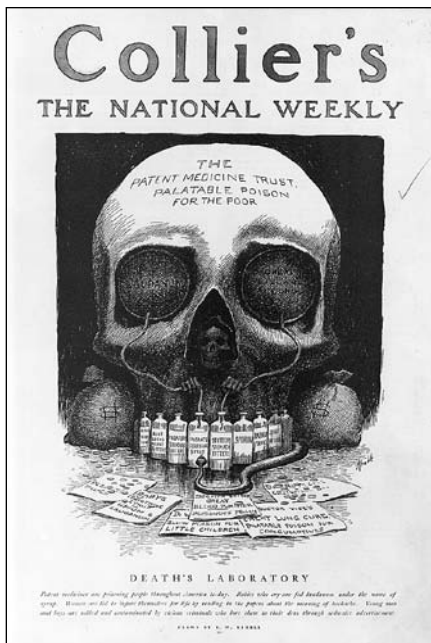
to \$4.6 billion, with only minimal Pentagon oversight.

Other efforts have dug deep into the war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, including the following projects:

Contractors and Contributions: In 2003, for example, after hundreds of Freedom of Information Act requests, the “Windfalls of War” project tallied the dollar amounts paid to contractors, totaled their political contributions, and identified the former U.S. military officials on their boards or in senior management positions. Late last year, CPI updated that project by naming the current top 100 Iraq and Afghanistan contractors and posted online their even more lucrative contracts. It was this project that first revealed that Halliburton, and its former subsidiary KBR Inc. (Kellogg, Brown & Root), have by far won the most lucrative contracts in Iraq.

False Statements: In late January, CPI released another data-rich, innovative project on Iraq called “The War Card: Orchestrated Deception on the Path to War.” [See related box about reporting on this project on page 12.] A searchable database of nearly 400,000 words provides documentation that tracks the 935

WATCHDOG GALLERY



In 1905, Collier's published E.W. Kemble's “Death's Laboratory,” an investigative article about the sale of alcohol and chemical-laced medicines.
Courtesy of Library of Congress.

false statements spoken publicly by George W. Bush and seven of his administration's key officials from 9/11 through the start of the Iraq War and beyond. Statements are deemed false when the speaker unequivocally stated that Iraq had

weapons of mass destruction or that Iraq was linked to al-Qaeda.

Funding Investigative Journalism

With the Bush administration outsourcing government to an extent never seen before—private contracts have more than doubled in the past five years, with billions of dollars being contributed to political campaigns and with 35,000 lobbyists in Washington spending more than \$3 billion annually—there is no lack of topics to explore. While our work at CPI is going well, I've been frustrated in my new job by how much we aren't able to do because of the difficulty in finding adequate resources for independent investigative reporting.

During the 16 years I spent as vice president of news in public radio, I helped to raise tens of millions of dollars from foundations—a task I can now appreciate as being relatively easy. Trying to raise funds to support CPI's work, I can make a crystal-clear case about the need for tough investigative journalism, but I find that resources to sustain the work we do are much harder to come by. Although my former public radio colleagues will

protest that they are only an on-air pitch break away from going off the air, NPR, MPR, and many major public radio operations are fairly dependably well resourced. With its endowment of more than \$200 million, and annual budgets of roughly \$150 million, NPR is not a struggling news organization. Nor is MPR, with an endowment and annual budget more than half that of NPR's, though certainly each could do even more with a greater amount of financial resources.

Unlike public radio, CPI takes no government money. While it earns some of its revenue, CPI relies heavily on foundations and major individual donors, but without the advantage of on-air pledge drives. It is my wish that more foundations and individual donors could appreciate how critical their support is for sustaining the high-quality investigative reporting done by CPI and other independent, nonprofit journalism organizations. In the challenging economic environment of today's for-profit news industry, we recognize how unlikely it is that newspapers and broadcast entities will be able to support efforts such as these. CPI is embarking on a major campaign to dramatically increase its endowment. A day of

great jubilation would be when we raise the necessary funds to allow us to devote more of our energy and attention to our investigative work rather than to our operating budget each year.

In his 2004 book, “The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age,” University of North Carolina professor Philip Meyer writes, “The only way to save journalism is to develop a new model that finds profit in truth, vigilance and social responsibility.” Meyer cited two examples of what he meant—NPR and CPI. The public radio model has proved its sustainability, and the smaller, but equally vital, CPI is seeking its sustainability model by raising a larger endowment. As we do so, words that the late historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a founding CPI advisory board member, used to describe our organization are ones I will carry with me and use as I try to convince others of the value of what we do. As Schlesinger said of CPI, it is “an indispensable truth-teller in a treacherous time.” ■

WATCHDOG GALLERY



In 1929, St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter Paul Y. Anderson won the Pulitzer Prize for Reporting for “his highly effective work in bringing to light” hidden details of the Teapot Dome oil-lease scandal. A gas station owner in Zillah, Washington, was so outraged by the corrupt dealmaking that he built his station to look like a teapot in protest. *Courtesy of the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Washington State Department of Community Development.*

Bill Buzenberg became the executive director of the Center for Public Integrity in January 2007. He had been vice president of news at Minnesota Public Radio/American Public Media for the previous nine years. For 18 years he was at NPR, including seven as vice president of news and 11 years as a foreign affairs correspondent and London bureau chief.

When a Few Dollars Make a Big Difference

The Fund for Investigative Journalism enabled Seymour Hersh to report on the My Lai massacre; since then it has funded many other investigative stories.

By JOHN HYDE

In 1969, as the Vietnam War raged on, a dogged young reporter named Seymour Hersh thought he was onto something. He had learned that there might have been a massacre of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. soldiers in the village of My Lai. Knocking on one door after another, Hersh asked editors at mainstream news organizations to buy him a plane ticket so he could pursue this lead—and, if proven correct, this publication would be able to offer the story to its readers. One after another, they rejected his request.

Hersh then stumbled across a fledgling organization called the Fund for Investigative Journalism (<http://fij.org/>). This fund had been established by Philip Stern, a progressive-minded philanthropist who had spent a lifetime trying to, in his words, “balance the scales of

WATCHDOG GALLERY



In 1931, Drew Pearson (1897-1969) published “Washington Merry-Go-Round,” which became the name for his Washington Post column in which he exposed political corruption. LBJ Library and Museum/Courtesy Newseum.

Fund for Investigative Journalism: Practices and Policies

As a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the fund operates frugally so it can give out as many grants as possible. Its 12-member board of directors, composed of distinguished working journalists who serve without compensation, meets several times a year to weigh grant proposals. Frugality is a necessity, since the fund accepts no money from corporations, labor unions, special interest groups, or governmental agencies. Most of its funding comes from foundations and individual contributors.

Grants, ranging from \$500 to \$10,000, are awarded to U.S. and foreign journalists, and projects in all media are considered, including newspapers, magazines, broadcast, books and the Internet. Applicants state in a letter what they propose to investigate and how they intend to go about it. They also submit their resumé, a budget for the project, a sample of published work, and a “letter of interest” from an editor or producer stating that if the finished product meets their editorial standards, they will consider using it.

Half of the grant is given at the start and half when the project is completed. Other than this financial assistance, the fund exerts no editorial control over the project, nor does it monitor how the grant money is used. Its interest is in good journalism, not reviewing expense reports. The fund does not offer scholarships or training programs. Its sole purpose is to promote tough, honest investigative journalism by putting money into the hands of reporters eager to shine light into dark places. And, in that respect, it is often the only game in town. ■—J.H.

justice.” He’d done what he could to fund projects designed to alleviate poverty and others to battle against racism, corporate greed, and government corruption. Over time, he became convinced that by putting

a small amount of money into the hands of aggressive reporters, he could do an immense amount of good toward achieving these goals.

For Hersh, that small amount of money—the first grant given out

by the fund—was \$250, which he used to pay for his reporting trip to Indiana. Hersh returned feeling certain that he had a story, so the fund gave him an additional grant of \$2,000 to pursue it further. When he finished his reporting, the magazines to whom he offered the story turned him down. After a friend who operated Dispatch News Service, a small newspaper syndicate, agreed to run his piece, the scandal he'd unearthed became a huge and influential story when 36 newspapers in the United States and abroad bought the rights to reprint it. Hersh won the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 1970, and public opinion about the Vietnam War was profoundly affected.

"Think of it," Stern later wrote, "a mere \$2,250 in fund grants enabled Seymour Hersh to leverage a whiff into a colossal stink and contribute mightily to the change in how Americans viewed the war in Vietnam."

Courageous Pursuit of Stories

Since then, the work of investigative reporters who have received the fund's grants has been recognized by the award of nearly every

Seeking Support for Investigative Projects

These foundations and centers offer financial support for journalists.

Alicia Patterson Foundation

www.aliciapatterson.org

This Washington, D.C.-based fund provides six-month and one-year grants to working investigative reporters who want to pursue independent investigative projects. Grants can be as much as \$35,000 and are awarded based on an annual competition.

Center for Investigative Reporting

<http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/projects/thedickgoldensohnfund>.

The Dick Goldensohn Fund makes small grants to cover research, reporting and travel costs for freelance journalists working on international investigations.

Fund for Investigative Journalism

www.fij.org

Based in Washington, D.C., the

major prize in journalism: There has been another Pulitzer, two National Magazine Awards, the George Polk Award, the Raymond Clapper Award, and the Frank Luther Mott Award. There have also been plenty of other courageous reporters whose work we've funded who have not won prizes but who have endured harassment and imprisonment and risked their lives in pursuit of what they knew was an important story to tell.

Journalists who've headed out to do reporting we've funded have been beaten up, shot at, and run out of town. In 2001, Argwings Odera was forced to flee his native Kenya after the nation's president went on national television and accused him of treason because of his stories about government corruption. Robert I. Friedman, a freelance author, was sent into hiding after his book, "Red Mafiya," earned him a death sentence from the Russian mob. After he received a subsequent fund grant to investigate human trafficking in India, he contracted a rare disease during his time there and died. In honor of his work, the fund created the Robert I. Friedman Award for International Investigative Reporting to honor him. Eliza Griswold,

Fund for Investigative Journalism gives grants of up to \$10,000 to investigative reporters who are working outside of major news organizations. Types of investigations the fund supports include corruption, incompetence and societal ills.

Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE)

www.ire.org/training/fellowships

E-mail Jennifer Erickson at jennifer@ire.org.

In a new program, IRE will offer grants to freelancers working on investigative stories. IRE will distribute a limited number of annual fellowships of \$1,000 to \$2,000. Applications are due on May 1st each year, and fellows will be announced at IRE's annual conference in June.

The Nation Institute

www.nationinstitute.org/ifunds/

The Nation Institute's Investigative Fund provides grants for researching investigative stories. The fund is designed to

who was the first winner of the Friedman Award, was detained and subsequently ushered out of Pakistan while she was reporting on Waziristan, a remote tribal area thought to be the hiding place of Osama bin Laden.

There was Lesley McCulloch, a Scottish journalist, who was arrested and jailed for five months while reporting on the conflict in Banda Aceh. The Indonesian government originally threatened to charge her with treason, a capital offense, but later backed away when international opinion coalesced in her favor. Unknown to her jailers, McCulloch had smuggled a cell phone into her cell and gave a series of interviews to the BBC.

Our annual book award is named in honor of legendary editor Gene Roberts, a longtime member of the board of directors whose idea led to this \$25,000 award. It gives authors who are writing investigative books financial assistance during times when it can be a struggle for them to complete their projects. Our most recent recipient was Jessica Snyder Sachs, a science journalist whose book, "Good Germs, Bad Germs: Health and Survival in a Bacterial World," details how the "war on germs" threatens a massive

support work on stories about topics and issues that are often ignored by mainstream media.

The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting

<http://pulitzercenter.org/>
(Click on "Grants")

The center funds international travel costs associated with reporting projects on topics and regions of global importance. While broad in its description, the center has supported investigative pieces "with an emphasis on issues that have gone unreported or underreported in the mainstream American media." The grant amount depends on the specific project and detailed budget planning and ranges from \$3,000 to \$10,000. Some have been as much as \$20,000. All journalists, writers or filmmakers, both freelance and staff of any nationality, may apply.

University of California at Berkeley, Graduate School of Journalism

<http://journalism.berkeley.edu/>
E-mail Marlena Telvick at investigativereportingprogram@berkeley.edu.

public health crisis as microbes become resistant to antibiotic drugs.¹

Many years after the My Lai massacre story made him famous, Seymour Hersh looked back on the important role the fund plays. The support it provides, he said, “is absolutely essential for nonestablishment journalists working on stories that—believe me, I know—99 percent of managing editors would have passed up.” ■

John Hyde was the part-time executive director of the Fund for Investigative Journalism. He had been a reporter and editor for several newspapers, including the Des Moines Register, where he served in the Washington bureau for 12 years.

¹ Previous winners include Stephanie Mencimer for “Blocking the Courthouse Door: How the Republican Party and Its Corporate Allies Are Taking Away Your Right to Sue,” about tort reform, and “Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II,” by Jason Berry and Gerald Renner, which details sexual misconduct by a secretive sect within the Catholic Church and an effort to cover it up at the Vatican’s higher levels.

The university offers three yearlong postgraduate fellowships in investigative reporting that are open to all working journalists but with preference given to graduates of U.C. Berkeley’s program in journalism. Selection will be based on qualifications as well as potential and on the proposed areas of investigation. Fellows will be provided with office space, phones and basic expenses and will be considered employees of the university with an annual salary of about \$45,000. ■

This information was compiled by Rachel Schaff, who is in her second year of the Masters of Library Science program at the University of Missouri-Columbia and has worked in the resource center of Investigative Reporters and Editors for several years while attending Missouri. She will join the staff at the library at U.S. News & World Report after she graduates in May.

Transparency Increases Credibility

A Web site and television show reveal how investigative journalists do their jobs.

BY MARK SCHAPIRO

Investigative reporters are rarely beloved. In making it our business to reveal the often uncomfortable truths behind the public reality, why should we be? But to be understood is another matter.

Early in 2006, the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) and WNET, the PBS station in New York City, joined forces to begin production of the television program, “Exposé: America’s Investigative Reports.”¹ Our goal was to illustrate through this television show what it takes to do investigative reporting by retracing the steps of some of the best in the business at newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations across the country. By revealing how it’s done, we thought that the show might contribute to taking some of the taint off the plummeting public image that the profession

has endured—not to mention tell some dramatic tales.

In preproduction, WNET sent out veteran producer Tom Casciato to get a sense of the media terrain. Casciato had put his documentary skills to work on behalf of ABC News, National Geographic, and Bill Moyers before taking the job as executive producer of *Exposé*. He came back from that initial foray and reported, “You’re all optimists!” The belief that the “system can and should work” was a common quality he noticed in the many interviews he had conducted with investigative journalists, editors and producers at news organizations, small and large, across the country.

This surprised me; I’d never heard any of my colleagues or peers define themselves using quite such buoyant terms. Upon reflec-

¹ www.pbs.org/wnet/expose/

tion, however, his words started to seem like an accurate observation about the constellation of sometimes gruff, always driven journalists who pursue this line of work. They actually believe that bringing real information to the attention of the public might prompt change—in government policy, in the fate of politicians and government officials, in the behavior of corporations, in individuals or in entities with a link to power. His observation certainly offered a contrast with the public's typical view of investigative journalists, who tend to rank somewhere between lawyers (another profession given an arguably bad rap) and repo men (who might deserve it). And the 24/7 news cycle hasn't helped when anyone from Katie Couric to the local cable correspondent staking out pot dealers across from a local high school can label him or herself an "investigative reporter."

How is the public supposed to recognize the "real" thing?

We hope the program, *Exposé*, now in its third season and being aired as part of Bill Moyers Journal, can heighten viewers' ability to differentiate the real from the not-so-real by providing the critical dimension of transparency. Each

episode tells through video the story-behind-the-story by showing in detail an investigative reporter's methodical—often dramatic—assemblage of evidence. The program peels away layers of the often-mystifying process of doing investigative reporting.

In the first season, for example, the program portrayed the extraordinary efforts of the investigative team in St. Petersburg, Florida to reveal FEMA's ineptitude in handling the destructive after-effects of Hurricane Rita, months before Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and every newspaper in America was on FEMA's trail. The segment followed the South Florida Sun-Sentinel's I-Team as they pursued one Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request after another with FEMA and constructed a scathing portrait of the federal agency's incompetence by comparing official documents with the experiences of local residents.

In its second season, "Exposé" followed James Steele and Donald Barlett as they evoked the relentless document and source trail they developed for investigating the defense department's largest contractor, Science Applications International Corporation, for a story

that appeared in *Vanity Fair*. Like many other pieces shown as part of this series, this one demonstrated how these two veteran reporters went about gathering information. What they did and how they did it involved the use of tools and strategies that the investigative journalists use all the time, but this story gave a gritty glimpse of the process to those who are unlikely to think much about how stories like this one are reported.

“Exposé” also tracks what happens after a story is published or broadcast: It then shares with viewers what happened to targets of an investigation and victims of malfeasance months after the initial story appeared. The show also is able to give a second life to revelations whose initial impact might have been limited to a local market.

Using the Web to Expose Reporting

Developing such themes on “Exposé” has enhanced the investigative journalism we do and support at CIR, a 31-year old nonprofit or-

ganization that produces investigative stories for all media. At CIR, reporters and editors endeavor to use whatever journalistic tools we can to let readers have as much clarity as possible about how we report our stories; sometimes this means revealing the step-by-step process that leads to a revelation. Or reporters explain how they got the story in the first place, or where their journey in putting together its many pieces led them to go. Loretta Tofani wrote on the CIR Web site about her series, “American Imports, Chinese Deaths,” that appeared last October in the *Salt Lake Tribune*. This Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist first explained how she’d left journalism in 2001, when cuts at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* led her to take a buyout and open a store in Salt Lake City that sold Chinese ethnic furniture.²

Tofani then wrote about what pulled her back into journalism. Later she described what she went through in reporting the story of what was happening in these Chinese factories. A few of her words follow:

² On the CIR blog—The Muckraker—reporters write about their investigative work and discussion takes place about investigative reporting. <http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/blogs?category=31>.

The store made me an importer, so I often traveled to China, where I had been a foreign correspondent for four years during the 1990's for The Philadelphia Inquirer. As a businessperson, I saw a different side of Chinese factories than those I had been allowed to see as a foreign correspondent. Back then, I received the usual 'foreign journalist as spy' treatment: I was escorted by half a dozen Chinese officials who had pre-screened the factories and preinterviewed the workers and managers. But as a businessperson, on a new passport, I had relative freedom to choose the factories I wanted to see, unencumbered by government escorts.

What I saw—and my inability to stop thinking about what it meant and what the stories would say—caused me to close my store and return to journalism. My series ... showed that millions of Chinese factory workers were touching and/or inhaling carcinogens—nickel, cadmium, lead, benzene, toluene, n-hexane, mercury—as they made products destined for the United States. While Americans worried about lead on toys imported from China, Chinese workers were dying from lead and other toxins. They were paying the real price of cheap

American imports. Using shipping documents, I linked specific American imports to specific Chinese workers dying of fatal occupational diseases. I interviewed the workers and obtained their medical records. The series raised questions: If we protect American workers from fatal occupational diseases, shouldn't Chinese workers making American products also be protected?

We are putting CIR's Web site to use in other ways, too. It provides readers not only with documentation that buttresses the reporting but also with explanations of how our reporters used it. It has graphic representations of a story's central findings and shows clearly the reporter's stepping stones of document collection and interviews. Our Web site figures into CIR's investigations, no matter in which medium the original story appears. Flash art is used to draw the links between people, documents and revelations. On companion Web sites for our documentary films and other major projects, we include everything from raw data to interview streams, so we can show the various pieces of the puzzle that went into putting the finished product together. In my recently published

book, “Exposed,” I adopted some of these techniques to carry readers along as I moved through complicated sequences of scientific evidence about the effects of chemicals on the human metabolism and into the differing responses to that evidence in the United States and Europe.³

Taking people inside the work of investigative reporters increases the story’s credibility and illuminates the immense effort that journalists put into such coverage. This helps especially with complex and controversial stories, where we’ve found that a high level of transparency about the reporting process translates into greater believability by readers. (According to a similar logic, many newspapers now inform readers about the reason for an unnamed source’s desire for anonymity.)

CIR was the nation’s first effort to put into practice the notion that if for-profit news organizations would not support in-depth investigations into abuses of power, then perhaps foundations and philanthropic individuals could. Back then no one foresaw the systematic unraveling of newsrooms that we

are witnessing today. The implosion of traditional support within newsrooms has heightened the necessity of finding alternative resources to support this kind of reporting. This prospect has helped to galvanize the work of the nonprofit institutions reflected in these pages. And perhaps the increasing attention to the role of nonprofit journalism reflects a broader phenomenon at work: recognition of how essential this combination of optimism and the methodical application of skepticism is to a healthy democracy. In telling the story of journalists and the efforts they make, perhaps investigative reporting can be seen for what it contributes as well as an unwelcome disruption to the status quo. ■

Mark Schapiro is the editorial director of the Center for Investigative Reporting and author of the book, “Exposed: The Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Products and What’s at Stake for American Power,” published by Chelsea Green in 2007.

³ <http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/projects/Exposed>

Good Journalism Can Be Good Business

‘Let’s not pull the plug on for-profit journalism just yet.’

BY DANIEL BROGAN

Hardly a day goes by anymore without more bad news about the news business. Layoffs. Budget cuts. Once proud companies dismantled. Wall Street analysts predicting more gloom ahead. It’s gotten to the point that even The New York Times is worrying that “Muckraking Pays, Just Not in Profit:”

Investigative reporting can expose corruption, create accountability, and occasionally save lives, but it will never be a business unto itself. Reporters frequently spend months on various lines of inquiry, some of which do not pan out, and even when one does, it is not the kind of coverage that draws advertisers.¹

Things are so bad that, increasingly, we’re seeing nonprofits such

as ProPublica and MinnPost put forth as the last refuge for serious newsgathering.

While I applaud high-quality journalism by any means necessary, let’s not pull the plug on for-profit journalism just yet. Four years ago, I made a commitment that 5280—Denver’s city magazine, which takes its name from our mile-high elevation—would do more, not less, long-form and investigative journalism. It hasn’t been cheap, but I’m here to tell you to forget the conventional “wisdom.” There’s good money to be made in good journalism.

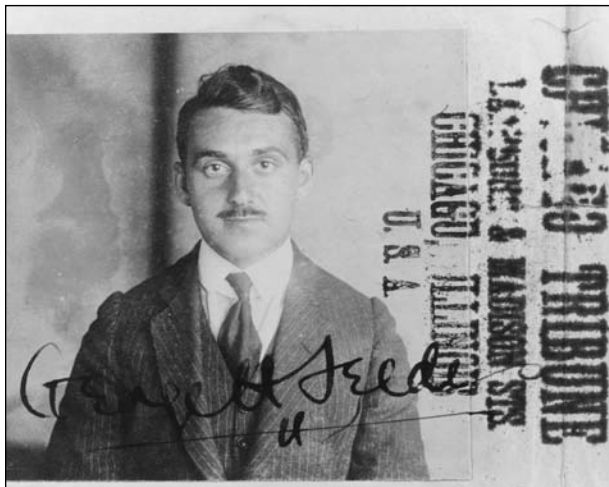
A bit of background. Fifteen years ago, I started 5280 in my second bedroom. It was a classic bootstrap launch, funded by personal savings, a few small family loans, and a lot of credit card debt. As a former reporter at the Chicago Tribune, I fully intended that investi-

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/10/business/media/10carr.html>

gative and long-form narrative journalism would be an important part of our editorial mix. And in our early years, we made a few noble attempts, including the first in-depth interview with the principal of Columbine High School following the 1999 shootings and the first profiles of the jurors selected in Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing trial. But reality quickly set in. Those kinds of stories were expensive, and we were barely keeping our heads above water.

To survive, we instead turned our focus to that mainstay of city magazines, service journalism. If you could list it, rank it, or rate it, you'd find it in the pages of 5280. Admittedly, this was not the kind of glamorous reportage that most of us went to journalism school to pursue. But for a small staff with limited resources, our lists of doctors, restaurants, neighborhoods and

WATCHDOG GALLERY



George Seldes (1890-1995). In 1938 he founded a weekly newspaper, “In Fact,” in which he wrote frequently about the hazards of smoking cigarettes during a time when other publications refused to print such stories. *Loren Ghiglione/Courtesy Newseum.*

schools offered a cost-effective way to build an audience. Over time, we were able to translate that audience into ad dollars and, by 2003, we were turning a healthy profit.

However, as Denver grew and the Internet began to offer readers new sources of information, it became clear that simply being a good magazine wouldn't be good enough for very long. So I decided

to take 5280's financial success and reinvest it in creating a great magazine, one that was the equal of any city magazine in the country. Since the start of 2004, we've tripled the size of our editorial staff, bringing on journalists from national titles like GQ, Red Herring, Sports Illustrated, and Skiing as well as some of the very best city magazines. At the same time, we doubled the budget for our freelance writers, photographers and illustrators. All told, we've increased our total editorial expenditures by nearly one million dollars a year.

Returning to Investigative Journalism

Our magazine has a ways to go before we reach our ultimate goal, but we've been doing a lot of important investigative work, including the following stories:

- We documented the holes in the first case brought against an Air Force Academy cadet accused of rape, in the article "Conduct Unbecoming."² When those charges were later dismissed, the cadet's

father credited 5280 with saving his son from a life sentence.

- We revealed that the Army's flagrant physical and psychological abuse of its recruits during basic training was driving some mentally troubled trainees to suicide in the article "Private Stites Should Have Been Saved."
- We uncovered serious conflicts of interest in the mediation system set up to protect veterans who illegally lose their jobs when returning from Iraq in the article "Nobody's Hero."
- We told the story of sick and dying workers at the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant who are being denied promised health benefits, despite the government's unprecedented admission that the workers had been recklessly put in harm's way, in the article "Out in the Cold." Following our report, the workers' cases were reopened and are now being reviewed.

At the same time, we've also increased our emphasis on narrative storytelling, offering readers such compelling reads as a two-part pro-

² This article, and others mentioned, can be found at www.5280.com/back_issues.php.

file of Focus on the Family's James Dobson, "And on the Eighth Day, Dr. Dobson Created Himself," and the gripping tale of a woman left for dead by a serial rapist who terrorized Denver in 2005, "Undefeated."

Other costs have come our way from pursuing these kinds of stories. We've had to fight off a subpoena from the Department of Defense and, in another case, we sued the federal government when we discovered evidence that an order had gone out to destroy records we were seeking under a Freedom of Information Act inquiry.

But we've also experienced a tremendous return on our investment—financially and in terms of recognition from our peers. We've been nominated for two National Magazine Awards and received a flattering number of other awards, often being recognized alongside entries from publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Two of our stories became segments on ABC's "20/20" and the "NBC Nightly News." Recognition from our peers is gratifying, of course. On the business side, the returns have been just as gratifying. In the past four years, 5280's paid subscriptions have grown by more

than 50 percent, while the number of magazines we sell on the newsstand—already strong for a city of Denver's size—has increased by a similar amount. Though Denver is the nation's 22nd largest market, only five other monthly city magazines sell more copies on the newsstand.

Last, but certainly not least, we've more than doubled our ad revenue during this same time. This means we continue to generate a very healthy profit margin, even as we continue to reinvest in the magazine's editorial product. I'm guessing that Wall Street wouldn't endorse our strategy. After all, 5280 is a small magazine in a relatively small city. But there's nothing about our business model that shouldn't be valid elsewhere. To sell ads, a publication needs to attract a worthwhile audience. To do that requires compelling content. All of which convinces me that good journalism can be good business. ■

Daniel Brogan is the editor and publisher of 5280 magazine, which he founded in 1993. He has a journalism degree from Indiana University.

Digital Journalism: Will It Work for Investigative Journalism?

The Nieman Watchdog Project's editor explores what might be missing and what might be found as journalists turn to the Web to assist in reporting.

BY BARRY SUSSMAN

It's beyond dispute that the finest investigative reporting being done by members of the press is marvelous. The problem is, there's not enough of it. Month to month, we find evidence that gaps in watchdog coverage grow. Where once newspaper reporters were assigned routine beats, such as poverty, labor, the courts, this doesn't happen so much anymore, or maybe a reporter gets three beats to cover when the average number used to be one. The state of race relations seems good for a Newsweek cover story every five years, but that's about it. What's happening in prisons? Forget it. The problems are as large and numerous as ever, but the press's watchful eyes, in large measure, have gone away.

When reporters are on a beat, they are known by those they cover. In time, they come to know who is

doing what and learn why. They sniff out when something isn't working as it should and, pretty soon, if they are doing their job well, sources start to come to them. Stories that once seemed impossible to nail down now seem doable. One of the great losses of our day is that so much of this kind of daily legwork isn't happening, not to mention the enormous loss of so much valuable institutional memory vanishing by way of employee buyouts. For any editors who don't realize what this absence means, perhaps a reminder from a one-time secretary of defense might help; he'd surely put these absent stories in the category of "known unknowns."

As someone who remembers when beat reporting served a valuable purpose—for the newspaper and the public—I wonder at times whether there will ever again be a

time when substantial reporting occurs about the topics and issues on which beat reporters once kept watch. I am not holding my breath for that day to arrive.

The Web: An Investigative Reporter's Tool

What the Web does incomparably well is to provide information—instantly—on just about anything. Want to know about where there have been cases of bird flu? Or what can go wrong with voting machines? Or about the capital punishment of innocent people? Civilian deaths in Iraq? College enrollment and rising tuition costs? Googling not only provides answers, but it connects reporters and anyone else with possible places and sources to go to find out more. But the ways of the Web also mean that a “source” no longer has to wait for a reporter to call to get word out about something. The Web is always waiting—available anytime for anyone to publish anything.

Determining how trustworthy a piece of information is or how reliable a source might be is what reporters do, or what they were once expected to do by those who

read their stories. It is, therefore, not comforting to read a recent Harper's Index item that observed the following: “Minimum number of edits to Wikipedia since June 2004 that have been traced back to the CIA: 310.” Nor is the habit Web audiences have of finding their way most often to sites where like-minded people reside something that ought to comfort us, either. At least when we open a newspaper we aren't always sure what we'll find inside, and sometimes what we find gives us food for thought.

There are plenty of reliable, dedicated groups and individuals responsibly sharing important information through the Web. And at a time when surveys of public attitudes inform us that the public's trust in the press is exceedingly low, it seems inevitable that other avenues of seeking sources for “news” will be sought. We know already that the role the press once assumed as a gatekeeper of such information is no longer theirs. And with all of the changes brought by technology and with those happening in newsrooms, it is hard to know whether investigative journalism's future looks brighter for those of us who believe in the essentialness of its traditional watchdog role.

During the four years I've been editor of the Nieman Watchdog Web site,¹ there's been, of course, an extremely rapid growth in digital media. Web sites of news organizations now display impressive multimedia displays of investigative pieces, such as those done by The New York Times and The Washington Post and other mainstream news outlets. A lot of other investigative work found on the Web is done, however, through nonprofit entities or by individuals, some of whom had distinguished careers in newsrooms before they began to publish on their own. Others with less familiar bylines have surfaced in recent years, and by now some have been around long enough that their work has shown itself to be credible and solid. Now on some important watchdog stories these Web-based writers are doing original reporting to the point where online sites, such as the Center for Investigative Reporting, the Center for Public Integrity, Talking Points Memo, and others are in the forefront of investigative reporting.

If editors believe, for example, that there should be more and better reporting about what is going on inside of prisons and with the courts—yet they lack the staff necessary to do this beat as day-to-day reporting—then there are ways that the Web can help. With well-researched information and links to news coverage in every state, The Sentencing Project's Web site, operated by a prison reform group in Washington, D.C., for example, can give reporters a good start in figuring out whether there is a story to be told. Or the reporter can go to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law or to a range of similar sites. It's not exactly the way shoe-leather reporting was done but, in some ways, use of the Web will likely enable some aspects of reporting to take place that would never have been possible before.

Another example of that is a public interest group, the Center for Medicare Advocacy, Inc.. Journalists probing the Bush administration's apparent efforts to weaken

¹ At www.niemanwatchdog.org academic experts, journalists and others pose questions they believe the press should be asking and share information about topics that might lead reporters to develop their own investigations.

Revealing the Disinformation Industry

With complicated stories, a problem for reporters and editors always has been to wade through mounds of disinformation to get to the facts. Today the problem is even worse. There is an entire disinformation industry, consisting of corporate-funded think tanks, phony grassroots groups, co-opted citizens organizations, experts for hire, fake news and fake reporters, government officials on all levels who lie and promote disinformation, and a presidential administration that has worked to discredit the press and make it irrelevant. Nor has the Web been spared, as digital disinformation proliferates.

But the Internet also provides journalists with some online resources to help journalists sort what is real and solid from what is fake and disingenuous. A couple of good ones, among others, are the Web sites of Investigative Reporters and Editors (www.ire.org) and the Project for Excellence in Journalism (www.journalism.org). And there is a new Web site — www.frontgroups.org — aimed directly at this disinformation problem. It is put out by Consumers Union and the Center for Media and Democracy with the stated goal of exposing “the people and organizations who function in our society as hidden persuaders. You’ll find them at work posting to blogs, speaking before city councils, quoted in newspapers and published on the editorial page, even sponsoring presidential election debates. All this while pretending to represent the grassroots when in fact they are working against citizens’ best interests.”

The disinformation industry is huge and well entrenched. Reporters need all the help they can get. ■—B.S.

and possibly destroy the Medicare system will find this a knowledgeable source. In this case, as in others, experts serve as sources and do their own reporting through regular online releases. Its ex-

ecutive director, Judith Stein, has written occasional pieces for the Nieman Watchdog site that, in my view, provide authoritative, excellent leads for journalists. [See accompanying box for a description

of Web sites journalists can use to help them ferret out disinformation campaigns.]

Sites like this one—and many others—give reporters guidance that can jump-start an investigative story by confirming hunches they might have with solid data and by suggesting sources to which they can turn. Few investigative assignments, however, will be—or should be—completed online; I’m old enough and experienced enough to know the importance of working with actual sources—people who have stories to tell and documents to back up what they know. Databases, and the computer tools we have to work with, are a terrific resource, but there still need to be stories about real people and real people’s lives. Readers—whether they get their news online or in a newspaper or on TV—aren’t riveted by numbers and timelines. What they still crave are stories, in this case ones in which the powerful are held accountable for actions they’ve taken and the circumstances of the vulnerable are brought to life.

In a letter in his 2006 Berkshire Hathaway annual report, Warren Buffett wrote that, when he was young, “No paper in a one-paper city, however bad the product or

however inept the management, could avoid gushing profits.” Those days are gone. Now Buffett believes there are two paths for newspapers to take if they are to survive. One path leads to “civic-minded wealthy individuals [who] may feel that local ownership will serve their community well.” That’s a possibility, but a declining one, he wrote. Speaking about the Buffalo News, which Berkshire Hathaway owns, Buffett held out the hope that “some combination of print and online will ward off economic doomsday.”

Let me add a proviso to Buffett’s two-path strategy. Unless newspapers figure out how—in print and online—to continue their essential watchdog role by providing substantive investigative reporting in well-told ways, then whether they survive or not, what they’ve meant to the survival of our democracy will have vanished. ■

Barry Sussman is the editor of the Nieman Watchdog Project.

Investigative Reporting About Secrecy

‘With some noteworthy exceptions, secrecy is rarely tackled head-on in the press.’

BY TED GUP

The real intent of the First Amendment was to prevent national suicide by making it difficult for the government to operate in secret, free from the scrutiny of the press.

—I.F. Stone, October 3, 1966

Investigative reporters are all too familiar with secrecy. They know it as the obstacle that stands between them and the object of their interest. Everything about investigative reporting reinforces the notion that secrecy is but an impediment to be overcome. We celebrate our triumphs over secrecy with prizes, promotions and public accolades. But secrecy is more than a mere roadblock to successful reporting, and the conventional treatment of secrecy may inadvertently play into the hands of those who seek to keep the public in the dark.

With some noteworthy exceptions, secrecy is rarely tackled head-on in the press. Rather, it crops up in stories as an incidental—a fleeting denial of access, a closed door, a call not returned, a stalled Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. Secrecy itself gets short shrift. It is endemic to the culture of investigative reporting to see it in terms that are defined by our own ability or inability to surmount the obstacles before us.

In so doing we have tended to overlook one of the more significant stories of our lifetime—an emerging “secretocracy” that threatens to transform American society and democratic institutions. Systemic or indiscriminate secrecy involves the calculated use of secrecy as a principle instrument of governance, a way to impede scrutiny, obscure process, avoid accountability, suppress dissent, and

concentrate power. The tendency to abuse secrecy is as old as power itself, but prior to 9/11 it was usually checked, and even its abuses were cyclical.

Too often today this broader use of secrecy escapes our attention, or at least our reporting—especially when as reporters we fail to prevail and obtain the information sought. On the rare occasion that secrecy itself is granted center stage, it is often so closely tied to the particulars of a given story that the context is lost. Readers encounter the subject of secrecy almost always in isolated settings—this official refused to disclose, that official declined to comment.

Our own reportorial frustrations have sometimes been allowed to color our judgment and blind us to the news; we personalize secrecy. Because we are stymied in our quest for information, we view the story as a dry hole. There is a professional reluctance to write about secrecy per se, in part because it is seen as self-serving or whining, an admission of our own shortcomings as reporters. Writing about intact secrets somehow smacks of defeatism. Great reporters, we might imagine, would not stoop to carping about such conditions,

equating secrecy with professional adversity; they would rise above them, or so the argument goes. Watergate and the Pentagon Papers remain the template, stories steeped in secrecy, but in which the reporters emerged triumphant. The closest we come to recognizing secrecy as an integral element of the story is when it is cast as a cover-up.

Obstacles to Reporting on Secrecy

There are other reasons why secrecy is rarely taken on directly. To expose broad patterns of secrecy requires reporters to cooperate across beats and to subordinate sensitivities over turf to news values. There is also the fear that an examination of secrecy is for policy wonks and political scientists, not journalists, and that it is too abstract to be of much interest to readers. But it is no more so than a host of other topics we routinely cover, including economics, science, health or politics (and secrecy involves them all—and more).

The key, here as elsewhere, is to show who benefits and who suffers and how secrecy is the lubricant for all manner of chicanery. Noth-

ing so discredits legitimate secrets as the profusion of counterfeit secrets. Most importantly, we should be detailing how indiscriminate secrecy threatens to profoundly alter our entire system of governance, neutering oversight efforts and marginalizing citizens. Secrecy writ large can hijack democracy itself.

Finally, while journalistic enterprises have targeted secrecy at the publishers' and trade association level, individual papers are often squeamish about working in concert with one another, eschewing campaigns out of fear that they compromise objectivity. One week a year, a coalition takes up the subject and spotlights individual states' compliance or lack of compliance with sunshine provisions, but otherwise it is a topic left to ad hoc efforts linked to specific reporting challenges.

Historically, reporters have indulged themselves in reporting almost exclusively on those secrets that they have penetrated. Everyone reports on a leak, but too few notice the dam looming behind them. The sense of accomplishment that comes with cutting through resistance and secrecy is undeniable. But cumulatively, such

breakthrough stories may have left readers/citizens with the dangerous misimpression that few secrets can withstand our reportorial onslaught, that the republic still enjoys a robust albeit begrudging transparency, and that the government's or industry's feeble attempts to ward us off and conceal their actions are ultimately to no avail. In short, we have telegraphed to the electorate, the consumer, the patient and the litigant, that they are in possession of all the vital information they need to make informed choices.

That does not comport with my experience as a reporter. Nor does it, I believe, reflect the reality of America in 2008. Silly as it might sound, we also do the nation a service when we admit what important information we do not possess and cannot acquire because it has been denied us.

Secrets Not Shared

In truth, secrecy has migrated well beyond the historic reservoirs of national security as the nation's entire infrastructure has been considered a potential terrorist target. All the state, county and metropolitan authorities that intersect with

those sites—as well as the private industries that operate them—have increasingly come under the mantle of secrecy. Communications intercepts have brought the telecommunications companies into the security fold.

Formal secrecy, as all investigative reporters know first hand, is only a fragment of the problem. Hundreds of thousands of officials, senior and junior, as well as contractors, possess the ability—without any formal training or authorization—to scribble “Sensitive But Unclassified,” or “Official Use Only,” or any one of many other designations on documents, thereby removing them from public scrutiny even as they admit them to be unclassified. Those labels have brought about a sea change in the availability of materials and in our ability to track the policies and practices of government and industry. It is a subject familiar to the coalition of interest groups

and journalists who care so deeply about such affairs, but it remains widely unknown to most Americans.

Secrecy is increasingly a problem in the courts as well, as fewer cases are adjudicated in open court and more and more cases go the way of alternative dispute resolution and are sealed. In the federal courts, fewer than two percent of cases go to a full and open trial. This might sound like an arcane subject, but it has very real public implications as tort litigation over potentially dangerous products—autos, tires, medications, machinery—medical malpractice, gender, age and race discrimination, and a slew of other topics that directly affect the public’s safety and well-being, are increasingly settled out of sight.¹

In my book on secrecy, “Nation of Secrets: The Threat to Democracy and the American Way of Life,” I reported that the software

¹ In an award-winning series of investigative articles, The Seattle Times examined how King County judges had improperly sealed hundreds of court files holding secrets of potential dangers for the public. This series, entitled “Your Courts, Their Secrets,” was written about by one of its reporters, Ken Armstrong, in the Winter 2007 issue of Nieman Reports and can be read at www.nieman.harvard.edu. The original series of articles can be found at <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/yourcourts-their-secrets/>.

system used in all federal courts is designed to spit out “No Such Case Exists” when anyone queries cases that have been sealed. [See page 61 for a reflection by Walter Pincus of Gup’s book.] But outside of lawyerly publications, such matters rarely receive notice in any systemic context.

I recognize that the economy has thinned the reportorial ranks, but given the wild proliferation of secrets in both the public and private spheres, it would be a terrific investment of reportorial resources, not to mention a valuable public service, to dedicate an entire beat to secrecy. If nothing else, it would produce some remarkable stories,

and it might just help the public grasp the wider implications of unchecked secrecy.

When I began working on my secrecy book, I asked a ridiculously simple question that produced some extraordinary responses. The question: “May I have a list of everything I am not allowed to see?” At least it was a start. ■

Ted Gup is the author of “Nation of Secrets: The Threat to Democracy and the American Way of Life” (Doubleday, 2007) and is the Shirley Wormser Professor of Journalism at Case Western Reserve University. His e-mail is tedgup@att.net.

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Secrets and the Press

‘Some secrets deserve to be kept, and even secrets uncovered might not merit being put in public print, on television or on the Internet.’

BY WALTER PINCUS

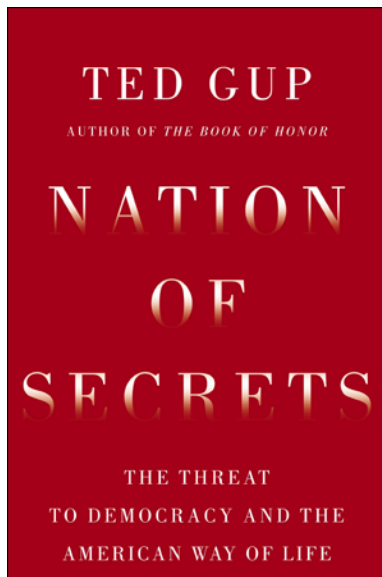
Nation of Secrets: The Threat to Democracy and the American Way of Life

Ted Gup

Doubleday. 322 Pages.

“Kept from the knowledge of others,” is the shortened definition of a secret in Webster’s New World Dictionary. We all have secrets we keep from others, whether family, friends or the public at large. To be honest, I’ve kept secrets from colleagues—the home or cell phone number from a particularly good source who asked for it be kept private—and even from editors; the original tip came from someone I will not admit ever spoke to me.

Government institutions and their officials, corporation officers and employees, arts organizations, colleges and universities, social groups and sports teams, music groups and symphony conductors,



movie and television personalities all have their secrets. But why something is secret and from whom is another thing altogether.

Ted Gup, a dogged investigative reporter who shares that gift now with journalism students at Case

Western Reserve University, has taken on this subject in his book, “Nation of Secrets: The Threat to Democracy and the American Way of Life.” [See Gup’s article on page 56.] After a 10-year career exposing secrets in newspapers and magazines, and two years studying the subject, Gup writes about his concern that “Today America is a nation of secrets, an increasingly furtive land where closed doors outnumber open ones and where it is no longer ‘the right to know’ but ‘the need to know’ that is the measure against which access is determined.”

As someone who has worked at reporting on government for some 50 years, I can’t argue against aspiring and practicing journalists tacking that sentence up on the wall and remembering it as they go about their business. But there is, as Gup alludes to, another way to think about this. Some secrets deserve to be kept, and even secrets uncovered might not merit being put in public print, on television, or on the Internet. Much as reporters ought to realize that everything an official says publicly might not deserve to be published, just discovering something that is being kept secret, even by government officials, doesn’t mean it needs to be exposed.

Gup concedes the point, saying honestly that “where genuine national interests could be adversely affected, I have also remained silent.” He, in fact, is trying to find the correct midpoint, saying “Secrecy and democracy are not irreconcilable, but the former often advances at the expense of the latter.”

How Secrets Become Public

The question is, always, who decides what government secrets become public? At the most serious level, when lives are obviously at stake, it has to begin with those inside government who have been trusted with the secret. In all instances, even in spying, those outsiders trying to get the secret must find a government source who willingly or even inadvertently turns it over. Since decent journalists—and I confine myself to that category—don’t steal secrets, any discussion on who is to blame for secrets getting out to the media has to go first to the government’s inability to protect its own closely held information. If an administration doesn’t like leaks, officials need to get their own people to respect the need to keep them secret.

At the next level, the journalist or the intermediary who passes the se-

cret on makes his or her own decision on the secret's import and value. The journalist, I would hope, in deciding to write a story would first seek to determine the truth of the secret—a step that inevitably means going back to the government officials who are involved to try to get verification, context or at least a comment.

Here, in the normal handling of such things, government officials have a second chance to protect things that are genuinely important. They can make their case to the reporter, his or her editor, and even the owner of the enterprise. At The Washington Post and other news enterprises, such discussions over the years have even involved the President of the United States talking to the paper's owner.

Then there is an equally important step for journalists in deciding whether it is worth publishing a secret just because up to now it has been secret. Does its publication help public understanding of some issue? Or is putting it out there just being done to show that you know something the government wants to keep secret? For example, does a story about a secret intelligence operation you have uncovered, and think the public ought to know about, need to have the actual

names of covert agents included, if somehow you find them out? Over the years, The Washington Post has made it a policy to not put those names in the paper when they are not essential to the story.

In the end, it is the judgment of owners, editors and reporters at news organizations—including those people who distribute information on the Internet—that decides whether to publish or not.

When Secrets Are Disclosed

Despite frequent complaints by government officials that we, as journalists, don't understand the implications of what we are doing, I believe the record over time supports the following conclusion. More often than not, the enhancement of public knowledge gained by published secrets far outweighs the damage that government officials claimed would be or was done. The uproar caused by the December 2005 New York Times publication of stories about the Bush administration's warrantless terrorist surveillance program neither halted the program nor prevented it from continuing to function. But in defending such instances of publication in the many talks I have

given over the years to groups of intelligence and military officers, I've always stressed that someone in government with access to the information made the first decision that a secret could be disclosed by sharing it with a journalist.

Gup pushes for transparency as he also takes on the complicated issue of open and closed institutions, not just governmental but also corporate and educational. Here again, there are limits. In some cases, I believe, transparency and openness can be detrimental to public policy. In retrospect, one of many errors I have made journalistically was to write uncritically of the idea of televising the sessions of Congress, first in the House in 1979 and later the Senate in 1986. I should have known better, having covered congressional debates in the late 1950's and worked twice in the 1960's running investigations for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when it was chaired by Senator J. William Fulbright.

One occasion stands out. On the evening of December 15, 1969 I was lucky enough to be one of a handful of staff members on the floor during a closed Senate session when an amendment related to the then-secret U.S. bombing in Laos was de-

bated with all 100 senators present and no one in the galleries. It was a real debate, with senators such as New York's Jacob Javits, Clifford Case of New Jersey, and Fulbright from Arkansas taking on Richard Russell of Georgia, Mississippi's John Stennis, and Henry (Scoop) Jackson of Washington. Questions were posed and answers given, or sometimes not given. As a result of this free-swinging discussion, minds were changed, and the first amendment prohibiting then-President Richard Nixon from using funds to introduce ground troops into Laos and Thailand was eventually passed.

That kind of open debate no longer takes place in Congress. Today's so-called "debates" are seriatim speeches, often with members presenting contrasting information but no direct exchanges between opponents. Why? The reason is television, and the glare of constant public scrutiny with the prospect that a slip of the tongue during floor debate could be used against the incumbent in the next election—or employed even sooner in exchanges that characterize Weblogs.

As a consequence of these experiences, I am opposed to efforts to put the Supreme Court on television. I make it a practice of trying

to see as many Supreme Court arguments as I can, a habit I picked up from watching a son of mine argue many times before the court. Those arguments represent the most vigorous and interesting discussions—and the truest intellectual debates—taking place in Washington, D.C. today. Put a television camera in there and the whole situation would change. The public’s “right to know” is satisfied by the delayed radio broadcast of these arguments. And the country would be much better off if the floor sessions of Congress went black and senators and members of Congress went back to freely discussing and debating issues.

When What Is Known Remains Secret

In its pursuit of secrets, today’s news media suffer from a problem that the intelligence community also wrestles with—concentrating so much on getting what someone doesn’t want it to know that it disregards important information already in the public domain, in other words, not secret.

In the 1960’s I wrote about money and politics at a time when finance records of presidential and

congressional campaigns hardly existed. In the wake of the reforms after Watergate, disclosure records became so voluminous that private watchdog groups and opposing campaigns, rather than reporters, became the prime source for campaign fund information.

Even in the era of Bush administration secrecy, each day dozens of government reports are printed, contract offerings and awards are listed, hearings held on Capitol Hill with witnesses’ prepared statements released, tax court decisions are issued, and a Federal Register published along with the Congressional Record. Who can possibly read all of this material? Yet, if it isn’t examined and information culled from it by journalists, in effect, what has been investigated and “reported” remains secret to the public at large.

Gup takes on that other oddity in journalism—secrecy within the news media. Having appointed ourselves—with support from the U.S. Constitution—as the guardians of truth for the public, it is incumbent on owners, editors, publishers, news directors, producers, anchors and reporters to practice what we so often preach. But of course we don’t.

The past six years, since 9/11, have illustrated both the best and worst of journalism. Underlying a great deal of our failures—Saddam Hussein's supposed stockpile of weapons and early acceptance of torturing terrorists and Iraqi prisoners, to give two examples—has been the interwoven problems of secrecy and fear. There has been the fear of this so-called new phenomenon of terrorism, in which everybody, at all times, seems to be at risk, with the reminder that we are all in it together. This fear seems to extend to a real concern about how the repercussions of challenging the government's pressure to keep everything secret could involve us.

Subpoenas to reporters in the Valerie Plame case created far more anguish within the journalistic community, which is so sensitive of its prerogatives, than it should have. At The Washington Post, where two of us were subpoenaed, the case was handled more as a criminal matter rather than a First Amendment issue. Reporters are citizens who, at times, develop confidential relationships with sources. But when our sources agree to speak to prosecutors, so can we—albeit getting their permission beforehand. If they don't speak to a prosecutor,

and thereby don't release us from our agreement, then we, like they, must face the legal consequences.

The settlement reached by news organizations in the Wen Ho Lee case, which Gup explores in some detail, illustrates the other side of the confidential sources' coin. In this case, my confidential sources did not come forward, nor did they release me and other reporters to speak. Each reporter went to court and each claimed a privilege to protect his sources. The courts ruled against us. Then we faced the bad choice of ignoring the law, as it was stated by the U.S. Supreme Court, or settling. The Washington Post, as did the others, decided to settle and pay to keep our pledge to our sources.

As one of the reporters involved, I take issue with Gup's conclusion that Lee was guilty only of "a crime of common carelessness, not espionage" and was "a victim of secrecy and what appeared to him to be a terrifying alliance between the government and the press." But right now, my basis for writing this will have to be one of those secrets that I will keep. ■

Walter Pincus reports on national security issues for The Washington Post.

Loud Noises, Sharp Elbows, and Impolitic Questions

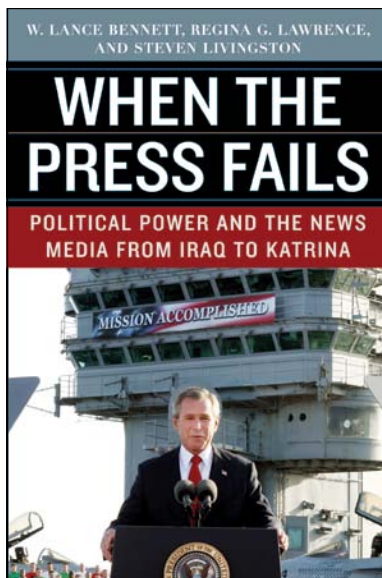
A former editorial writer examines why the inquisitive, argumentative and forceful voice of journalists is quieter these days.

BY JIM BOYD

When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media From Iraq to Katrina

W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston
University of Chicago Press.
263 Pages.

I was deep into this book, “When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media From Iraq to Katrina,” when General David Petraeus, in charge of American forces in Iraq, appeared before Congress, followed by a prime-time address by President Bush telling the American people he (and, more to the point, we) are in Iraq for the long run. I switched on CNN an hour before the President’s address—and could not believe what I was seeing. Jack Cafferty and this new guy, Rick Sanchez, were tearing Bush and his



policies limb from limb. Sanchez’s specialty seems to be “then and now”—playing a clip of Bush saying something several years ago (“We will hold the Iraqi government to

these benchmarks,” for example) and comparing it with today’s reality.

Wow, I said to myself, have times changed. Actually, the three authors of this volume—W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston—would say what changed specifically was the power quotient in Washington. Bush was down, and there was no longer an imperative among representatives of the mainstream press to be as abjectly deferential to the administration as they had been in the run-up to the war and its first couple of years. CNN had obviously made the calculation that there was market share to be gained by putting a lot of distance between themselves and the Bush stenographers at Fox. I liked the results at CNN, but I doubted the motive was anything to celebrate.

It is the central thesis of “When the Press Fails” that the press has become excessively deferential to political power in Washington and has forfeited its (occasional) role as independent watchdog of government. The rule of the press road in Washington now is to run every story through the filter of political power and, unless another strong actor (say, Congress) raises

a stink, the press will dutifully report whatever the administration says, without challenge. When you add into the mix an administration that admits to no requirement that it be truthful and straight—indeed, quite the reverse—we have the embarrassing story of press failure to challenge the deceitful case for war in Iraq.

Katrina proves the point, the three scholars write: It caught the administration unprepared, its spin and deceit machine on vacation, and the press, thus left to its own devices, showed that it can sometimes get to a truthful telling of an important story. (Made me wish they’d started their research with the press role in the Clinton scandals. Would have complicated their thesis a bit.)

Confronting Spin

The authors’ description of the press failure on Iraq certainly squares with what I saw and lived and the scars I bear. But they tie it up a bit too neatly for me. When they describe the press-management machinations of Karl Rove and others, for example, they express a belief that the press should have focused on the spin. In effect,

they wanted the press to preface each sales pitch from the Bush administration with a warning to the public that it was about to get taken for a ride, that there was something improper about “a war being promoted through a sales campaign.” I can’t grasp how that was possible or wise, although that might just be my own lack of imagination, for I wholly support their criticism of the press’s failure to aggressively investigate the veracity of the claims contained in that sales campaign.

Some of what they propose could have happened. At the *Star Tribune*, I recall doing a lengthy editorial that was a point-by-point refutation of claims made by Vice President Dick Cheney during an appearance on “Meet the Press.” Early in the piece, I recall chastising Cheney for behaving like a public relations agent for the war rather than as a vice president required to speak truthfully to the American people. But the real story was the content of his lies. Even in exposing that content, the authors seem to expect more than the press is likely to deliver. “The lead-up to war was paved by ferocious government spin,” the authors write, “against which the mainstream press proved no match.” Elsewhere, they lament

the inability of the mainstream press to provide “a sustained and coherent alternative perspective” to the administration’s.

But, in actuality, there is no “the press” and certainly not one capable of sustained and coherent perspectives. Nor was it the press’s job to “match” the spin. The press did a horrible job (with the cockle-warming exception of the brave Knight Ridder Washington bureau and a few others), but even if it had performed with exceptional skill, the outcome might have been the same.

I recall my early days of writing editorials about state government. I could drift into paralysis worrying over the impact of my writing and often had to remind myself that I was not the governor, not a committee chair, not responsible for the outcome. I had to do my best to offer well reasoned, informed opinion, but I was not the government.

What I would have liked to have seen prior to the invasion of Iraq was a bunch of aggressive, independent media actors—I. F. Stones on steroids—all trying their damndest to investigate the truth of the claims being made by the Bush administration. I envisioned a cacophonous, disjointed, episodic, competitive free-for-all effort to

test everything the Bush administration was saying. Might have carried the day, might not. That's all the press owes, nothing more. It is not the government.

But even my middling scenario did not happen. In explaining why, I think the authors are on firmer intellectual ground. The most pernicious influence is the fiduciary obligation that owners of our highly concentrated media believe they owe to shareholders. That obligation is not to be sneezed at, but neither should it be allowed to crowd out the sacred duty to perform in service to the public, which is the reason we even have a First Amendment. I believe that "crowding out" is almost complete now and find myself longing sheepishly for the early days of Gannett, when old school print guys like John Quinn guided the journalism of that corporation. He and others from the print world brought to their corporate journalism jobs sensibilities about the role of the press in American life that now are missing, and we are much the poorer for it.

Strident Opposition

Many of the incidents included in this book remain powerful for me.

As deputy editorial page editor at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis, I was the principal writer on Iraq for the newspaper's editorial page. We broke with Bush on Iraq when he broke with the United Nations. We became increasingly strident and began to draw national attention and a national Web audience. We suffered for it; our corporate masters strongly disapproved of our behavior; they wanted us flying well under the radar screen.

Our stridency I justified, then and now, by the ferocious, deceitful Bush spin machine that the authors of this book describe. This was an unusual situation in which the reasoned tones of traditional editorials—The New York Times and others who argued against the war in sonorous, measured tones from the ivory tower—weren't going to make a dent. We needed to slug it out. We used facts and reasoned arguments, rather than ad hominem attacks and name-calling. But we were unyielding in our opposition to the war.

When the Downing Street Memo story broke, I retrieved the text from the Internet, and we ran the entire thing on our op-ed page, to my knowledge the only newspaper that did. When Senator Richard

Durbin, a Democrat, compared U.S. treatment of detainees to Nazi behavior and created a maelstrom with his words, I wrote that he had been right and had nothing to apologize for and that his critics were simply seeking to change the subject from detainee treatment to Durbin rhetoric. That one earned me a heated dressing down from our publisher, who said we were becoming laughingstocks.

Apparently the prevailing wisdom in corporate media boardrooms is that workers—even when they are journalists—don't serve shareholders well by making waves. We make nice, which dovetails powerfully with the inclination to defer to power. So we go along to get along and, as our readership slides and market share plummets, we make nicer and nicer and nicer—until we can't even grasp that serving the public frequently requires asking impolitic questions, making loud noises, and employing sharp elbows.

The boldest thesis in this book, the one I was most delighted to see—and least able to assert is really true—is that this attitude of timidity and obeisance is actually bringing on the decline in readership and viewership that it, in part,

seeks to avoid. Americans are fed up with the partisanship, game playing, and general ineptitude of the political class, the theory goes, and by deferring to that class, the press has succeeded in getting itself lumped together in the public mind with it. If the press could reassert itself as a truly independent anchor of this democracy—scrappy, skeptical, proudly and fervently scornful of the “insider” perquisites so many journalists seem to treasure—then it might have a chance at pulling out of its economic woes.

Instinctively I think that is right, but it is unfortunately counterintuitive to those who now guide corporate media strategy. It has the added benefit of mixing back into journalists' behavior the dedication to public service that these authors are so eager to have happen. Do well by doing good, we might say, or do well by taking names and kicking ass. Wish I could say otherwise, but I am not holding my breath. ■

Jim Boyd, a 1980 Nieman Fellow, is former deputy editorial page editor at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Urgent Issues the Press Usually Ignore

A focus on smaller stories ‘too often fails to connect the proverbial dots and avoids too much digging into or interpreting the larger picture.’

BY DANNY SCHECHTER

The Last Days of Democracy: How Big Media and Power-Hungry Government Are Turning America Into a Dictatorship

Elliot D. Cohen and

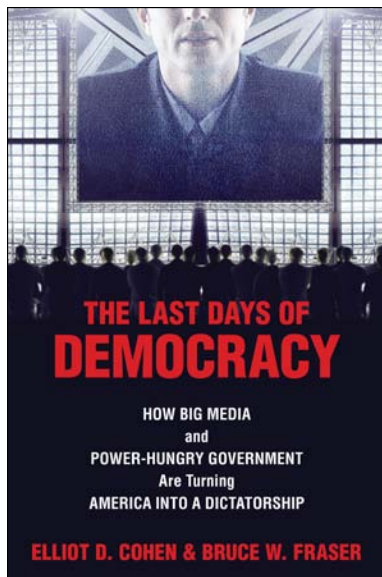
Bruce W. Fraser

Prometheus Books. 333 Pages.

Con-spir-a-cy, noun

1. A plan or agreement between two or more people to commit an illegal or subversive action
2. The making of an agreement or plot to commit an illegal or subversive action
3. A group of conspirators

As a general rule, I don't trust conspiracy theories, and neither should other journalists. These theories usually assume too much clarity of purpose and skill in top-



secret coordination to be credible, even though many of us have chronicled the rise and fall of “geniuses”—heroes who quickly become zeroes—and the ultimate

folly of what appear to be initially well-executed schemes, from public policy to wars.

Even so, plots and conspiracies do happen in real life when transparency is not high on the political or corporate agenda. Powerful people find clever ways to mask intentions and cover up their tracks in concentrating power in their offices or cabals. RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) enforcement might be applauded when used to prosecute criminal conspiracies but, when it comes to political misdeeds or institutional malfeasance, conspiratorial thinking is consigned to the planet of the nuts.

I raise the specter of conspiracy theories, in part, because of the provocative subtitle Elliot D. Cohen and Bruce W. Fraser give their book, "The Last Days of Democracy." Are they really going to be able to prove that "big media and power hungry government are turning America into a dictatorship" without resorting to claims and theories (some might call them doom-and-gloom scenarios) that seem too dark to be taken seriously, at least initially? Most of us start off being suspicious of such sweeping statements; we wonder about hav-

ing to connect too many dots.

I can hear some cocky editor chortling "the death of democracy, indeed!" Don't these pointy-headed PhD's watch TV and see all the people turning out for political events? Don't they realize that the American system in its genius corrects for the overstepping of unwise politicians? Don't they know that checks and balances work, eventually?

Journalism's Failings

Yet this book, written in a footnoted, academic style and broken into chapters that could easily be lesson plans, chronicles trends and offers analysis that should not be dismissed, though it probably will be. If it is, its dismissal will be, in part, because the authors hold journalistic institutions to account alongside some of the perversions of democracy going on within our judicial system and being committed by the Bush administration. And we know how hard it is, if not impossible, for those in the news media to delve into the role their own institutions might be playing in threatening our democracy.

To First Amendment worshippers, this proposition sounds preposterous. Yet we, like other soci-

etal institutions, should be judged by what we actually do (as well as by what we fail to do) and not by what we might think we do.

I won't recycle here familiar critiques of journalism's failings or the worries many of us have about mounting media concentration and corporate ownership. Nor will I replay my own criticism of how most news organizations failed in their reporting in the walk-up to the Iraq War.¹ What I will do, however, is suggest that big stories are not being covered well because our tendency to focus on smaller stories too often fails to connect the proverbial dots and avoids too much digging into or interpreting the larger picture. Increasingly, we see journalists who do this kind of digging being purged from top newspapers. Seymour Hersh now works for *The New Yorker*, and Robert Scheer, who used to write for the *Los Angeles Times*, now runs a Web site. Reporting on "softer news" continues to undermine one of our core societal roles and, as economic pressures hollow out newsrooms,

the values that animated their work shrink as well.

Yet denial of what is happening around them remains strong among those who cling to old routines of news coverage. A German theologian once said, "When they came first for the Jews, I was not a Jew so I didn't protest. Then they came for the Communists, and I was not a Communist." He concluded with these words: "And then they came for me."

In the aftermath of 9/11, it was "terrorists" they came for, and Americans—including most journalists—looked the other way even as many Afghan farmers were tossed into our Guantanamo dungeon only to be released quietly years later. It is wholly inadequate to respond to this by saying, "Well, mistakes were made," when the entire policy is what needs to be examined. Why did it take so long—in an open society—for us to find out that the U.S. Attorney General promulgated secret orders to permit torture? How many other secret decisions have been made by

¹ Schechter has written two books about Iraq War coverage, "When News Lies" and "Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception: How the Media Failed to Cover the War in Iraq" and made a documentary, "WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception."

an administration that has shown contempt for the constitutional process of checks and balances?

It took Naomi Wolf, writing in *The Guardian*, a newspaper in Great Britain, to remind Americans that open societies can quickly be turned into dictatorships by stealth plans and actions: “If you look at history, you can see that there is essentially a blueprint for turning an open society into a dictatorship,” Wolf wrote. “That blueprint has been used again and again in more and less bloody, more and less terrifying ways. But it is always effective. It is very difficult and arduous to create and sustain a democracy—but history shows that closing one down is much simpler”

Being born in freedom makes it hard for us, as Americans, to even consider that it is possible for us to become as unfree as people in many other nations are today. In schools, children don't seem to be learning as much about our rights, our responsibilities, and our system of government. The citizen's role of being aware of the Constitution has been outsourced to lawyers and lobbyists so much so that we scarcely see the signals telling us that our government's checks and

balances (the ones our founders put in place) are being systematically dismantled. Yet George Bush and his administration are using time-tested tactics to close down an open society.

In his *New York Times* review of “The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism,” by another *Guardian* columnist, Naomi Klein, former World Bank Economist Joseph Stiglitz wrote: “It's not the conspiracies that wreck the world but the series of wrong turns, failed policies, and little and big unfairnesses that add up. Still, those decisions are guided by larger mindsets. Market fundamentalists never really appreciated the institutions required to make an economy function well, let alone the broader social fabric that civilizations require to prosper and flourish.”

Stiglitz is right when he posits that while ignoring sweeping indictments of what's wrong isn't wise, we need to try to get into the details of the interplay of real-world forces and interests that undermine our democracy and devalue it. In their book, Cohen and Fraser confront these same fears in focusing on certain disturbing trends, even though they don't linger long on the resistance and re-

vulsion these trends have bred. And they are not alone; on the night before I wrote this essay, Jon Stewart on “The Daily Show” expressed his fears about the coming of fascism. Is he an alarmist, too?

Sometimes, it’s too easy to dismiss the questions raised by people who are often dismissed for being too conspiratorial. A few examples: When activists chanted “No blood for oil,” suggesting the Iraq War was driven by the desire to dominate oil reserves, they were dismissed. Now, years later, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan endorsed the idea, and suddenly this notion is considered more credible. Ditto for those who worried about the idea that oil production would peak. These “peak oil” theorists were dismissed. On October 22, 2007, The Guardian quoted a high-level report saying, “World oil production has already peaked and will fall by half as soon as 2030,” according to report issued by the German-based Energy Watch Group that “also warns that extreme shortages of fossil fuels will lead to wars and social breakdown.”

Most anticonspiracy critics love to debunk the 9/11 theorists who support a range of discordant and

often competing theories to challenge the U.S. government’s al-Qaeda “done it alone” narrative. To even question this “reasoning” is to risk being labeled a kook. One such “kook” is the Canadian journalist Barrie Zwicker, who told The Toronto Star: “... people who just shrug off these questions with the ‘conspiracy theorist’ epithet should be asked what they stand for. Unquestioning acceptance of the official narrative? Sure, there are outlandish theories out there—aliens, Atlantis—but there have also been real and huge conspiracies.”

Stories Not Being Told

Two stories I’ve done demonstrate the dire consequences when adequate and accurate press attention is not paid. The first involved the 2000 presidential election results in Florida that I covered for a film called “Counting On Democracy.” My reporting led me to conclude that the left’s argument that George Bush et al. “stole the election” was simplistic. While I have little doubt that the Republicans tried to do just that, I also found that many Democrats were not attentive to the details of the voting process and did not educate the voters they helped

to register in how to vote. It was, as the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida contends, a “tyranny of small decisions” by guardians of the election process that led to the controversial outcome. Yet stories examining these many “small decisions” were scant.

Later, a media consortium took a very long time to investigate the charges of election tampering and ended with convoluted conclusions, although Ford Fessenden, the journalist who organized The New York Times probe, later told me that in their count they found more votes cast for Gore than Bush. Yet that key finding was not reported clearly. Why? There were many reasons commented upon at the time—a failure on the part of all the news organizations to agree or to report the story in the same way, the murkiness of the voting process in Florida, the time lag in the reporting, and the fact that this follow-up story came and went quickly when a plane crash seized the headlines on the day it was published. Soon the election story faded as President Bush con-

solidated his power. Years later, Al Gore would claim he had been elected at the polls but lost in the courts.

The other “hidden” story is one I wrote about in Nieman Reports last year.² In that story, “Investigating the Nation’s Exploding Credit Squeeze,” I focused on the news media’s failure to shine a light on a credit and debt squeeze that was then already leading to high rates of foreclosures and economic misery. I told this story also in a film, “In Debt We Trust,”³ and soon after some reviewers dismissed my documentary as “alarmist,” the subprime mortgage meltdown emerged as a global issue—and a front page story—as trillions of dollars in losses were tallied, hundreds of thousands of people were being displaced, and millions of families are facing foreclosure. One former presidential candidate, Senator Chris Dodd, called it a “50 state Katrina.”

That disaster’s coverage occurred like most disaster reporting, after the damage had been done. But unlike natural disasters,

² Schechter’s article from the Spring 2006 issue of Nieman Reports can be read at www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100179.

³ www.indebttwetrust.org/

in this case many in the know had been sent warnings about the high probability that such a crisis would occur. Warnings were greeted by silence by most in the press. Even now, the scams behind the sub-prime Ponzi scheme are only being touched upon—not deeply examined.

Dictatorship has not arrived, but to say it can never happen here is to forget that many of history's worst disasters were engineered "legally" after laws were changed, often in times of national crisis. Today fascism is visible in softer flavors and disguises, with flags waving as patriotically correct slogans creep into the language we use.

Whether or not investigative au-

thor Greg Palast's blurb that this book "cuts right through the turgid bullshit of corporate media ca-ca" gives you reason to pick it up, perhaps the book's greatest value is in reminding us that it is time to sound the alarm about these internal threats we are facing while we still can. Introspection and self-criticism are always helpful first steps. Responding to what is hopefully a premature obit for democracy ought to get those juices flowing. ■

"News Dissector" Danny Schechter, a 1978 Nieman Fellow, edits Mediachannel.org and is a blogger, filmmaker, author and media critic.

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Voyages of Discovery Into New Media

At the crossroad of old journalism and new media, digital news entrepreneurs—some at Web-only operations, others expanding the reach of storytelling on the Web—lead us on voyages of discovery into new media. From MinnPost to MediaStorm, these entities are using visual media, interactivity and social media to watchdog government abuse and the justice system, identify environmental dangers, and tell enduring stories. In doing so, they illuminate possibilities. —Melissa Ludtke, Editor