

Investigative Journalism Doesn't Win Many Friends

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By Charles Lewis

It was 1992, in Moscow, and some of the world's most respected investigative journalists had gathered for an international conference. In the opening hours, stark differences emerged as reporters described conditions they confronted in the practice of independent journalism. The Russian and Ukrainian journalists lamented the losses of their murdered colleagues; British and Indian reporters recounted how they'd been arrested for violating the Official Secrets Act; the reporter from apartheid South Africa grippingly recalled seeing her sources gunned down in the street, and a Colombian journalist told how her sister was murdered following her investigative stories on the Medellin drug cartel. As their turn to speak came, straight-faced American journalists earnestly complained about the government's tardy handling of their Freedom of Information Act requests.

I was struck by the stark, global disparity in daily working circumstances and also the extent to which American reporters lead a distinctly privileged existence, which we rarely acknowledge. Unlike much of the rest of the world, when attempting to ferret out uncomfortable truths inside the United States (and Canada), life and death physical safety is not really an issue. And our constitutional protections of press freedom and our two centuries-old legal system that generally fosters transparency and open discourse about public figures and institutions are distinctive relative to so many other nations.

Fourteen years and several international investigative reporting conferences later, this disparity of privilege still exists. It does so despite the audacious, recent encroachments to the public's ability and right to know,

with rollbacks of various access to information laws nationwide, with the increased federal prosecutorial zeal against journalists, and with the detention of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay Naval base for many years without trial and under the veil of anonymity and absolute secrecy. All of these affronts are reflected in the United States's downward slide to 44th place in Reporters Sans Frontières' 2005 World Press Freedom Index.

But the most urgent, ominous threat to quality commercial journalism in the United States is economic. Courageous and independent watchdog reporting is on the wane, based on the numbers alone: There simply are fewer and fewer professional reporters monitoring those in power. According to the 2006 annual report on the State of the News Media, published by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, while newspaper owners continue to reap 20 percent annual profit margins, they have jettisoned at least 3,500 newsroom professionals since 2000, or seven percent of the editorial workforce nationwide.

In recent years, two newspaper executives very publicly resigned after refusing to lay off more reporters in order to boost their company's already inordinately healthy profits. Jay Harris, the publisher of the San Jose Mercury News, a Knight Ridder newspaper and, just last year, John Carroll, the editor of the Los Angeles Times who had just shepherded the Tribune Company newspaper to five Pulitzer Prizes, could not countenance the continued corporate carnage. It's difficult to overstate the rank-and-file newsroom distrust of owners; it is quite palpable and affects the very soul of journalism itself. After all, just how courageous and independent can reporters be when fewer of

them cover more while also facing the real possibility of unemployment next week, next month, next year?

For roughly 30 years I've been investigating politicians and the powerful forces behind them and, like so many practitioners, I grew increasingly frustrated as many important stories inconvenient to "the powers that be" got spiked or not even assigned. My own tipping point came late in 1988 when, at the age of 35, married with a family, a mortgage, and no savings, I abruptly quit my job as Mike Wallace's producer for "60 Minutes." It was the most impetuous thing I've ever done; friends and colleagues discreetly inquired if perhaps I seriously had lost my mind.

I started searching for a way to do serious and substantive, original investigative journalism at the national level, unfettered by the normal daily time and space limitations or well-titled, well-paid faceless minions (a.k.a. the "suits") telling me what I could or couldn't do. With no management, fundraising or business experience, I began and directed a new, independent effort—known as the Center for Public Integrity, which today is the largest nonprofit investigative reporting organization in the world.

Oppositional Forces

Washington "access" journalism doesn't really happen at the Center for Public Integrity. Being despised and frozen out by those in power is an occupational hazard of what gets done at the center—indeed, it is a badge of honor for investigative reporters everywhere. For example, within days of the invasion of Iraq we published a report, which found that at least nine of the 30 members of the Defense Policy

The Center for Public Integrity: What It Is. What It Does.

From its founding in 1989 to the end of 2004, when I stepped down as its director, the nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity grew to a full-time staff of 40 people and roughly 20 paid rotating college intern researchers each year. During the center's first 15 years, more than 275 investigative reports, including 14 books, were produced. The center's findings or perspective have been covered in approximately 10,000 news stories in the United States and throughout the world. Its reports

are best known for tracking political influence in Washington, D.C. and in the 50 state capitals. Utilizing dozens of researchers, writers and editors and studying thousands of pages and half a dozen types of federal and state records, a signature product has been the center's quadrennial investigative dissection of the powerful economic interests behind the major presidential candidate, "The Buying of the President," published in each presidential election year. In 1997, the International

Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) project was initiated by the center. It is the first working network of 95 preeminent reporters in 48 countries on six continents and has produced more than half a dozen reports across borders.

More information about the center, including its reports, funding and the awards its work has won, can be found at www.publicintegrity.org —C.L.

Board, the government-appointed group that advises the Pentagon, had ties to companies with more than \$76 billion in defense contracts in 2001 and 2002. Months later, the center reported that Halliburton was by far the Bush administration's favorite contractor in Iraq. We had meticulously tallied and posted all of the major government contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan, which took 20 of our researchers, writers and editors six months and 73 Freedom of Information Act requests. This effort also involved successful litigation in federal court against the U.S. Army and the U.S. State Department. A lawsuit was necessary because much about the entire contracting process is deliberately hidden and therefore unknown to the public.

All of this inconvenient "truth telling" doesn't make friends in high places, and just about everything has been tried to discourage these kinds of investigations by those who are unhappy with what we find. I've had subpoenas against me issued and had my hotel room stalked. I've been escorted off military bases and threatened with physical arrest. It's been

suggested I leave via a second-story window. Another time a death threat was personally communicated by concerned state troopers who asked us to leave the area immediately. We didn't.

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Public relations people have been hired to infiltrate the center's news conferences and pose as "reporters" to ask distracting questions. Some of the center's financial donors have been pressured and expensive, frivolous libel litigation that requires years and costs millions of dollars to defend (and, in the end, get dismissed) is used as a form of intimidation.¹

Meanwhile, it has become painfully evident that the news media is incapable of covering its own economic and political agenda. For example, when a TV network was preparing an

evening news story about one of the center's reports—which had found that broadcasters and telecommunications companies had taken Federal Communications Commission officials on 2,500 all-expense-paid trips over an eight-year period—the piece was pulled from the evening broadcast at 5:30 in the afternoon. A New York network executive scolded his Washington bureau correspondent and producer for letting things get that far that late by developing a story that might embarrass their company: "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

Journalism—and the public—require no-holds-barred reporting, not anticipatory self-restraint, which is Jay Harris's term for self-censorship. Information about crucial issues of our time is needed, not spoon-fed pablum from officials or market-driven drivel based on focus groups and demographic research to please advertisers. Reportorial courage, independence and commitment to community are antidotes to the poisonous combination of falling readership, inordinate shareholder greed, and dwindling newsgathering budgets.

We've seen some truly inspiring

¹ To defend against this oppositional strategy, The Fund for Independence in Journalism, a 509(a)(3) endowment and legal support organization, was created, with initial foundation contributions totaling \$4 million and a goal of at least \$20 million.

flashes of journalistic excellence, as reflected in the most recent Pulitzer Prizes. The domestic surveillance exposé by James Risen and Eric Lichtblau of The New York Times, published over the strenuous objections of the Bush administration, epitomized courage and independence. Is there any better way to stand up to secrecy? Or how about a newspaper's prescient truth telling, which predicted what would happen to its city if it was hit by a ferocious natural disaster, and then, after it happened three years later, managing to publish in spite of having to abandon

its offices that, along with many of its employees' homes, were underwater. It's hard to recall a prouder, more courageous moment than The Times-Picayune of New Orleans defying the odds and publishing "come hell and high water," a phrase the paper's staff wore on their T-shirts after the levees broke.

What happened in New Orleans might serve us well as we think about our beleaguered profession. As watchful observers point to dangerous fault lines developing in many of the institutions that once supported what report-

ers do, will journalists, publishers and broadcasters summon the courage of their convictions and commit themselves to doing the work on which our democracy depends? ■

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