

Seeking New Ways to Nurture the Capacity to Report

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

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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 process, 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 verisimilitudes 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 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 repackage 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 current 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?

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 Journalism, resulting in his removal from office? [See an article by Sheila S. Coronel about this reporting in referred articles.]

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 January 2008, with former Wall Street Journal managing editor, Paul Steiger, as its president and editor in chief. [See referred articles.] 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.

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 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.

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