NIEMAN REPORTS

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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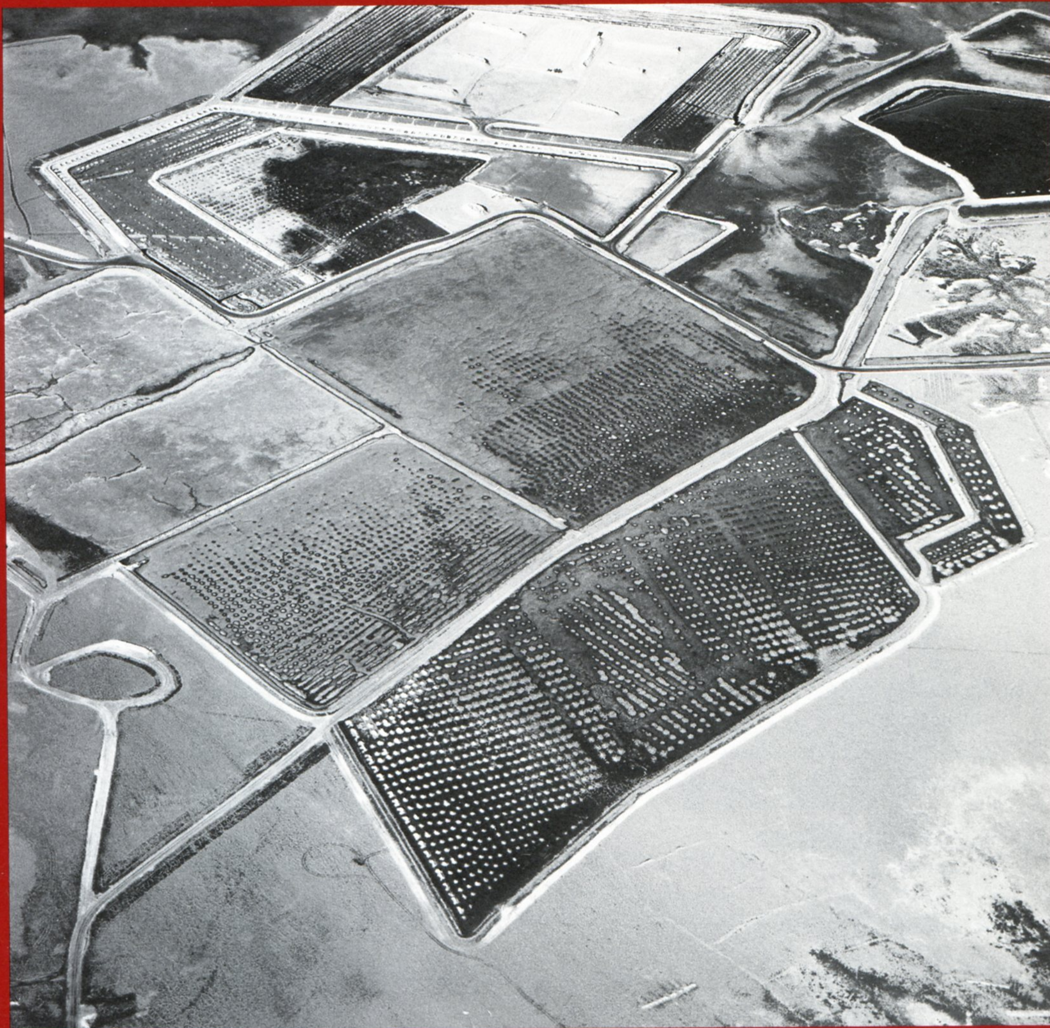
Water: A Life Force Harnessed as News



Words & Reflections:

From vanishing newspapers to the Web, from secrecy to scandals, journalists explore authors' ideas and images.

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Continuity of Change at the Nieman Foundation

'While its ideals are deeply rooted in the core mission, the foundation could never afford to stand still.'

By Bob Giles

The Nieman Foundation was the subject of attention in the press recently. A story in The Boston Globe gave voice to alumni expressing "discontent" about changes that have taken place in the program. The published quotes yearned for an earlier time when the Nieman program was remembered as being exclusively focused on the journalists selected to be Nieman Fellows.

The main concern seemed to be that democratizing the program and, from time to time, inviting other journalists to share Harvard's riches, would subtract from the fellowship experience and move the program too far from its roots. Other alumni who were quoted raised questions about the investment of four million dollars in the renovation of Lippmann House and the construction of a new seminar room that improves the fellows' learning environment and enables the foundation to be more inclusive. One Nieman, after returning for a visit at year's end, circulated a memo that treasured memories of a "moldy" Lippmann House with its folding chairs and mismatched cabinets.

The Globe's story was posted on the Internet and even reprinted in the International Herald Tribune. It drew a heartening response of e-mails expressing approval of the new direction, seeing journalism conferences and the narrative writing program as important additions, and wondering about Nieman Fellows past whose apparent sense of elitism would inspire resistance to change.

Change is troublesome to many who might prefer things as they were. Each Nieman Fellow remembers his or her experience as a special time, a year of discovery and reflection. In spite of this deep affection for that time past and the desire that it remain the same for today's fellows, the institution has changed consistently since its founding. In his 25 years as Curator, Louis Lyons eventually opened the program to women and international journalists. Dwight Sargent was the first in a succession of Curators to raise money. He and each of his successors recognized that additional resources were needed to keep the program vital and competitive. Jim Thomson increased the number of women and sought more journalists from developing countries. He also established a program of instruction in creative writing. Howard Simons continued to expand the number of international journalists in the program. Bill Kovach added the Watchdog Journalism Program and raised the foundation's profile in support of high standards of journalism.

During its 67 years, and under the influence of seven Curators, the core Nieman mission has remained unchanged: providing an educational experience at Harvard for journalists of accomplishment and promise who then return to journalism with the expectation that their work will contribute to elevating the standards of our craft. The addition of international journalists, women and minority fellows has substantially enriched the Nieman experience. Instruction in the creative and narrative forms has given the fellows an option to work on their writing during the Nieman year. Seminars, workshops and conferences have enabled them to meet other journalists in discussions about the complex issues in journalism. Feedback from recent classes about these opportunities is clearly positive.

The Nieman Foundation is a living institution, its values nourished by the excellence of the fellows in their years after Harvard, as well as by the strength of new generations of fellows. While its ideals are deeply rooted in the core mission, the foundation could never afford to stand still. It is part of a university that is changing, becoming more global. In times of significant change in the news world, the Nieman program has discovered appropriate ways to share the educational values of Harvard and the purpose of the Nieman Foundation with the larger world of journalism.

We have elected to use the foundation's resources and the convening power of Harvard for weekend workshops on subjects journalists and their news organizations struggle with: public perceptions that our standards are declining, that our journalistic values are being overtaken by commercial priorities, that our credibility suffers from recent scandals, that our reporting is not to be trusted, that as a craft we are slow to adapt to new technologies, and that there is a growing threat to press freedoms in the United States and globally.

The Nieman Foundation recognizes a shared mission with journalists and news organizations in addressing these fundamental challenges. While we have a limited ability to do so, it is our obligation to bring Nieman Fellows together with practitioners and scholars four or five times a year to discuss journalistic practices and public perceptions about the role of journalism.

This vision continues the spirit of change that each Curator has brought to the program. It is a spirit expressed at a reunion of Nieman Fellows in 1995 by John Kenneth Galbraith, emeritus professor of economics and a friend to generations of fellows: "There is nothing about this program that can be considered finished. Nothing that can be considered normal. To the Niemans, there is no stationary state." ■

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Reporting on Water

U.S. and International Coverage

Water is the essence of life, and its cleanliness, availability, and our use and abuse of it are stories meriting reporters' and editors' attention. Yet as **Stuart Leavenworth**, who covered water issues for The Sacramento Bee and describes the wide array of issues he took on, reports: "To my chagrin, I had the beat largely to myself for four years. Across the country, papers have tackled problems of water pollution and degradation, but have overlooked fundamental issues of supply—and sustainability. This is curious."

Seth Hettena, who covers water for The Associated Press in San Diego, writes about "this remarkable beat" and explains that "the story of water in the West has a natural tension that makes it easy to write." Photographer **John Trotter** chronicles the slow death of the Colorado River Delta and the effect this has on the native Cucapá tribe who rely on this water, but with the delta's demise can no longer be self-sustaining. With the rain-deprived San Joaquin Valley's farmland as his backdrop, **Mark Grossi**, the environment and natural resources reporter for The Fresno Bee, connects readers to farmers' vital sources of water, which he describes as being a prized commodity "… like gold. It's something to be stored, obsessed over and litigated …." Using aerial photography, **David Maisel** shows what Owens Lake looks like with its water diverted to Los Angeles and a system of shallow flooding controlling pollution from windblown dust.

When **Scott Streater** was environmental reporter with the Pensacola (Fla.) News Journal, he followed a tip through a year and a half of "intense research" to produce a three-day series about how the public's drinking water became polluted with radium. **D'Vera Cohn**, a metro reporter with The Washington Post, explains why in the past year her newspaper published more than 100 stories about the water utility's refusal to tell customers about the unhealthy, lead-contaminated drinking water or act quickly to fix the problem. From KDFW in Dallas, **Paul Adrian**, investigative reporter with the local Fox-owned and operated affiliate, writes about catching on video city agencies violating their own regulations and polluting the city's river: "What we found is that the quality of regulation depended highly on the identity of the polluter."

Environmental reporter **Eric Staats** writes about how sightings of "black water" by Gulf of Mexico fisherman led the Naples (Fla.) Daily News on an 18-month search for answers about "how coastal population growth and industry are destroying wetlands, polluting rivers, injuring marine life, and sickening people." At The Boston Globe, **Beth Daley** reported a four-part series about ocean fishing: "Without having a person, regulatory agency or group at fault, it was difficult to find a conventional organizing mechanism for all of our reporting," she says.

At the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, Colorado, water gets attention. From the city desk, **Jerd Smith** tackles the water beat in this drought-stricken area where no central regulating agency oversees water's use. "The beat is shrouded in arcane procedures, measurement conundrums, unanswered legal questions and, of course, closely guarded meetings," she writes. Smith's colleague, **Todd Hartman**, connected urban readers to the state's drought by bringing an intense narrative focus to a long-running battle over water usage involving two Colorado communities. "Dividing the Waters," Hartman's 24-page special section, went on the paper's Web site with links

to video documentaries of each community done by **Sonya Doctorian**, who writes about this collaboration. Then Hartman's stories, along with the section's photos and graphics, were given to **Roger Fidler**, now a journalism fellow at the Missouri School of Journalism, who explains how he created for the newspaper's Web site a new Digital Newsbook that can be downloaded and read offline.

The film "Thirst" focused on a struggle in Stockton, California about a multinational water company taking control of the city's water, a fight that documentary filmmakers **Alan Snitow** and **Deborah Kaufman** connect to international conflicts involving water privatization. **William Marsden**, an investigative reporter for The Gazette in Montreal, Canada, describes "The Water Barons" project for The Center for Public Integrity, in which a global team of investigative reporters set out to examine the details of what was happening in countries where efforts existed to privatize water. Despite the difficulty of reporting about multinational water companies with ties to powerful figures in Indonesia, **Andreas Harsono** writes that "I tried hard to use not a single anonymous source."

Jacques Leslie, a journalist whose soon-to-be published book, "Deep Water," revolves around contentious issues of dam construction, relied on "stories with flesh and bones" to bring statistics about these projects alive. **Supalak Ganjanakhundee**, a reporter at The Nation in Bangkok, Thailand, shares difficulties he's had in reporting on dam projects in Southeast Asia because "governments … don't want journalists to watch too closely."

Egyptian online journalist **Nadia El-Awady** found good cooperation from water officials when she reported on pollution along the Nile and one community's efforts to transform its polluted waterway into a healthy environment. Despite the importance of water to the Israeli-Palestinian relationship, **Zafrir Rinat**, an environmental reporter for Haaretz in Tel Aviv, Israel, writes that water is usually ignored when it doesn't pose an immediate crisis. **Dagmar Dehmer**, an environmental reporter with Der Tagesspiegel in Berlin, observed a similar reluctance by editors to focus on lingering water issues after a disastrous flood receded. As she writes, "These are complicated issues with high relevance to people's lives but with no immediate public annoyance to bring the issues to the surface." Longtime environmental journalist **Rakesh Kalshian** explains why water coverage in India is "monochromatic … [as] newspapers have become increasingly intolerant of long analytical narratives on water issues" and stories about the poor are not published or broadcast. In Nepal, **Soniya Thapa** tells of efforts by the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for All group to provide training in a rural village so journalists learn about water and sanitation problems and can tell water stories that aren't being widely told. ■

Why Journalists Need to Cover the Water Story

It's the economy, stupid.

By Stuart Leavenworth

"Cadillac Desert" is arguably the most influential environmental book published in the past 30 years. Before Marc Reisner produced this 513-page work, there was little public understanding of the West's powerful water rustlers; the immense public subsidies that benefited irrigated agriculture, and the myth that cities such as Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles could continue to add millions of people without the taps running dry.

Given that "Cadillac Desert" is still a big seller, one might think that editors and broadcast producers would recognize the public's intense interest in water issues. They don't. With few exceptions, leading newspapers aren't helping answer basic questions about the security of their community's water systems, the growing privatization of water, and the inevitable impact of coming droughts and floods.

I recently finished a stint covering Western water issues for The Sacramento Bee. To my chagrin, I had the beat largely to myself for four years. Across the country, papers have tackled problems of water pollution and degradation, but have overlooked fundamental issues of supply—and sustainability. This is curious. Water makes up 70 percent of the earth's surface and about 60 percent of our bodies' weight. It's a fundamental resource for life.

Reisner wrote that water flows uphill toward money. We care about money, don't we? Business desks have reporters covering banks and oil supplies. Why not water?

Water from the Sacramento River and Sutter Bypass flow over the Fremont Weir (distinguished by the churning white water) as it heads toward Sacramento, California in February 2004. The Fremont Weir was built in 1924 and was designed to relieve pressure from the Sacramento River when water reaches a predetermined height. *Photo by Randy Pench/The Sacramento Bee.*

The Water Beat

Media outlets only tend to focus on water when its absence or abundance creates a full-blown crisis, says Rita Schmidt Sudman, who runs the Water Education Foundation, a nonprofit based in California. Back when California Governor Jerry Brown was pushing the idea of a 42-mile Peripheral Canal to ship water from Northern to Southern California, political reporters dropped what they were doing and became experts on H_2O. Voters defeated the canal in 1982, so water was ignored for a while. Interest by journalists perked up during the drought of 1987-1992, then went back into hibernation.

"Right now, I don't see the intensity of coverage I would expect to see," says Sudman, who notes the Colorado River is in the sixth year of drought. Las Vegas, almost wholly dependent on shrinking Lake Mead, could see its neon economy start to blink; Mexico is fighting with the United States over two rivers (the Colorado and the Rio Grande); dams might be torn down in the Northwest to help salmon.

"Water is all about power politics," says Sudman, who has covered these stories for more than 25 years for Western Water, a quarterly publication. "It involves money and growth and where people will live and how they will live. It's a great story, and it deserves to be taken seriously."

Here are some prevailing myths about the water beat:

- **Water is boring**: Tell this to anyone who has seen the movie "Chinatown." The exercise of brute waterpower is a fascinating tale and, although today's water barons don't usually slice open each other's noses, they still play tough.
- **Water is an environment beat:** Partly, yes, but not entirely. Covering

water involves a fundamental understanding of engineering, economics, meteorology and agriculture, which is the largest user of water in the country.
- **Water supply is just a West Coast worry:** There is an old saying about water: On the East Coast, people take it for granted. On the West Coast, we take it from each other. The drought of 2003 revealed that hundreds of East Coast communities were unprepared to deal with even a two-month dry spell. Soon these communities were fighting among themselves for water, just like the thugs did in "Chinatown."

Water from the Feather River flows through a damaged levee in Arboga, California in January 1997. This break caused major damage in the region. *Photo by John Trotter/©The Sacramento Bee.*

I fell into the water beat like a toddler learning to swim. Before joining The Sacramento Bee, I worked as the environment reporter at The News & Observer in Raleigh, North Carolina, covering industrial hog farming, hurricanes, floods and other disasters. In North Carolina, the problem was always too much water, not too little. Few people in the Tar Heel state had ever heard of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

When I arrived at the Bee, the newspaper already had a water reporter—Nancy Vogel, a tenacious, energetic journalist whose talents weren't fully appreciated at the paper. When the Los Angeles Times snapped Nancy away, the water beat went unfilled for many months. In 2001, I jumped into the void, at a time when California's water world was undergoing a historic transition.

For decades, agriculture in California has consumed the bulk of the state's developed water. Cities consumed less than 15 percent. But the cities and suburbs are growing, adding 500,000 people a year. Given that Congress is no longer subsidizing the construction of new water supply reservoirs, water is certain to be reallocated in California. The question will be how this happens.

Along with business reporter Dale Kasler, I started to examine the brave new world of water trading in California. That's right. Water, a public resource, is being bought and sold like pork bellies. In the most basic of such transactions, farmers agree to idle some of their fields and sell the unused water to cities or other farm districts downstream. Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley have benefited from these transactions. So have rice farmers in Northern California, who sometimes see more profit in selling water than growing rice.

We wanted to examine the implications of this practice. We pitched a project proposal, but it didn't get very far. With the support of a pair of editors, we decided to pursue what later was called a "stealth series." We looked at what could happen to rural farm economies as water is sold. We profiled British financier Keith Brackpool, who had designs of getting rich off Southern California's water needs. We examined basic questions that arise when this public resource is treated as a private commodity. There were a lot of other angles that we explored in our reporting, including emerging scientific evidence that the West had previously undergone droughts lasting 100 years or more, not just six or seven. We also examined the prospects of desalination, utilizing California's last untapped reservoir—the Pacific Ocean—to satisfy the state's thirst.

Much to our surprise, our stealth series ended up winning a slew of national and state prizes, including the National Press Foundation's Thomas L. Stokes Award. That helped to elevate the stature of the beat and laid the groundwork for more coverage.

In 2003, California water managers were becoming increasingly nervous about the fast-shrinking Colorado River, which provides nearly half of Southern California's supply and much of the water in Las Vegas, Phoenix and other cities. I knew there was a big story there. Continued drought would undoubtedly lead Southern California to look north toward the Sacramento River for water,

but I needed a stronger hook. I needed something visual.

Around that time, one of our newspaper's veteran photographers, Jay Mather, alerted me to Lake Powell. The giant reservoir on the Utah-Arizona border, named after explorer John Wesley Powell, had nearly dropped its level by half in three years. Houseboats were becoming stuck in the mud. Scenic canyons, long underwater, were re-emerging. Water districts and utilities were contemplating what would happen if Lake Powell dropped so low it could no longer generate hydropower or deliver its required water to Arizona, Nevada and California. [See the photo on page 10.]

No paper in California had written about Lake Powell's demise at that point. So Jay and I traveled to Page, Utah, and spent four days exploring canyons, talking to locals, and gauging the confidence of federal water officials. Without visiting such a place, it is impossible to imagine or convey the scope of this drought. As I later wrote:

> *Normally holding 7.8 trillion gallons of water and stretching 180 miles into two states, Lake Powell is dropping a foot a week, slowly exposing the sinuous canyons that federal engineers flooded when they built Glen Canyon Dam in the early 1960's.*
>
> *If the dry spell continues, officials of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation will have to prepare for the unthinkable. Eventually, they say, the lake could drop so low it will stop feeding the hydroelectric penstocks that generate $70 million in power yearly for 1.7 million people throughout the Southwest. At that point, the water supply of 25 million people in California, Nevada and Arizona would also be in jeopardy.*

Now, one year later, Lake Powell is 60 percent empty; boat ramps are closed, and water officials are no longer describing my 2003 article as alarmist. Luckily for them, The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, CBS News, and other outlets have started covering the Colorado River drought. Sometimes this kind of media rain dance can change the weather.

A disk harrow is idle near where a farm once thrived in Natomas, California. Apartments are being built where flooding was common. *Photo by Randy Pench/The Sacramento Bee.*

Finding Water Stories

Every good reporter is always asking the question, "What is the most important story in my own backyard?" Those who cover the water beat are no different. In Sacramento, flooding is the 800-pound gorilla. The city sits at the confluence of two powerful rivers—this was why early settlers called the Sacramento Valley the great "inland sea," and Indian tribes never built permanent settlements in this area, knowing they would have to evacuate.

Since 1997, when floods killed six people in the Central Valley and drove 120,000 people from their homes, the Bee has covered the twists and turns of city and regional debates about upgrading levee systems. But when the water has receded, usually public interest has, too. As John Steinbeck wrote about his home state, "It never failed that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years."

As the state of California sunk deeper into its financial hole, funding for levee repairs also dwindled. I'd heard about this for months and then, in one of those moments every reporter hopes for, a source leaked to me an internal state report that laid out the scope of the cuts. In four years, the state had cut funding for flood management by 74 percent. As a consequence, levees were going unrepaired and emergency crews were unavailable to respond.

I filed a story on this report. This news just barely managed to make the front page on a strong news day. So I pitched a projects proposal, envisioning a series that would examine flood protection from a number of angles. We'd chronicle the state's neglect of levees and the mounting liabilities that resulted. We'd focus attention on the role local governments were playing in allowing development to occur in deep flood plains. We'd turn a spotlight on our urban area and the ability of a traffic-clogged region to evacuate in the next flood emergency.

Once the editors gave the green light, we had a small window in which to report these stories. It was November, and in the Central Valley flood season ends in March. Our report needed to be published while the rivers were still high—before the Central Valley had transitioned to its eight months of bone-dry weather. This meant we had to hustle.

At the end of March 2004, our series,

"Rising Risk," examined Sacramento's wishful reliance on 100-year-old structures—levees—that are basically piles of sand mounded up on the sides of shifting rivers. The second-day story showed how recent development in Natomas, a low-lying, fast-growing suburb north of Sacramento, could flood 20-feet deep if a levee ever broke. On the third day, graphics and a narrative story combined to show what would happen, hour by hour, if a levee broke in a downtown neighborhood and spread water throughout the city.

The day after the final story appeared, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and federal environmental agencies announced new policies for speeding up repair of valley levees and cited our stories as the reason. Three months later, a levee broke open west of Stockton, flooding 12,000 acres of farmland. No one was injured, but the surprise June flood revealed the vulnerability of the flood system. So far, the consequences of that single levee break have cost the state $90 million. If multiple levees broke in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, it would shut down the delta's state and federal water pumps, which supply water to 22 million people.

Stories To Be Told

During my last two years as water reporter, I sensed a fresh appreciation of the beat at the Bee. Editors started to realize water stories could be compelling and free of jargon. Most of what I wrote ended up on the front page. To be sure, I still was pulled off the beat to cover forest fires, legislative battles, and other news. Yet in an era of shrinking news holes and quick-hit coverage, the Bee had dedicated itself to water coverage. Whether that will continue is hard to predict. In December, I accepted a position as an associate editor and columnist on the Bee's editorial pages. As this article went to press in February, the water job was still unfilled. Editors here say the newsroom will continue to cover water, but they may not do it with a single specialist. Although a tag-team approach may produce stellar coverage, that hasn't been the case at others papers. Usually it takes a dedicated and creative water wonk to push these stories above the fold.

There is still more to tap from this beat and not just in the West. In Southeast Asia, several countries are laying the groundwork for an international water war as they build dams on the Mekong and other rivers, with little regard for their neighbors downstream. Companies based in France and Germany are buying up water utilities worldwide, creating fears that water will increasingly become a private commodity. Meanwhile, scientists agree that global warming will bring more precipitation in the form of rain instead of snow, adding to complications of water planning and flood control.

Marc Reisner passed away five years ago. Where is the next generation of water writers? ■

Stuart Leavenworth, an associate editor at The Sacramento Bee, has worked at daily newspapers for 20 years in California, North Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana and Tokyo, Japan.

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By Its Absence Water Becomes a Big Story

'I try to focus my coverage on people whose lives intersect with water.'

By Seth Hettena

When I tell colleagues that I cover water issues in the West, I often get looks of pity. It is as if I'm drowning in a sea of minutia. But to my way of thinking, they are the ones missing out on the joys and challenges of this remarkable beat.

I write about water for The Associated Press from San Diego. What makes it interesting is that there isn't enough water to go around. To give an idea how bad things are, the record-breaking rainfall that sent Southern California homes skidding off their foundations this winter wasn't enough to solve the West's ongoing water problems. It will take a few years before we can write "The Drought Is Over" story. After five dry years, the fat lady hasn't sung yet.

In the dry West, water is everything: It's power, and it's the engine of growth. With it, a community like Phoenix can build more homes, attract business, fill swimming pools, and create jobs even in the triple-digit summer heat. Giving up a precious resource like water is tantamount to committing communal suicide. I've visited places, such as Colorado's Arkansas Valley in the Front Range prairie east of Denver, which have sold water to other places. They are sad places, and the only industries they seem able to attract are prisons.

Huge federal works projects—the Hoover Dam and Glen Canyon Dam, to name a few of the biggest—have been constructed to pool and distribute what little water exists. During the past few decades, the Colorado River, America's Nile, has been transformed into a massive plumbing system ferrying precious Rocky Mountain water to the deserts of the American Southwest. Aqueducts carry water across the desert, for example, to the millions who live in and near San Diego.

The West's Water Crisis

Last year, Bennett Raley, a Colorado cowboy-turned-lawyer who was the Bush administration's top Western water official, led me and four other journalists from The New York Times,

Los Angeles Times, The Sacramento Bee, and The San Diego Union-Tribune down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon for a week-long floating seminar on endangered species, drought and a behind-the-scenes look at water politics.

Now, Raley assured us, the region is facing a water crisis unlike any in its history. Five of the driest years on record have dried out the American West. From the brittle canyons of Southern California to the sun-blasted fields of Idaho, the nation's fastest-growing region is being choked by drought. At the same time, demand is pushing the region's water supplies past their limits. Water supplies are dwindling and drought-stricken forests are raked by huge wildfires. The "Cadillac Desert" that the late author Marc Reisner described in his book is being sucked dry.

The stakes are huge. Drought is already doing what environmentalists could only dream of: It's draining Lake Powell. The lake, one of two major storage reservoirs on the Colorado River, is less than half full and sinking. A recent issue of Backpacker magazine featured a hiking guide to Powell's canyons that were until recently submerged underwater. The lake is a few years away from being so low that no water could be released from the dam into the Grand Canyon. The dam's cheap hydropower would be lost, which could raise electricity prices and play havoc with the Western power market.

Las Vegas, which gets almost all its water from Lake Mead and the Colorado River, is already in big trouble. The city has been paying millions of dollars to homeowners who were willing to rip out their front lawns. Vegas is on the verge of a self-imposed drought emergency as Lake Mead continues to fall lower and lower. Something the city's water wonks are loath to discuss is the thought of drought silencing the ice cubes clinking in casino highball glasses.

Hikers walk in an alcove on Lake Powell in May 2003. Behind them is the chalk-colored "bathtub ring" left on canyon walls as drought brought the lake to a record-low water level. Environmentalists are calling for the Glen Canyon Dam to be decommissioned and Lake Powell drained. *Photo by Joe Cavaretta/The Associated Press.*

Reporting on Water

Perhaps because few reporters take much of an interest in water, I'm given wide latitude to cover it. My stories range across the West, but I have a rule I try to follow in all of them: Keep numbers to a minimum. Environmental stories can so easily get bogged down in parts per million or acre-feet of water. These are measurements that are irrelevant to the lives of most readers. Only farmers understand what an acre-foot of water means. (It's a lot of water given that it takes two years for a typical family of four to use just a single acre-foot.)

I try to focus my coverage on people whose lives intersect with water. Rural Imperial County, California's poorest, is often forgotten, but it's full of colorful people. What draws journalists to this dry corner of California is the region's water. The agricultural region grows a sizeable chunk of the nation's wintertime vegetables and uses incredible amounts of Colorado River water to do it. Los Angeles, San Diego, and others have long coveted buying up Imperial's water for urban use, but Imperial has been stubborn about letting go. A 95-year-old farmer sat with me one day under a mammoth Indian pepper tree and told me about the days when the field across the street was a sand dune. As long as he was around, the cities wouldn't get the water he had to work so hard for. Also in Imperial, I met Stella Mendoza, the daughter of a cantaloupe picker who described her childhood as straight out of "The Grapes of Wrath." She, too, refused to part with the valley's water. "Without water," she said, "we are nothing."

The story of water in the West has a natural tension that makes it easy to write. Farmers and cities, rival water districts, and even some states seem locked in permanent feuds that have almost become a way of life out here. Historian Norris Hundley, Jr., author of "The Great Thirst," encouraged me to be patient and take the long view of such conflicts. "It's not going to be over until it's over," he said. "And even then it's not over." Taking this long-term outlook is not easy for any journalist, especially an A.P. reporter, but I've come to understand, as I've covered this beat, just how good his guidance is.

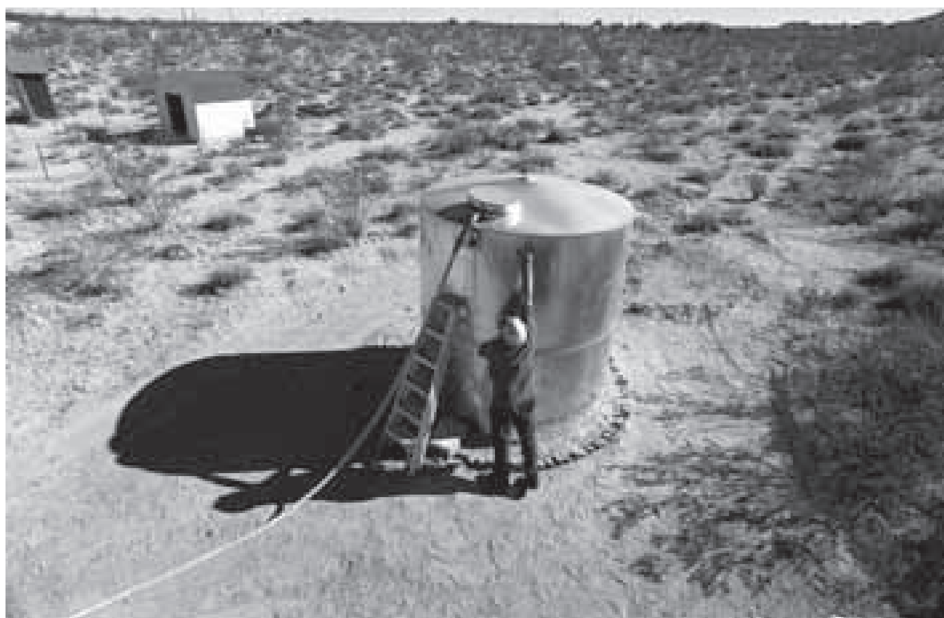
A major water war broke out in 2002 when California backed away from a long-awaited pact and angered the six other states that share the Colorado

River. California had promised to stop overusing the river's water, but a rural water board backed away at the last minute, and the deal collapsed. The state and federal government kept pressure on all sides to bring them back to the table.

Some old-fashioned sourcing allowed me to break another big story in 2003: In a scene straight out of "Chinatown," former Governor Gray Davis threatened to allow water destined for Southern California to flow into the ocean to keep the parties in line. A source in a Southern California water agency let me know what was going on in the hope of getting the governor to back off. Davis, who was soon to be recalled by voters, refused to do so and, through a spokesman, made clear that he was withholding water as a political bargaining chip. My story about this became an instant embarrassment to Davis, since the federal Department of the Interior did not like the idea of anyone flushing water into the ocean in the midst of a drought. Davis had to apologize and backtrack on his threat.

There's also a compelling history to water. The water grab that Jack Nicholson uncovers in the 1974 film "Chinatown" isn't entirely fiction. The farming community of the Owens Valley, in the high desert of the eastern Sierra, became a dust bowl when Los Angeles quietly acquired its water and flushed it down an aqueduct 90 years ago. [See page 17 for photos of Owens Lake.] "Whoever brings the water, brings the people," wrote William Mulholland, the aqueduct's legendary creator.

Modern-day water speculators still stalk the waterways of the West. Denver investors bought up a sugar-beet refinery and sold the water associated with it to the suburb of Aurora 20 years ago. A decade later, brothers Lee and Edward Bass, Texas oil barons, quietly bought up land in California's Imperial Valley and then unsuccessfully tried to sell the water out from under it. Ever-growing Los Angeles is still on the hunt for more water as well, but it doesn't just grab it anymore. It created a $1 billion-a-year quasi-government entity that conducts its affairs like any other modern government institution. It hires lobbyists and spin masters, pays consultants to spy on its enemies, and spends millions of dollars of taxpayer money in questionable ways.



An L&S Water Delivery employee checks the water tank level by sensing the temperature on its side as it fills in Johnson Valley, California. *Photo by Damian Dovarganes/The Associated Press.*

There's rich fodder for journalists in these huge urban water agencies. In California, these "special districts," which can tax residents and spend their money, exist by the thousands with little built-in public oversight. Since they are public entities, they do have to open their records to public inspection, and when one record search was done what turned up were expenses for lavish dinners and country club parties with little, if any, purpose. The Los Angeles Times's reporting on excessive billing of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power by Fleishman-Hillard, a public relation's firm, led to the criminal indictment of one of that firm's executives.

Finally, the unreal way water is used in the West makes for compelling stories—the same notion that makes Reisner's "Cadillac Desert" so interesting. Consider Palm Springs. At nearby Palm Desert's Desert Springs Marriott, guests ride gondolas to feast on ahi steaks by the edge of a sprawling lake. There's a man-made water-ski lake. A new shopping mall was built around a man-made river. In ultra-wealthy Indian Wells, thirsty lawns aren't even a choice; they're required. Desert sands have been transformed into the self-ordained "golf capital of the world" by cheap and abundant water. This water comes from the Colorado River through deals negotiated decades ago, when water was cheap and seen as abundant and, if renegotiations were attempted, they'd be entangled in lawsuits for decades ahead.

All of this is taking place in an area described by 19th century explorer John Wesley Powell as "the most desolate region on the continent." Rainfall averages just three inches a year, but per-family water usage is nearly three times the U.S. average. This is because many places—such as Las Vegas and Palm Springs—have built their tourist economies around water. Though water experts and some journalists are trying to dispel the myth of the West's abundant water, few are heeding the warning that the emperor has no clothes. ■

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No Agua, No Vida

A photographer chronicles the slow death of the Colorado River Delta.

By John Trotter

The writer Wallace Stegner once called the arid American West our "geography of hope." Its vast skies and towering mountains promise a future of limitless opportunity. But at what cost have we watered this living mythology? We have compelled what was a wild, red, living force—the Colorado River, which carved the majestic Grand Canyon—to nourish a vision of the urban landscapes of Europe and the East Coast on what the early 20th century writer Mary Austin called "the land of little rain." It has created an apparition of sprawling cities, championship golf courses, and heavily subsidized "rain on demand" for cheap, abundant produce. The Colorado River supports more than 30 million people in the United States and millions more south of the border. Without it, civilization, as Westerners know it, would vanish.

El Delta del Rio Colorado, as Mexicans call it, once spread across two million fertile acres above the river's mouth at the Gulf of California. Thick tule marshes rippled with schools of fish and migrating waterfowl ruled the sky above them. It is there that I've photographed the last of the Cucapá tribe, whose name means "people of the river." For 1,000 years, they hunted, fished and farmed in this paradise, where only two inches of rain fall annually.

This tribe numbered as many as 20,000 when the Spanish arrived in 1539. With the construction of Hoover Dam near Las Vegas, Nevada in 1935, the world they'd known changed forever. The two-million-acre delta shrank by 90 percent, as the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation turned the river into a commodious, regulated plumbing system north of the border. Any water reentering the Colorado after being used for irrigation in the United States was laden with fertilizers, pesticides and salt leeched from soil once covered by an ancient sea.

Tamarisk, a salt-tolerant, invasive plant brought from Asia as a windbreak and bank stabilizer, swept down the river, each plant capable of producing up to half a million windblown seeds per year. Native cottonwood, willow and mesquite trees were crowded out by its thirsty root system, completely altering the riparian ecology. Fish and bird species vanished. Vast wetlands became empty, salt-encrusted baldios. Since Lake Powell filled behind the controversial Glen Canyon Dam in the 1960's and '70's, the river sometimes no longer reaches the gulf.

Still, there is hope. I've photographed the miraculous Cienéga de Santa Clara, accidentally created in the Mexican delta in the 1970's, with very saline U.S. irrigation runoff from the end of a discreet diversion canal passing through the border fence. Had it flowed into the Colorado, the water would have propelled the river past salinity limitations set by a U.S.-Mexican treaty. Even this poor water though, added to a once bone-dry former wetland, has produced the finest habitat for flora and fauna remaining on the entire river.

But in fall 2003, the U.S. Congress voted to allocate money toward the restart of a long-dormant desalting plant in Yuma, Arizona, mothballed since 1992 because of exorbitant operating costs. As originally intended, it would treat that same "wasted" irrigation runoff and release it into the main channel of the Colorado. Should the restart occur, the only water flowing down the canal into the delta would be the brackish waste from the desalination process, which would subsequently poison the Cienéga de Santa Clara out of existence.

Will underfunded forces along the desert border be able to head off disaster against the enormous U.S. pressure on the river?

Paralleling the rapid disappearance of the Colorado River Delta itself, "the people of the river" now number fewer than 300 in Mexico. Allowed only limited fishing rights along the muddy artery that had formed their culture, the Cucapás are no longer self-sustaining and languish in a desiccated community beside a two-lane highway speeding tourists to resorts farther down the Baja California peninsula. They often must fetch water from the polluted river by pickup truck. Like many others in the Mexican delta, they await a more equitable division of the Rio Colorado. No agua, no vida, they say. No water, no life. ■

John Trotter, a photographer who lives in Brooklyn, New York, has been working on a project along the lower Colorado River for almost four years. He began this project on March 24, 2001, the fourth anniversary of his near-fatal beating by a half-dozen street gang members while on assignment in Sacramento, California. In the spring of 2006 Trolley Books will publish a book of photographs he took at the brain injury treatment center where he lived while recuperating from his injuries. Fundraising to support his Colorado River project is assisted by the Blue Earth Alliance. The Web address is: www.blueearth.org/projects/colorado_River/index.html.

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Water district officials from states that use the Colorado River listen to an impassioned speech by José Campoy, director of the Mexican Upper Gulf of California Biosphere Reserve about the need to save la Cienéga de Santa Clara in Sonora, Mexico. The group toured the wetland on a trip to the Colorado River Delta in Mexico in November 2002, sponsored by the Southern Nevada Water Authority, which supplies water for Las Vegas.

A photograph of Pankuak, an early 20th century Cucapá, in the small museum of Cucapá El Mayor, a tribal community in Mexico. In their language, their name means "people of the river." Though they were as many as 20,000 strong and famously friendly when the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, only about 300 members of the tribe still exist in Mexico.

Photos by John Trotter.

Media Luna Gonzales, one of the granddaughters of Cucapá traditional chief, Onesimo Gonzales, with her father at one of the tribe's winter fishing camps.

The San Felipito, or "K49," Bridge in the Mexican state of Baja California Norté is the last on the Colorado.

Photos by John Trotter.

Covering Water When It's a Commodity

'Tracking the battles over water isn't a beat—it's a career.'

By Mark Grossi

Reporter Elliott Krieger shot me a wry, sideways grin as we watched the first snow flurries in the fall of 1985, and he asked: "So, have you seen snow before?" I'd moved to New England from my native California a few months earlier for a job as a reporter with the Providence (R.I.) Journal-Bulletin (now The Providence Journal). I assumed he was joking because I naively thought everyone understood about snow in California. Later, Elliott ribbed me again: "What do Californians know about snow?"

It turns out that snow in California means ski resorts to the people I met in New England. But to many Californians, snow means much more than great skiing. When I moved back to my home state and wound up covering water issues, I realized how clueless I'd been. For far too long, I've owed Elliott a better response than I'd managed back in Rhode Island. What better way to make amends than to explain the snowpack in terms of the beat I've covered for the past dozen years?

Quite literally, without the snowpack, half of California would dry up and blow away. It is particularly true in central California, where I often write for The Fresno Bee about a $14 billion agricultural economy that lives and dies by the winter snow report. There are about 25,000 farms in this valley alone. Farmers cultivate about seven million acres and grow 250 different crops. This is the San Joaquin Valley, the leading farming region in the country and likely the world. Here a city of 100,000 people could be fit into one corner of some of these farms with room left over to grow thousands of acres of cotton.

It is with these images and figures that I describe the vast scale of this story to editors who might otherwise believe the story belongs somewhere near the obituary page. Unless I find a context that turns heads in the front-page meetings, I'm going to wind up covering fires and murders instead of water stories. I use every hook I can find, like explaining how farmers use laser technology to level their land and global positioning systems to guide tractors plowing fields so they can be very efficient with water. Why? This verdant countryside rarely sees enough rainfall from May to November to smudge your windshield. How the farmers keep their fields so green is directly connected to the water that is frozen as snow each winter in the Sierra Nevada.

Tracking Water Battles

Here water is a commodity, like gold. It's something to be stored, obsessed over, and litigated in cases that sometimes end up being argued in the U.S. Supreme Court. An entire culture is built around it, focusing on law, economics, politics and research. Both the state and federal governments have invested billions of dollars in rerouting nature to divert trillions of gallons of water from historic river channels into concrete canals and muddy sloughs in the service of agriculture and the millions of Southern Californians who depend on this source of water. The lawsuits alone are a rich vein of stories, but only if I can explain them in the context of all the tinkering that engineers have done to nature.

But human alterations degrade water quality downstream of some dams, snuff out salmon runs, and exclude the public from using rivers for recreation. And water fights follow. The three I've reported on most closely involve the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the San Joaquin River, and Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park, and I have traveled hundreds of miles to cover these issues. But these battles over water represent only a small slice of this activity. For many decades, people have battled over issues involving the Colorado River, Lake Tahoe, the Klamath River, and the Trinity River. And who could forget Los Angeles and the Owens Valley, a fight that was memorialized in the movie "Chinatown." Just mentioning these subjects can stir emotional arguments, and books have been written about many of these fights.

Tracking the battles over water isn't a beat—it's a career.

But any reporter who wants to wade into this must know that everything starts in the Sierra Nevada, which means "snowy mountains." The Sierra is one of the snowiest places in the country. Between blizzards, helicopters carry hydrologists into alpine meadows at 10,000 feet or even higher each January and February to measure the depth and water content. I will often take the gut-turning helicopter ride, walk on snowshoes, and witness the measurements. It's a long day, but well worth the time and effort. Farmers and many others closely watch newspapers and various Web pages to get some hint of how much water there will be. Their next crop loans, the amount of leased acreage, and a host of other details depend on that water supply.

Each spring, when immense snowfields in the 400-mile-long Sierra melt into rivers and cascade down ancient, glacially sculpted canyons, California hears the sound of natural wealth and the economy is born again. Anyone who has been in California for even one season experiences some aspect of this process. Indeed, in a state known for stunning Pacific Ocean sunsets from Malibu to Monterey, the real story is that two-thirds of California's water comes

from the frozen reservoir at the rooftop in the Sierra. Yet coverage of this annual event rarely breaks Page One unless there is a drought or a flood.

When I catch a breaking news story related to the spring thaw, I can write about the key to California's water. Most of the water originates in Northern California, yet about two-thirds of the state's 36 million residents live in its southern part. As many have observed, the water flows where the political muscle resides. The state's complex replumbing of nature is designed primarily to pump fresh river water out of Northern California to send it more than 400 miles south. It's a well-understood dynamic, especially among my reporting brethren.

Stories Not So Often Told

In the San Joaquin Valley, the southern part of the state's Central Valley, the dynamics involving water are less well understood. In part, this is because journalists seldom stop here to tell the story. However, one of the bigger stories is finally receiving a little more attention outside of this area. It is the fight to restore the state's second-longest river, the San Joaquin River, and I've been covering this evolving story for the past 15 years.

The river had one of the southernmost salmon fisheries in the country until it was dammed up during the 1940's and then became dry in two places. For 60 years, up to 90 percent of its snowmelt was directed into irrigation canals and sent to 15,000 farms, as part of the federal Central Valley Project. Environmentalists sued in 1988, challenging the renewal of the federal contract. The focus quickly turned to the destruction of the river and a state law requiring the protection of fisheries downstream of dams.

After 16 years and a failed four-year attempt to settle the lawsuit, a federal judge ruled in September that the operation of Friant Dam, about 15 miles northeast of Fresno, violated state law by wiping out the salmon. Now, with Central Valley farmers contending that nearby cities will lose their economic base without their contribution to the $4 billion economy, both sides await the judge's decision about how the river will be restored. Environmentalists, based in San Francisco, claim the river can be restored without damage to the valley's economy as water conservation, water exchanges from other rivers, and other efficiencies will prevent farmers from losing much water.

I've been either editing or writing stories about the San Joaquin River since 1988, and I know that the most compelling ones for me to report lie ahead.

Another ongoing water story also involves San Francisco in a very different light. It's about Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, built in Yosemite in the 1920's to provide water for San Francisco and residents in surrounding Bay Area communities. San Francisco is one of the few large, urban areas in the country where the drinking water does not need to be filtered because it is pristine snowmelt from a national park.

Unless I find a context that turns heads in the front-page meetings, I'm going to wind up covering fires and murders instead of water stories. I use every hook I can ….

The reservoir has been considered a black eye to the environmental movement since its construction in the 1920's. San Francisco, home of environmental progressives, has resisted attempts to study the draining of the reservoir so that Hetch Hetchy Valley, often compared to picturesque Yosemite Valley, could be restored. Environmental Defense, a national advocacy group with offices in the Bay Area, has come up with a feasibility study, showing how the water could be stored downstream. Now, state officials are calling for a more thorough study.

The irony is that progressive San Francisco has always balked at the idea. The city is going through a multibillion-dollar upgrade of its Hetch Hetchy system, and it does not want to give up the reservoir. Pressure has begun to mount after The Fresno Bee's big sister newspaper, The Sacramento Bee, began a series of editorials advocating restoration studies. Not surprisingly, farmers in the Fresno area consider the Bay Area hypocritical. As one farmer asked: "What's the difference between Hetch Hetchy and the San Joaquin River?"

The stream feeding Hetch Hetchy Reservoir is the Tuolumne River, which connects downstream with the San Joaquin. It is one of several other major tributaries that help the San Joaquin run north to the delta where it meets the state's longest river, the Sacramento River. The San Joaquin River Delta is the largest estuary on the West Coast. The two rivers push against the Pacific Ocean tide, creating a delicate intermediate zone of life. The delta has suffered greatly from water diversions. California and federal agencies have worked for a decade to restore it while trying to keep water flowing for cities, farms and industries.

Everything that happens at the delta, 165 miles from Fresno, affects my readers. It is not an easy task in a 500-word daily story to explain these relationships. But California gets a lot of new faces each year, so these issues must be explained and revisited. Many new residents, in fact, come from the East—some from New England—and they might be wondering if we've ever even seen snow. Forgive me, Elliott, but yes, we have. ■

Mark Grossi is the environment and natural resources reporter for The Fresno Bee. He is a former Knight Science Journalism Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His natural history and guidebook on the Sierra Nevada was published in 2000.

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The Owens Lake Project

Compiled by David Maisel

Owens Lake was a perennial lake at the terminus of the Owens River throughout historic time; the lake held water continuously for at least the last 800,000 years. Owens Lake is now an extreme example of the destabilizing effect on land surfaces caused by the extraction of surface water in desert regions.

Beginning in 1913, the Owens River was diverted in order to bring water to the city of Los Angeles, and by the mid-1920's Owens Lake was dry. For decades, the dry bed of Owens Lake produced enormous amounts of windblown dust. Indeed, the lakebed became the single largest source of particulate matter pollution in the United States, by one estimate emitting some 900,000 metric tons annually. The dust from the lakebed contains carcinogens such as nickel, cadmium and arsenic, as well as sodium, chlorine, iron, calcium, potassium, sulfur, aluminum, and magnesium.

The extraordinarily high air pollution levels recorded around the dry lakebed during dust storms have reached 25 times the levels of national clean air standards. The dust travels both north and south on turbulent winds channeled through the Owens Valley by the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the west and the White-Inyo range to the east; the toxic dust has been tracked by satellite some 250 kilometers to the south into the Los Angeles area.

The city of Los Angeles owns thousands of acres of Owens Valley lands, along with the rights to the water in the Owens River. The Owens River still flows through the upper part of the Owens Valley, but is then diverted into the Los Angeles Aqueduct 51 miles upstream from the point where it used to enter Owens Lake. Under California law, the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District has been given the authority to order the city of Los Angeles to undertake reasonable measures to mitigate the air quality impacts of its water-gathering activities. After decades of legal wrangling, in 1998 Los Angeles was ordered to implement dust control measures to abate the toxic dust storms that come off the barren lakebed. These controls include the shallow flooding of thousands of acres along the eastern edge of the lake with a small percentage of the water that is diverted, as well as reclaiming some of the saline lakebed soils and establishing fields of salt-tolerant grass irrigated with hi-tech buried drip systems. Los Angeles continues to implement these dust controls and will complete the $400 million project by the end of 2006. ■

This text is adapted from a story David Maisel wrote for Grist magazine.

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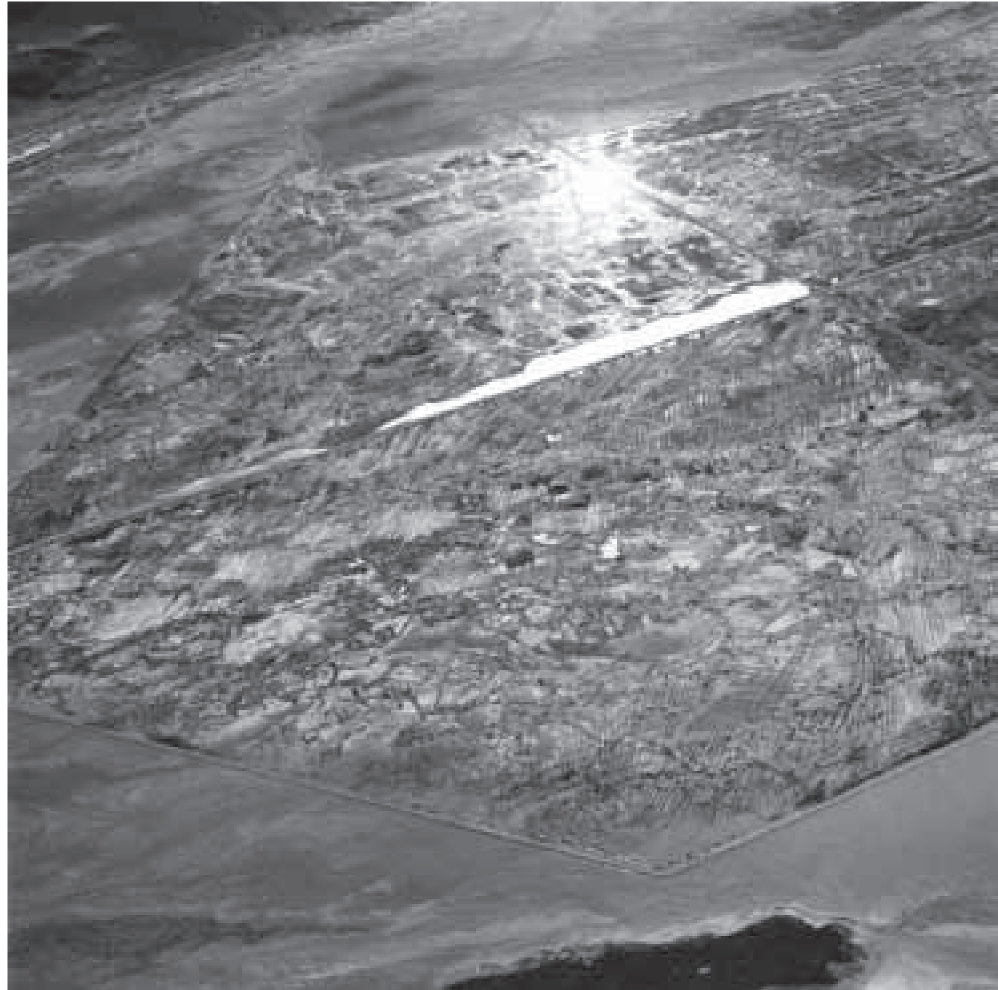
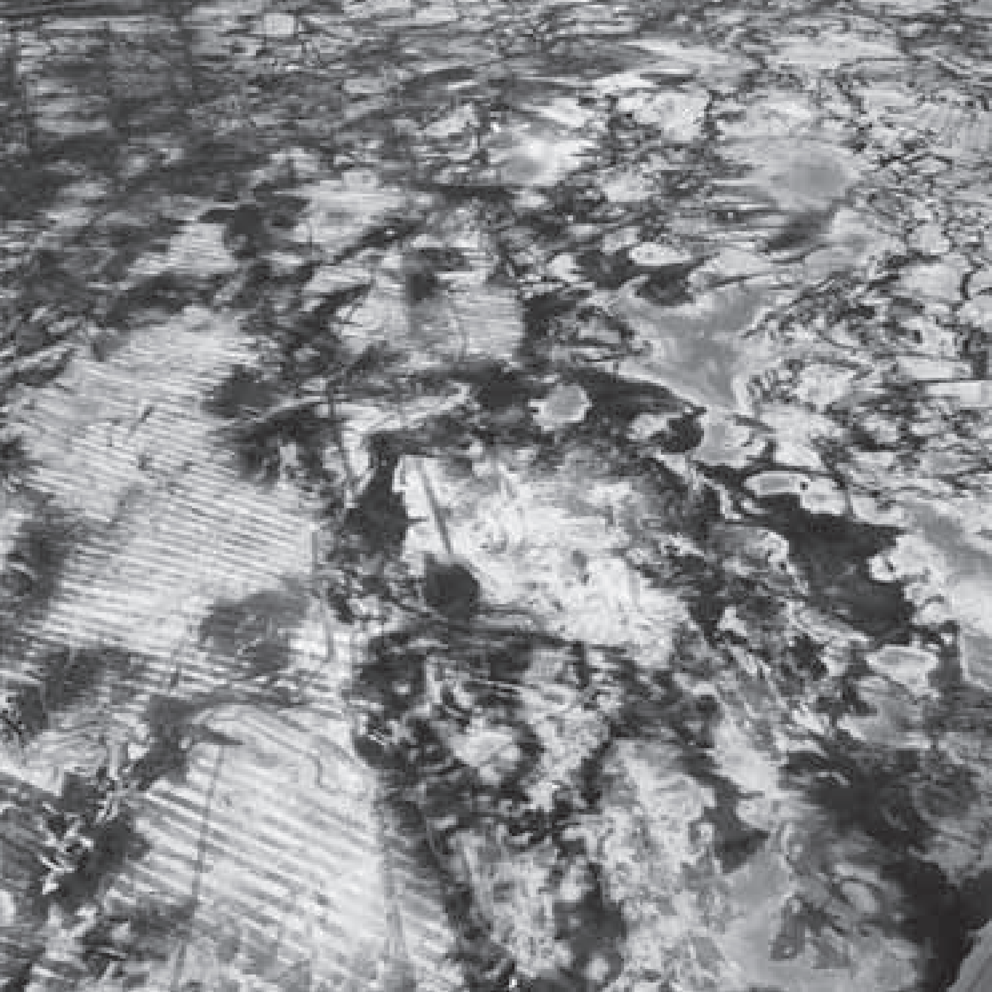
Areas on the lakebed that generate dust must be controlled with one of three approved dust-control measures: flooding with shallow sheets of water, establishing native salt-tolerant vegetation, or covering the surface with gravel. The lower portion of this photo shows the construction of an extensive underground drainage system that will carry away salty water and allow the soil to be reclaimed to the point that it will support native salt grass. Within two years this area will be a green meadow. The areas in the upper portion of the photo will have dust controls installed by the end of 2006. *Photo by David Maisel/Caption by Ted Schade.*

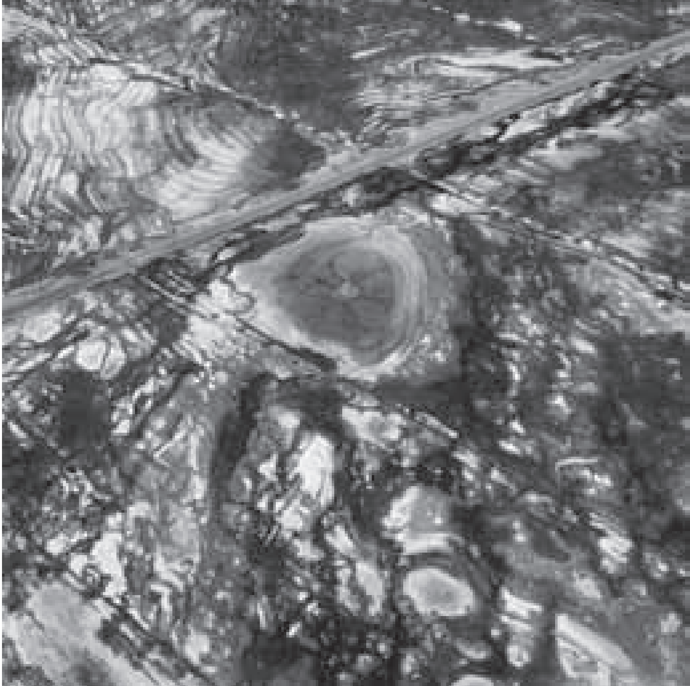
One of the methods used to control dust emissions from the dry portions of the Owens lakebed is known as shallow flooding. Los Angeles has constructed a large network of buried pipeline that takes a small percentage of water out of the Los Angeles Aqueduct and returns it to the lakebed for dust control. By the end of 2006, about 15,000 acres of dusty lakebed will be controlled with shallow flooding. The photographs on these pages show a portion of this shallow flooding. Water slowly flows from thousands of outlets across the playa and is captured by berms, then recirculated to the top. Not all of the lakebed needs to have standing water; the areas between the pools of water are wet enough to not emit dust. The visible hatched patterns are scars from attempts to level the surface with bulldozers. These scars will disappear in a few years as the water moves across these flattened areas. *Caption by Ted Schade.*



Photos by David Maisel.



David Maisel has made aerial photographs of environmentally impacted terrain in the United States for more than 20 years in an ongoing project called "Black Maps." The Owens Lake photographs are included in this project. See www.davidmaisel.com or www.lakeproject.org for more information and images.



Photos by David Maisel.

WATCHDOG

Finding Necessary Evidence to Back Up a Tip

A 17-month investigation about drinking water pollution prompts action.

By Scott Streater

It was a sensational tip. The public utility responsible for ensuring safe drinking water in Pensacola, Florida knew for years that radioactive waste had polluted several wells and that thousands of people had been drinking this contaminated water. And the utility's leaders conspired to misinform the public and thwart efforts by state environmental regulators to force the utility to rid the water of this pollutant. As a result, high levels of radium 226/228 from a massive underground plume of toxic chemicals from a nearby Superfund hazardous-waste site were continuing to contaminate the water and exposing residents to high levels of radium—a known human carcinogen linked to bone and nasal cancer.

That's the story Mike Papantonio, a high-profile lawyer at one of Florida's biggest law firms, pitched to me in February 2002. I shuddered at the possibility. Already I'd written extensively about the massive underground plume coming from the Agrico Chemical Company fertilizer plant (the Superfund site) and its very real threat to drinking water supplies. But if his tip about the utility's longtime knowledge and cover-up was true, it would be a huge and important story, perhaps one of the most important the Pensacola News Journal had ever published. My heart raced at hearing this tip, but my mind harkened back to the sage advice of one of my college journalism professors, "If your mother tells you she loves you, check it out."

Reporting on the Tip

I set out to "check it out" because on its surface Papantonio's story simply didn't jibe with the available facts. It would take nearly a year and a half of sometimes-intense research to determine that these accusations were not only true, but that the entire story was much, much bigger than anyone understood.

I knew that Papantonio had his own reason to circulate this kind of information, a motive that did not involve serving the public good. He was embroiled in a high profile, class-action lawsuit against Conoco Inc. (now ConocoPhillips), which owns the Superfund site. Papantonio's partners on the lawsuit included Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and his Riverkeeper Inc. group, as well as Jan Schlichtmann, the Boston lawyer made famous in "A Civil Action," a book and movie about a water pollution case in Woburn, Massachusetts. The lawsuit centered on the Agrico underground plume, alleging that the spreading toxic plume damaged property values and endangered the health of thousands of people by contaminating private irrigation wells used to water lawns and fill swimming pools.

Papantonio provided me with about 15 pages of internal memorandums, e-mails and other documents that he and his team of lawyers obtained during the discovery phase of the pretrial process. I reviewed these records, which appeared to qualify as the basis for a solid story. But I also pursued my own research by going to the county courthouse and poring over hundreds of pages of court filings, documents and depositions in the public record. I was glad I did, because my search made clear that individual pages or portions of memos and e-mails had been carefully picked from the public record, and in some cases this meant that information was taken out of context.

For example, one of the documents Papantonio provided me with was a letter from a Florida Department of Environmental Protection official stating that radium in Pensacola's public water supply was a health threat. But my independent review of records obtained by Papantonio that were on file at the courthouse included a follow-up memo in which the same state regulator reversed himself. (I would eventually discover there were political reasons for these differing positions that had nothing to do with science. But the omission of this memo concerned me.) Other records Papantonio provided were extremely vague, with no hard data.

Searching for Evidence

I needed well-documented evidence for us to be able to publish this story. I could not rely on weaving together bits and pieces of anecdotal fluff. Unfortunately, not too long after he passed along his tip to me, Papantonio went public with his "data," appearing on local television and prompting a local weekly to publish a grossly inaccurate story accusing public leaders of "poisoning" the water supply. I was forced to write a story telling our readers that the public records circulated by Papantonio, and on file at the courthouse, "provide no conclusive proof" that the Superfund site had contaminated the public water supply.

But I never gave up reporting this story. How could I? The records I had reviewed were enticing, to say the least. I began to file numerous public record requests and to copy thousands of pages of inspection reports, memos and letters compiled by state and federal environmental regulators and the Escambia County Utilities Authority, the public utility in charge of the Pensacola area's water supply. And every month, over the course of the next 17 months, I visited the courthouse to review the latest depositions and documents filed by each side in the Papantonio lawsuit. I built what amounted to a small library of more than 50,000 pages of documents, all of which I meticulously catalogued in rows of white binders. I also created a massive timeline that

exceeded 100 pages. This allowed me to place specific memos, e-mails and other data in context.

Slowly a clear—and disturbing—picture emerged. The records revealed:

- Between 1996 and 2000, thousands of residents in central Pensacola, neighboring Gulf Breeze and nearby Pensacola Beach, drank water contaminated with levels of radium 226/228 considered unsafe by federal regulators. They did so because the Escambia County Utilities Authority's top administrators did not want to spend the millions of dollars needed to shut down contaminated wells or to treat the polluted water. Instead, the utility hired environmental and health consultants to fight regulatory action.
- The public utility and the Florida Department of Health knew that water containing high levels of radium was coming out of taps throughout the city and Pensacola Beach. The health department and the utility had conducted sampling that measured high levels of radium 226/228 in drinking water fountains at an elementary school, the regional airport, a tourist welcome center, government office buildings, and numerous private water taps. The public was never told this information.
- The radium remained in the groundwater and polluted the wells, in large part because Conoco and four other companies responsible for cleaning the toxic plume convinced the federal government not to force them to clean the groundwater. The companies directed contractors to design studies and computer models that would help them convince the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to approve a "limited action" clean-up alternative that allows the pollutants to naturally filter in the groundwater over 70 years. This "natural attenuation" strategy saved the companies at least $45 million, officials boasted in internal memos.
- The Escambia County Utilities Authority conspired with two of the companies to fight an active pump-and-treat of the polluted groundwater. The utility's top scientific administrator, without the knowledge of the utility's elected board, worked with officials at DuPont and The Williams Cos. to draft a letter to EPA claiming the utility's sewer plant couldn't handle disposal of the dirty water pumped out of the ground. Federal officials cited that 1993 letter as one reason they ruled against mandating an active cleanup.
- The utilities authority's top scientific administrator knew the Agrico plume had contaminated public wells. In handwritten notes he wrote that contamination from the plume was "likely" in utilities authority wells. Yet he insisted repeatedly to the public and the utility's five-member elected board that the Superfund site had not polluted the public water supply.
- Residents might have been drinking the radium-polluted water for decades. The city was forced in 1958 to close a public well in the heart of Pensacola due to contamination suspected to have originated from the fertilizer plant. Follow-up studies warned that pollution from the plant was contaminating public wells. In 1972, the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that the toxic plume was impacting five wells. Nothing to remedy this situation was ever done.

Findings Lead to Action

In September 2003, we published a three-day series outlining these findings. Reaction was swift. The State Attorney's Office impaneled a grand jury to investigate the newspaper's findings, specifically whether Escambia County Utilities Authority administrators knowingly put the community at risk of health problems related to radium in the drinking water. State Attorney Curtis Golden also asked the grand jury to examine the activities of officials from Conoco who were responsible for cleaning up the massive underground plume.

One of Florida's U.S. Senators, Bill Nelson, a Democrat, and one of the state's members of the House of Representatives, Jeff Miller, a Republican, called on the EPA to review whether its original decision to allow the toxic plume to naturally filter over seven decades protects the public health. Miller was particularly upset that the utilities authority never told members of the public that they were drinking radium-polluted water. "The choice was not given to the citizen," he said. "The choice was made by a bureaucrat somewhere who chose not to inform the citizens of the potential risks." A short time later, the Escambia School District started to do its own tap water tests in schools serviced by the affected wells. This testing revealed high levels of radium in some samples.

The grand jury spent six months investigating the situation. In May it issued a scathing report blasting the Escambia County Utilities Authority and state and federal regulators for failing to protect the public. It also ripped Conoco and the other companies for being "motivated by financial reasons, not by health, safety and welfare considerations." But the grand jury did not issue any criminal indictments, noting that in Florida "dereliction of duty" by a public official is not a crime. It did, however, issue a number of recommendations, many of which are being implemented by the utilities authority.

In April, ConocoPhillips had settled its lawsuit with Papantonio, agreeing to pay $70 million. Most of that money will go to 7,000 residents who owned, or once owned, homes impacted by this Superfund's toxic plume. Meanwhile, residents continue to live with the consequences of this underground pollution. "EPA chose to wait, and now the agency tells us that after 70 years, nature will have corrected the damage done to the groundwater," the grand jury wrote in its 43-page report. "Even if that is possible, 70 years will not correct the damage to the lives and properties of those injured by pollution." ■

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WATCHDOG

Investigating Washington, D.C.'s Water Quality

With lead levels endangering health, public agencies kept test results from consumers.

By D'Vera Cohn

In January, a shivering group of environmentalists, health advocates and Washington, D.C. residents rallied in chilly weather outside the district's ornate city hall building to demonstrate their discontent with a persistent problem—high lead levels in the drinking water at thousands of homes in the nation's capital. The rally was timed to the year anniversary of a front-page Washington Post story that gave many D.C. residents their first news about the contamination. City and federal officials had known about the high lead levels for at least two years before that.

The Post has run more than 200 stories on the lead issue, both locally and nationally, since then. The paper explored the city's problem in detail, unearthing reports and e-mails from years earlier that warned officials that they were not doing enough to prevent lead contamination. Reporters then aimed the spotlight at the national law governing water testing, exposing weaknesses that prompted federal officials to close some loopholes and some members of Congress to propose rewriting the law.

At the heart of this story are complicated federal regulations on drinking water testing and a growing scientific consensus that lead has toxic impacts even at levels once considered relatively safe. Federal regulation of lead in drinking water is mainly done through the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Lead and Copper Rule, which assumes there is no safe level of exposure but sets an "action level" of 15 parts per billion (ppb). Utilities must do regular drinking water tests, focusing on older homes at the highest risk, and send the results to the government agency that regulates them. If 10 percent exceed the action level, the utilities must notify the public and replace a certain percentage of lead pipes that are the main source of contamination. Separately, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sets a level of 10 micrograms per deciliter of lead in blood as requiring treatment or other intervention.

Lead is most toxic to developing fetuses, babies and young children because it disrupts their physical and mental development. The effects can include a lowered I.Q., impaired hearing, hypertension, kidney disease, and behavior problems. A fetus can be exposed to lead because lead stored in a woman's bones can be released during pregnancy. Infants can absorb it via breast milk or in formula prepared with lead-contaminated water. Adults also can get kidney problems or high blood pressure from drinking water with high lead levels.

Lead paint is still the biggest source of contamination in this country. But EPA estimated in the early 1990's that drinking water could account for a fifth of lead intake and perhaps far more in infants who drink formula made with lead-contaminated water. Water becomes contaminated as it travels through corroding lead pipes that still exist in many homes built before the late 1980's, when use of lead plumbing, fixtures and solder was banned. It also can leach from some newer brass fixtures that, despite being labeled lead-free, contain a small amount of lead. Older water coolers in schools or other institutions also can leach lead.

There was a flurry of lead abatement activity across the country after the EPA adopted the Lead and Copper Rule in 1991, which required regular testing. Many schools replaced their water coolers, and dozens of utilities began adding corrosion-control chemicals to their water to curb the leaching of lead from pipes. But the issue died down in recent years. EPA has allowed some utilities to ignore requirements to reduce lead, according to Post reporting, and the agency dropped drinking water from its list of top regulatory priorities.

Top officials of Washington's water utility had been aware of lead problems since at least 2002, when the city tested 53 homes and found that drinking water contamination in more than half of them exceeded a federal trigger level. According to a former utility official turned whistleblower, some knew about it a year before that; she said they agreed to let her manipulate test results to hide the problem, but her superiors, who fired her, deny that.

The D.C. Water and Sewer Authority's (WASA) annual water quality reports repeatedly assured customers the water was safe. When they were required to send a brochure to city residents about the lead problem, they used vague words. After the Post began looking closely, the EPA accused the utility of failing to employ required warning language, such as "unhealthy." The EPA directly regulates WASA, meaning that EPA officials in the Philadelphia regional office saw the brochure before it went out. "Where were you, EPA?" one D.C. Council member shot back.

Investigating the Problem

In 2003, the utility tested drinking water in 6,118 city homes, and this time the results were even worse: Two-thirds had lead levels high enough to trigger public disclosure and lead-pipe removal. In 157 homes, the water tested above 300 ppb, or 20 times the action level.

One of those homeowners contacted Post reporter David Nakamura after receiving a letter from the utility with his test results. He was alarmed, and he did not think utility officials were very helpful when he asked for advice. (The letter with his test results arrived several months after utility officials had the results in hand. Many other homeowners did not learn their test results until the Post reported them.)

After the first story broke, the Post's metro editors quickly assembled a core team of reporters. There was so much for reporters to investigate—not just the utility and city government (Nakamura), but also EPA's role (Carol Leonnig and Jo Becker), health issues (Avram Goldstein), and the water treatment plants (myself). Database editor Sarah Cohen assembled a look-up table on our Web site that included thousands of city lead-test results that the utility refused to give us but which a local civic activist obtained and leaked to us. Several editors participated, with day-to-day oversight by Marcia Slacum Greene.

It was a complex and fast-moving story with the usual team meetings, late nights, and helpful anonymous tipsters that go with it. We assembled a shared electronic database of phone numbers, contacts and documents. We also acquired thousands of pages of e-mails, memos and reports using Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. We experienced firsthand the government's increasing balkiness at releasing material: In some cases we had to write follow-up letters stating exactly why we needed the materials so quickly. We did not always win our case even though thousands of city residents considered this a public health emergency.

Among the obstacles we faced was the insistence by D.C. water utility officials that they could not give us lead test results because that would violate homeowners' privacy. Several government agencies failed to provide relevant documents we asked for under FOIA requests, and we had to obtain them through other means. Those documents helped enrich our knowledge of the extent to which officials had known about the problem and failed to act.

What we found was that numerous people or agencies could have told the public about this problem or acted more quickly to fix it. Both the D.C. water utility (then part of the Department of Public Works) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers rejected a consultant's recommendation in the mid-1990's to add phosphate to the water, as other cities were doing, to prevent lead leaching from pipes. Cost concerns were one factor. EPA regulators, who were more worried at the time about high bacteria levels in the drinking water than a potential lead problem, went along. EPA again ratified that decision not to use chemicals in 2002, just as the lead problem was surfacing.

In November 2002, an EPA staff member wrote his supervisors that "fast action" might be needed to address the looming lead issue in D.C. We obtained memos that indicated some D.C. city health officials knew there was a problem that year but did not act—even as other city health staff were asking the water utility for help in dealing with families with high lead levels in their blood.

The Stories' Impact

The Post's revelations of the city's lead problems had enormous impact. The D.C. water utility distributed more than 30,000 free water filters and issued a public health advisory urging pregnant women, nursing mothers, and children under six not to drink unfiltered water. City residents were offered free blood tests. The utility hired a team of experts to give advice on health issues. The city administrator fired the health director in part over the poor handling of the lead situation.

Water fountains and sinks were tested in schools throughout D.C. and its suburbs, and some were turned off because of high lead levels. The D.C. water utility has promised to spend $300 million to replace all 23,000 lead service lines on public property by 2010, though many homeowners are unhappy that they must pay for the portion on their property. Several proposals for local regulatory reform have been floated, including having the city assume regulation of its own water supply. The water treatment plants also began adding a type of phosphate, the same chemical that officials rejected using back in the 1990's, in hopes it will stop lead leaching.

The D.C. Council, the city's inspector general, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (formerly General Accounting Office), and the EPA all launched investigations of the problem or audits of government response to it. Last year, the D.C. Council held 11 oversight hearings, and Congress held four. Some Democrats in Congress have called for toughening the law regulating lead in drinking water and closing loopholes that allowed the D.C. utility, and others, to downplay problems. EPA officials issued revised instructions to utilities on complying with the law after the Post published a series of stories, but their early official comments suggest they do not intend to propose a major rewriting of the law itself.

The D.C. lead crisis stemmed in part from the city's unusual form of governance. Its water system is regulated directly by EPA's regional office in Philadelphia. (In all states except Wyoming, a state agency performs that function.) The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers runs its water treatment plants. WASA, a semi-independent public agency, owns the pipes that deliver it. The city's health department does blood testing that assesses the impact of lead exposure. This makes for what critics call weak oversight, fuzzy lines of responsibility, and difficulty assigning blame.

But this problem could have happened anywhere and has, in communities large and small. Records obtained by the Post found that utilities in Philadelphia and Boston threw out tests with high readings or avoided testing homes likely to have high drinking-water lead levels. The Post also reported that New York City withheld test results from regulators that would have raised lead levels above the action limit. That disclosure prompted a state crackdown on New York City and a criminal investigation by the U.S. attorney. Regulators have acted in other cities as well.

And even without counting those that concealed true lead levels, the Post identified 274 utilities, serving a total of 11.5 million people, which have reported lead levels over the action limit since 2000. ■

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WATCHDOG

Local TV Investigates Who Is Polluting the Water

A series of news reports found city agencies ignoring their own regulations and illegally polluting water in Dallas.

By Paul Adrian

"You can't pollute something that's already polluted," proclaimed Jimmy Wayne Lashley from the stand at his trial, as he tried to stay out of jail in January 2005. "Who's going to drink that water?" The water Lashley was referring to was in the Trinity River as it flowed through Dallas, Texas.

Almost exactly one year earlier, KDFW producer Joe Ellis, videographer Paul Beam and I caught Lashley as he dumped hundreds of gallons of portable toilet sewage into a tributary of the river. And we caught him in grand style. Beam, wearing full camouflage, walked up the creek bed prior to Lashley's arrival and hid on the opposite bank. Ellis and I, along with videographer Phil Fleming, sat in a truck outside the Alliance Sanitation Company's headquarters. Hovering overhead, another KDFW videographer and our helicopter pilot circled, waiting for a moment we all knew would happen.

Caught in the Act: KDFW reporter Paul Adrian tries to interview Jimmy Wayne Lashley during an illegal dump.

We knew it would happen because we had witnessed the dumping three times previously. As usual, on that cold January morning, Lashley was punctual. He used an old Dodge pickup to pull a 500-gallon tank deep into the lot, where it couldn't be easily seen. Once there, he threw the truck into reverse and backed down ruts created on countless previous trips to the edge of a muddy overhang that dropped down to the creek.

Beam whispered into his cell phone, "he's getting out the hose … he's hooking up the hose." And finally Beam told us, "he's starting the motor. Come now! Come now!"

Our car roared through the open gates as the helicopter came down toward the site to get the best possible pictures of a stomach-turning operation. A chunky green liquid spewed out of the four-inch wide hose and splashed into the creek.

His pump's motor made such a racket that it had deafened Lashley. I walked up behind him and got close enough to tap him on the shoulder before he realized the gig was up.

I identified myself as a reporter and asked Lashley what he was doing. He clammed up, but much later he explained to a courtroom jury that "natural purification" would make the material less harmful to the environment. He also said coworkers told him it was an "industry practice" to dump the waste into a creek.

Lashley received as a sentence five months jail time on a case built almost entirely on our reporting.

Tracking the Polluters

Our investigative team at KDFW, a local Fox owned and operated affiliate in Dallas, had become adept at finding polluters. There is a lot said about how bad water pollution was before the Clean Water Act, and since I wasn't reporting then, I can't make a comparison to what we are seeing today. It amazes me how blatantly people still pollute our waters. The Alliance Sanitation lot was not along some secluded rural stream. Rather it

sat deep within city limits and shared a border with an interstate highway. Drivers exiting the highway at the right moment could have witnessed a dump in progress.

Our caught-in-the-act video, which we aired as part of our investigation of these illegal dumping practices, was dramatic. But Lashley was not close to being the worst polluter exposed in our news station's ongoing series of reports, called "Dirty Water, Dirty Secrets."

A question well worth asking is why a local television news team and not environmental regulators had such success in revealing these polluters. One needs only to examine the regulators themselves to find the answer. What we found is that the quality of regulation depended highly on the identity of the polluter.

In big cities like Dallas, it is the responsibility of city officials to control the amount of pollutants that enter storm water drains and flow into creeks. This work requires both public education and law enforcement. Federal storm water laws cover just about every kind of water pollution that could occur within a city, both from direct sources (people intentionally dumping a contaminant into a storm drain or creek, as Lashley did) and indirect (from pollutants that wash off a company's property during a storm).

Controlling pollution would be tough for any agency. But it's made more difficult when top officials have agendas that contradict regulation. Our investigative story was born from the frustration of city inspectors who believed their bosses prevented them from enforcing the environmental laws they were sworn to uphold. With their guidance, we uncovered records that showed the city of Dallas had a double standard when it came to enforcing pollution laws, and this standard was set at city hall. We found small violators were sometimes hit with a huge monetary sledgehammer, while one of the city's largest and most consistent polluters never received a fine and continued to pollute without fear of repercussion.

That polluter was the city of Dallas itself.

Every city government runs a huge industrial operation. Its sanitation service involves dozens or hundreds of garbage trucks and a landfill. Its water department includes oversight of the city's water and wastewater treatment plants. There are thousands of cars, such as police vehicles, that are owned, stored and maintained by workers at city facilities and, of course, there is much more.

About two years before we produced our first news story in this series, someone filed a complaint with the storm water inspectors. Oil was spotted in White Rock Creek that flows through one of the nicer parts of town to an urban lake that is the city's treasure. It's probably the prettiest outdoor spot in Dallas and is a favorite destination for joggers, boaters and picnickers. The inspectors struggled to figure out where the oil came from, since there's nothing around the creek but neighborhoods. Then they remembered one industrial facility bordered the creek, a city of Dallas service center, and that's where they found the pollution. Oil poured off acres of parking lots when it rained, rushing through storm drains, which funneled the pollutants to the creek.

The city has five service centers, where the vast majority of Dallas's blue-collar workers report for duty. They are also where just about every city vehicle is stored and repaired. The inspectors walked through the sites and documented page after page of violations. They photographed sanitation trucks leaking a mixture of oil, hydraulic fluid and garbage leachate, which pooled and ran down curbs into storm drains. They found oily sludge an inch deep coating parking lots behind garages. Fifty-gallon drums, opened and filled with unknown liquids, littered the back lot at one service center.

Altogether the inspectors docu-

Hydraulic Fluid Leak: A homeowner describes mystery fluid that flowed onto his property from a Dallas water treatment plant.

mented hundreds of examples of illegal pollution practices. In their reports, they failed the service centers across the board. Any other polluter would have faced thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of fines. But that was not the case for the city of Dallas. The inspectors told us they were prohibited from writing citations for the city, its employees or contractors. One inspector was so frustrated that he added a memo to his inspection report, "Per Jill Jordan, citations cannot be issued to City of Dallas employees." Jill Jordan is an assistant city manager.

Jordan later explained to us, "It does strike us a little odd that you would ticket one branch of the city, take it out of one pocket and put it in another." She also said, "that doesn't strike me as being terribly effective." She said it was more effective to hire a contractor to clean up the mess and focus city energies on educating the staff so they don't pollute in the future.

Of course, the argument would have been more impressive had it actually worked. Instead, many months after the inspectors produced their damning reports, we found the same problems still existed at city service centers throughout Dallas. We videotaped lakes of oil pooled in parking lots, streams of sanitation truck leachate running down curbs toward storm drains, and after a rain we photographed oily water billowing off the city's facility into White Rock Creek. Education had not worked.

Our news stories quickly multiplied; each seemed more preposterous than the last. The head of the water department proclaimed hydraulic fluid was so safe you could drink a pint without harm after we asked him to explain the unreported release of the fluid into a stream by a water treatment plant. The director of the streets department guaranteed me that some 2,000 gallons of liquid asphalt, spilled by the city, could not have reached the Trinity River. He said it would have traveled at most a couple of hundred yards down the storm drain. A few minutes before he told us that, our helicopter pilot reported seeing a huge cloud of material pouring into the river from a 15-foot wide storm drain outfall more than a mile from the spill site. Our pilot said it reminded him of the "Exxon Valdez disaster." City workers had failed to check the outfall. They also failed to tell the state about the spill as required by law. It seems each department thought another department was responsible for filing the report.

Our city officials, the state, and federal agencies all reacted. The Environmental Protection Agency filed an administrative order against the city for its failures at the service centers. The potential fines were so high that the case got kicked up to the U.S. Department of Justice, which is handling settlement negotiations with Dallas. And the city tackled the problem with manpower and money. The city manager, with the city council's approval, created 20 new positions: Ten of these new jobs went to create a new office of environmental quality, which is charged with making sure the city follows environmental laws. The other 10 positions went to the storm water inspection team to ensure it has adequate resources to do the job. In addition, the city will spend $12 million during this year and next on infrastructure improvements aimed at making the city more compliant with federal laws.

The Learning Curve

This story has implications for all of us. At its core, this investigation demonstrated that if anyone should follow the rules, it should be the regulator. Yet my instincts tell me that similar problems exist in most cities. Even after the extensive coverage we gave Dallas on this issue, we've been able to find blatant examples of pollution that involve public entities in surrounding communities.

For example, Frisco, an environmentally proud Dallas suburb, changed sanitation contractors and, after it did, the old company picked up all of its

State Regulators Respond to Story: An environmental investigation leads to a violation notice for Dallas.

rolling garbage bins (some 26,000 of them) and took them to a site designated by the city. There it had a power wash company spray everything on the inside right out onto the ground, including dirty diapers, chemicals stuck to the cans, and whatever trash was left inside. The city administrator in charge of the project was very upset, since she had just been named "environmentalist of the year" by the North Texas Corporate Recycling Association. The sanitation company blamed the power wash company, which admitted failing to control and dispose of the wastewater.

In neighboring Fort Worth, state records clearly document how the subcontractor who picked up the city's recyclables opened an illegal landfill, which he called a recycling center. It had no permit of any kind from the state as required by law. The city claimed little of its recyclables went to the landfill, but the state records show that Fort Worth Independent School District debris did. It's documented in two inspection reports seven months apart. The school district hired the contractor to dispose of construction and demolition debris. He sent them invoices from his illegal landfill. District officials claim they had no idea their material polluted an illegal site until we called, even though state regulators had pursued the operator for the previous 18 months.

Reporters ought to be looking at these kinds of stories. Learn the storm water rules, and start driving through any city's facilities. Is there oily sludge building up on the parking lot behind a mechanic's garage? That's illegal. Is leachate and hydraulic fluid dripping off garbage trucks and running down the curb? That's illegal. Are firefighters washing their trucks at firehouses and letting the water flow into the storm drain? That's against the law. If city agencies are breaking the law, how can they expect any private entity to follow it?

Sometimes, it seems, reporters can be a bit reluctant to chase environmental stories. Perhaps they are worried about sounding too much like an environmentalist with an agenda. The way I look at this is that I'm an investigative reporter who wants to tell the biggest story possible and achieve the most meaningful outcome. This issue of urban water pollution provides plenty of material for such an investigation with people breaking the law and doing so in ways that produce great pictures and impact a lot of people who live and work downstream.

Here's my word of caution: Do the story before someone in your market uses the Jimmy Wayne Lashley defense, "You can't pollute something that's already polluted. Who's going to drink that water?" ■

Paul Adrian is an investigative reporter with KDFW, a Fox owned and operated affiliate located in Dallas. Adrian is also a member of the Board of Directors for the journalism training organization, Investigative Reporters and Editors. He worked on the water pollution series with producer Joe Ellis, videographer Paul Beam, and vice president/news director Maria Barrs.

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Giving an Aerial View: A helicopter captures the spill of liquid asphalt into Trinity River.

WATCHDOG

Connecting Coastal Growth With the Gulf of Mexico's Decay

'Not everything is black and white, nor do the words legal and illegal do justice to these issues.'

By Eric Staats

A river-rafting metaphor might best describe the experiences of Naples (Fla.) Daily News writers and photographers who set out to document threats to the Gulf of Mexico. No one making this journey was ever exactly sure what was around the next corner, but they were certain the story they'd emerge with would be worth getting a little wet along the way.

In the spring of 2002, fishermen returning to port spoke of being amazed at the unusual sight of a mass of black water in the Gulf of Mexico between Naples and the Florida Keys. They described it, aptly, as a dead zone.

What started out in our newsroom as a search for answers about why and how this black water got into the gulf ended 18 months later when the Naples Daily News published 15 consecutive special sections in a series called "Deep Trouble: The Gulf in Peril." The series explained to readers how coastal population growth and industry are destroying wetlands, polluting rivers, injuring marine life, and sickening people. It also described how laws meant to stop this decline are failing. Working on this series proved to us that even small newspapers—if given an unwavering commitment of time and money—can make a positive difference in the lives of their readers.

Children swim in the waters warmed by the discharge from the Tampa Electric company's Big Ben Power Plant. ***Photo by David Ahntholz/Naples Daily News.***

Working the Story

Work on this collection of stories involved eight reporters and five photographers based in southwest Florida and correspondents in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C.. To make this work possible required a newsroom-wide shift both in how people were deployed and how they came to think about their work. Members of the team took weekly turns immersing themselves in "Deep Trouble." As target publication dates drew nearer, editors took some reporters off their beats indefinitely. That meant still other reporters filled in on must-cover stories or did double duty on their beats. Editors sometimes had to make difficult decisions about what to cover and what to sacrifice because of ongoing work on the series. And reporters, accustomed to rooting out news every day and getting it into the paper, had to take a more long-term view of their jobs.

Hard and fast publication dates were avoided. The mantra was to get it done right—not just get it done. Soon after the Daily News began publishing news stories about what it dubbed black water in the Gulf of Mexico, editors and reporters sat around a conference table and strategized about how to advance our reporting. They divided the Gulf Coast from Mexico around to Florida into sections, including coastal counties and parishes. Reporters consulted everything from scientific journals to travel guides to find out everything they could about their assigned stretch of the coast—its population trends, its history and physical features, and also its environmental watchdogs and its biggest polluters.

After months of reporting from their desks, teams of reporters and photographers visited each region to see for themselves what they had been told about over the telephone. Not surpris-

ingly, in these earlier phases Google became many reporters' best friend. A well thought-out Internet search often unleashed waves of good information and good leads for where to go next. Taking the time to wade through seemingly useless Web links often paid big dividends, as did making friends with disgruntled state and federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials, who can lead the way to the larger story and are freer with the truth than most current officials. In reporting a story like this one, the ability to find honest environmental officials lends balance to what the agency's spokespeople say and the criticisms heard from environmentalists.

Journalists who routinely cover water issues are trained to sniff out when polluters break the law. But it is just as important, if not more crucial, to focus on how much polluting is being done legally. And what might be illegal today might be legal tomorrow. For example, a paper mill can dump chemicals such as formaldehyde, ammonia and chloroform into the Mississippi River—as one in Natchez, Mississippi did for decades—and do so with permission of the EPA as long as the plant's emissions don't exceed the agency's guidelines. While federal officials will claim their guidelines offer environmental protection, irate neighbors and environmentalists contend this isn't so.

This debate—emblematic of the many nuances of environment reporting—is one we encountered often in researching this series. Not everything is black and white, nor do the words legal and illegal do justice to these issues.

While this series about the gulf's water was essentially an environment beat story, its telling benefitted enormously from having reporters from several other beats join in our coverage. For example, one city desk reporter's experience in crunching census data allowed the series to draw a parallel between what was occurring in coastal growth and pollution. The series also illustrated to us the importance of having a diverse newsroom. Having a reporter and a photographer who could speak Spanish enabled the series to report internationally with an investigation of environmental conditions along the Gulf Coast of Mexico.

As our team of reporters gathered information, themes emerged, and a strategy developed for bringing the project to readers. About half of the special sections would be devoted to reports on gulf-wide topics, not all of them obviously environmental. Some of these topics included overfishing, tourism, industrial pollution, human health, and failing environmental regulation. Other stories were geographically driven, and these helped readers make connections between the health of the Gulf of Mexico and the people who live in communities along its long edge.

An oysterman tongs out oysters in Mobile Bay, Alabama, where its reefs are blanketed with sediment from sewage runoff. ***Photo by Romain Blanquart/Naples Daily News.***

Our reporting on the black water phenomenon uncovered gaps in monitoring programs and explored divergent opinions about black water's cause. By the time the research arm of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission could arrange to sample the black water, it had largely dissipated. Few clues remained about what had caused it to appear. Scientists believe that the black water was made up mostly of a bloom of nontoxic microscopic organisms called diatoms that were fed by a slug of nutrients from a decaying toxic algae bloom and runoff from the Everglades. When black water showed up again in 2003, satellite pictures showed a connection with runoff from the Caloosahatchee River.

These black water events have touched off politicized debates about whether out-of-control coastal growth or agricultural practices should shoulder the blame. Many experts contend the problem is related to both.

Water can be a dry topic full of jargon: sediment contamination, storm water runoff, 303(d) lists, and Section 404 permits. The human stories—the characters and what they endure as a result of these circumstances—are what bring these issues home to readers. There was the story we shared of Jo Ann Allen, a Florida panhandle woman who traced her cancer to toxins in which she was cloaked for a half century as a nearby paper mill spit them into the Gulf of Mexico's Perdido Bay. Illuminating her struggle with this disease was as important as telling the story of the back-and-forth arguments between Alabama and the paper mill to clean up the mill's discharges.

Each special section featured a collection of "Profiles on the Gulf," and these featured snippets of wisdom from people we'd met during our reporting. The net for these profiles was cast wide to include Chamber of Commerce lead-

Jo Ann Allen received radiation treatment for cancer at a Pensacola, Florida hospital. She suspected that her health problems were related to dioxin or other harmful chemicals in a paper mill's discharge, though it hasn't been proven this caused her condition. *Photo by Romain Blanquart/Naples Daily News.*

ers, wildlife rescuers, scientists, neighborhood activists, fishermen, mayors, kayakers, and old-timers. Listening to them kept our reporting grounded and reminded us, time and again, how much people care what is happening with the water around them.

Journalists should, too. ■

Eric Staats is the environment reporter for the Naples Daily News. Jeremy Cox, city government reporter, and Janine Zeitlin, projects reporter, contributed to the writing of this article. "Deep Trouble: The Gulf in Peril" won the Edward J. Meeman Award for environmental reporting (under 100,000 circulation) and second place for in-depth reporting from the Society of Environmental Journalists. The reporters on the series were Cathy Zollo, Alan Scher Zagier, Chad Gillis, Dianna Smith, Gina Edwards, Zeitlin, Cox and Staats, and the correspondents were Michael Peltier and Jennifer Sergent. The photographers were Romain Blanquart, Gary Coronado, Cameron Gillie, David Ahntholz and Dan Wagner. To read the series, go to www.naplesnews.com.

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Complexity Makes Ocean Fishing a Tough Story

'… the more I learned about fishing, the less clarity there seemed.'

By Beth Daley

Two and a half years ago I started to write stories about oceans, but I've never explored the beat the way a good journalist does: By being there. Except for a dozen or so ferry rides and fishing trips, virtually all of the stories I've written about the ocean have been discovered, reported and written from land. It's hard to get onto the water and, even when I have, most of the real action is going on under the surface. But in many respects, this difficulty has been a benefit in forcing me to look at ocean stories through the lens of economics, history, relationships and culture.

Beginning in the fall of 2000, when I began working at The Boston Globe as its environment reporter, I spent much of my reporting time in the forests, streams and mountains of New England and also writing about lead poisoning and other urban environmental health issues. But after 9/11, like many journalists, the topics of my coverage shifted to anthrax scares and aspects of terrorism. I didn't return to this beat until mid-2002 and, by then, the Atlantic Ocean off New England's coastline was re-emerging as a critical story for the Globe to cover.

Commercial fishing faced its biggest challenge ever due to a lawsuit by environmental groups, while salmon farms were blanketing Down East Maine and breathing new economic life into the poorest places in the state. Waters off New England were being bombarded with new energy proposals, ranging from the nation's first offshore wind farm (which would be located in Nantucket Sound) to several proposed sites for liquefied natural gas terminals. My editors asked me to dive into these complex issues. I went from writing perhaps one or two ocean stories every six months when I first started this beat to writing dozens of them. Forests and

virtually everything else were pushed to the backburner, and ocean-related stories consumed some 70 percent of my time.

Undiscovered Depths

Oceanographers like to say that there is more known about the moon than the bottom of the sea. Yet virtually everyone agrees the world's oceans, once thought inexhaustible, are in imminent danger of being emptied of fish. The United Nations recently named overfishing as one of the 10 most important, but least written about, subjects. Only recently have environmental groups begun to pay attention to the oceans and, as they have, their focus is shifting public perception about how the oceans should be managed, what should be taken from them, and what countries' fishing boats should be allowed on which swaths of the sea.

Knowing little about the ocean or these issues, I blanketed universities and aquariums to ask about ongoing and interesting research. It was as if my inquiry had turned on a spigot: Research dollars were increasing for ocean studies and, as a consequence, related technologies and story ideas were everywhere. Here's a sampling of what I found:

- The United States was quietly trying to more accurately map the continental shelf off the nation's coast in hope of extending its seabed rights farther out from shore, an extension that could be worth billions of dollars.
- Sophisticated technology helped to locate one of New England's most famous shipwrecks 450 feet below the ocean surface.
- Recreational boat use was rising, and arguments about new marinas were escalating.
- Remote vehicles, many developed and based in New England, were catching up to scientists' ambitions to examine deep, cold-water corals and other treasures.

Within a few months, however, it was clear that New England fishing was the biggest story. For 200 years the region's economic engine revolved around the plentiful cod, so much so that a carved wooden cod still hangs in the Massachusetts Statehouse. But fishermen had taken too many of these fish, and stocks weren't being replenished fast enough despite a tightening—and confusing—array of regulation. Fishermen, who not long ago proudly came into port with hundreds of thousands of pounds of flounder and haddock, were now forced to hunt slime eels, an animal that snakes into dying fish to eat them from the inside out.

Clearly an investigation was needed to help our readers understand why New England couldn't seem to make commercial fishing work well in the 21st century or discuss if this way of life was truly on its deathbed. The Globe had tackled variations of this topic before, so it was difficult to see how the reporting we'd do this time would yield different stories. We'd done feature articles about the robust life of a fisherman on the brink and written about the industry's history, even about the fish. Complicating the matter was that the more I learned about fishing, the less clarity there seemed. No clear villains were emerging, nor any smoking guns. There was no clear solution visible.

Another challenge was that for the first time in recent memory, fish stocks were actually doing better. The pending lawsuit upon which we were hanging this story only contended that stocks weren't bouncing back fast enough. Also, I had doubts that I could produce a detailed and in-depth investigative series of stories on my own in the short time I had, so Gareth Cook, a science writer and excellent explanatory journalist at the Globe, joined me on this assignment.

Editors gave us several weeks to figure out what the story was and how we wanted to present it to readers. At least one editor believed the story would be ready to publish in three months. Instead, reporting stretched out over 10 months, and the project has proved to be one of the most difficult assignments either of us has tackled.

Finding the Story's Structure

Our four-part fishing series, "Sea Change: The New England Fishing Crisis," reached our readers in October 2003. From its inception to its completion, this project underwent its own sea change in how we'd tell the stories. With-

Fish are cleaned on board a boat on Georges Bank, off of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. *Photo by Bill Greene/The Boston Globe.*

out having a person, regulatory agency or group at fault, it was difficult to find a conventional organizing mechanism for all of our reporting. The other challenge was, as one New England environmentalist likes to say, "fisheries regulation is like Alice in Wonderland—without the drugs." It took us months to even understand what was going on and to figure out ways to convey what we knew in reader-friendly formats.

There are volumes of regulation about fish, and they are different for each one of the dozens of species managed in New England waters. Regulatory meetings go on for three days at a time and feature dizzying, acronym-filled discussions. What we know now is that fishery regulators really don't know how many fishermen are fishing. Added to this is a realization that hundreds of fishermen often change their mind about what rules they want depending on what fish are profitable at that moment. Absolute truths are hard to find.

With four months' reporting behind us, including a trip to Iceland, we had drafts of a five-part series in hand. But we threw much of it away. It simply didn't work. In this attempt, we had tried to pass the blame for this situation around and, as a consequence, the story was little more than a weak and uninteresting case study. However painful this was, it led us to a better sense of what we should do.

We constructed a four-part series with the mission of explaining the complexity of the relationships we'd found in the fishing industry and show how its future hinged on the strength (or weakness) of these alliances. The cast of characters who comprised this precarious alliance was diverse, and each, we realized, had a story to tell. There were government regulatory agencies, which were forcing fishermen to throw away dead and saleable cod in the name of saving the fish. There were zealous environmentalists who considered saving the ocean their new cause. There were the government scientists who, in their laboratories, counted fish and predicted the animals future. And there were the fishermen themselves, who believed they knew the ocean better than anyone but who were not trusted to manage the resource on their own. To a lesser extent, there were politicians who constantly voted in favor of fishermen, ignoring any harm to the environment.

By selecting particular characters from each group, we found a way to tell most of our fish story. The strategy worked well, but the extra reporting and writing time we needed to do this meant that we would miss a critical moment to run the story before a federal judge ruled to further limit fishing. Frustrated, we put the series aside and went back to our daily beats. Three months later, shortly before the new rules went into effect, we rejoined our earlier effort to do this fish story.

The other challenge was, as one New England environmentalist likes to say, 'fisheries regulation is like Alice in Wonderland—without the drugs.' It took us months to even understand what was going on and to figure out ways to convey what we knew in reader-friendly formats.

Completing the Story

There was one last bit of reporting to do: We needed to see fishermen throwing away cod as they approached the shore as a way of illustrating the federal rule forcing them to toss away excess fish they'd caught. This was one of those times when I absolutely had to be on the water to report this story. Virtually every fisherman we spoke to complained about this, but in our earlier reporting—when we thought we'd only address this topic briefly—we hadn't documented the practice with enough detail to use it as our lead. To do this, however, meant that I had to go fishing again and, through a series of boat mishaps and weather difficulties, it took me three weeks to actually see fisherman throwing fish away. One time I went fishing for 23 hours—much of the time I spent being seasick—only to have a storm kick up and the fisherman turn back with no extra fish. Finally, on one trip to sea, I was able to watch as dead cod were tossed overboard. This became the lead to the series.

I like to say that there were 16 versions of each story in the series, and this is only a slight exaggeration. In hindsight, for a series like this one to hold together, a reporter must be working from a crisp and sharply focused idea, not from just a vague concept about the troubles of an entire industry.

Despite the encyclopedic knowledge about fish I'd acquired—and a busy month of more follow-up reporting after the series ran—the Globe's appetite waned for ocean and fish stories as other news broke, and I moved into more science reporting. This past fall, when a great white shark got trapped in a local tidal pool, I was called back to the ocean and environmental beat. Once that story ended—with the shark assisted back into the ocean—it was pretty clear I needed to stay close to the coast as a final decision looms for the Nantucket Sound wind farm and other energy and research projects dramatically increase.

Fishing problems haven't gone away, but now these above-water stories have overtaken this long-running fish tale. ■

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WATCHDOG

Monitoring Colorado's Ongoing Feuds About Water

With a drought and expanding population, coverage of water gains importance.

By Jerd Smith

On a summer evening in 2003, high in the Colorado Rockies, cocktails and dinner were to be served in a spacious tent along the banks of the Snake River at Keystone Resort, one of Colorado and the nation's most popular ski areas. Seated at the tables were some of the most powerful players in Colorado's deeply divided water world. They were here, at least ostensibly, to break bread and make peace.

The public wasn't invited, nor was the press. When I learned of the dinner and asked to attend as a reporter, after the usual handwringing I was allowed to do so, as were other reporters.

Such uneasiness in dealing with the media is typical among the state's water power brokers. Most of the entities that control water in Colorado don't report directly to an elected body, though their constituencies are public. They operate in a parallel universe—neither wholly public nor fully private. Though water is a basic utility, there is no central regulating entity like those that oversee phone and electric service. Water quality is monitored by the state health department, and the state makes sure each entity gets its legal share. But that's about it when it comes to state regulation. There is no statewide water planning, policymaking or rules governing conservation. Instead, fragmented quasi-public water districts control the water and decide how it will be used.

When I arrived at the Keystone dinner, staffers from Denver Water—the state's largest urban water provider—let me know I wouldn't be seated with attorneys, urban water bureaucrats, and rural elected officials gathered at the carefully arranged tables. Instead, reporters were to sit at a separate table to the side of the room, well out of earshot of any discussion among the feuding parties. Within moments, however, the rural water officials on whose turf this dinner was being held and who are at war with the city dwellers reversed the order to sequester us and graciously offered reporters seats with the participants. The "let-them-in … no keep-them out" squabble over the seating chart would occur two more times that evening. Ultimately, the press was allowed to mingle freely with those in attendance.

Image withheld from Web by request.
See it online at http://denver.rogkymountainnews.com/news/water/

A front end loader is used to build a "check" in the Colorado River in June 2004, causing the level of the river to go up behind it and allowing farmers to then pump water from the river to their fields. *Photo by Ken Papaleo/Rocky Mountain News.*

This was a small skirmish in the grand scheme of things. But it was a telling sideshow in the ongoing battle to shed light on water issues in the semiarid American West. In one of the fastest-growing regions in the country, there isn't enough of the precious resource. Consider this:

- At Niagara Falls, water flows at about 100,000 cubic feet per second (cfs), an astounding liquid bounty—enough water each day to serve 400,000 urban families for one year.
- In contrast, a typical day at Dotsero on the Colorado River—the historic source of water for 25 million people from Denver to Los Angeles—average flows might hit 3,000 cfs, enough for about 12,000 urban families for one year.

That is the "normal" water situation in a semiarid region. But a five-year drought and a striking population boom are testing the limits of Colorado's water supplies and the fiefdoms that control them. Roughly 80 percent of the state's drinking water supplies are derived from melting mountain snows. But for each of the past seven winters, snowpack has been well below average, and reservoir levels have registered historic lows. In addition, the state's

population has nearly doubled in the past 14 years, growing to more than four million people. In the next 25 years, it's expected to top seven million.

It was in March 2002—after the winter snowpack was measured at 19 percent of what it usually averages—that the Rocky Mountain News assigned me full-time to cover drought and water issues, with a team of others—including science and environmental reporters. Nearly 20 years of abnormally wet weather—coinciding with this massive growth spurt—came to a screeching halt and a mad scramble began to find new supplies. Inherent in this scramble are public policy questions state officials have never really answered. Should the new supplies be taken from the state's already stressed mountain watersheds? Should urban dwellers begin drinking recycled water? Or should they simply use less?

To help Coloradans answer these questions, we've worked hard to find ways to penetrate special water districts and powerful water bureaucracies, to explain the state's elegant natural water system and its 150-year-old antiquated way of divvying up water and storied water wars. For writers and editors, finding ways to demystify—and then write about—water issues has been difficult. The beat is shrouded in arcane procedures, measurement conundrums, unanswered legal questions and, of course, closely guarded meetings. Water attorneys, engineers and bureaucrats complain that no one—not journalists, the public, nor state lawmakers—understands what they do. But they spend very little time trying to educate, relying instead on old ways of doing things—protecting water rights in court and meeting behind closed doors to keep their long-term water plans private.

Image withheld from Web by request.
See it online at http://denver.rogkymountainnews.com/news/water/

A five-year drought has left a small crop of trees as a hill in what used to be Lake Granby. June 2004. *Photo by Ken Papaleo/Rocky Mountain News.*

Complexity of Water Issues

In fairness to these water officials, Western water issues are complex. Water is considered private property that can be freely bought and sold, not a public asset to be shared. In addition, Colorado and other Western states allocate water under what is known as "prior appropriation system," or first in time, first in right. This means that if a water right was claimed in 1861, in a time of drought when stream flows are low, the entity with the oldest water right will receive its water before another diverter on the same creek, with a later water right date, receives its claimed water.

Because ranchers and farmers arrived in Colorado first, many of the older, most bountiful water rights once belonged to agriculture. That's slowly changed as cities along Colorado's Front Range (that's east of the Continental Divide) now own many of the best water rights in the state and guard them closely.

All water sales are handled in water courts and are rarely subject to public scrutiny. So protective are the utilities that some water right records that are more than a century old are considered too sensitive for public view. Earlier this year, for example, I asked to see old water engineering notes archived at a large urban utility. I was looking for historic color for a series we did called "The Last Drop," which chronicled how

Image withheld from Web by request.
See it online at http://denver.rogkymountainnews.com/news/water/

These ranch lands would be flooded if the proposed Wolcott Reservoir is built by Denver Water. *Photo by Ken Papaleo/Rocky Mountain News.*

Colorado cities first began staking claims to vast mountain water supplies back in the late 1800's. These old claims—while perfectly legal—mean that now some of Colorado's most scenic rural resort communities, from Vail to Keystone, won't have enough water to make snow and to keep streams full for fish and kayakers.

Though the utility's engineering notes were written by water prospectors more than 100 years ago, the utility stamped them "confidential work product," which barred them from public view. Why? Legal paranoia. Water rights are bought and sold and challenged in court every day. And old water rights are like liquid gold. Therefore any old notes that might bolster or jeopardize the legitimacy of a claim are stamped "confidential work product."

How long Colorado's 145-year-old water rights system will hold up during these times of drought and growth isn't at all clear. This system has befuddled ranchers and governors for more than a century. Long ago it wasn't unusual for Coloradans to take the water laws into their own hands. As an old rancher likes to joke, "Always better to be at the top of an irrigation ditch with a shovel, than at the bottom with a water right."

As more and more of Colorado's water supplies are constrained by growth, chronic drought and environmental concerns, there is a sense that somehow the state's citizens need to demand a broader, less fragmented approach to allocating water. In the meantime, reporting on Colorado's far-flung water fiefdoms and their ongoing power struggles remains a challenge. But as we travel back and forth across the Continental Divide, we hope to help readers stitch together a clearer view of the statewide water picture, with its interconnections between urban water demands and Colorado's picture-perfect mountain landscapes. ■

Jerd Smith covers the water beat at the Rocky Mountain News. She worked as a business writer and editor for 10 years, including three at the Rocky Mountain News before joining the paper's city desk in 2001.

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The Story of Water Told in a Tale of Two Towns

Developing the narrative thread relied on finding key characters and weaving their experiences into the article's focus on water.

By Todd Hartman

It was early in 2003 in the newsroom of the Rocky Mountain News, and a few of us were brainstorming for fresh ways to tell the story of our ongoing drought. It had hit hardest in 2002, when precipitation in Colorado dropped to levels unseen for hundreds of years. We wanted to do more than just write the bread-and-butter stories on parched reservoirs, anemic snowfall, tree-ring studies, and lawn-watering restrictions. But what would this different coverage include?

How could our coverage bring home to our 300,000 mostly Denver-area readers the story of this drought? Generally speaking our readers' relationship to water was defined by their love of Kentucky bluegrass lawns, long hot showers, and the bottled stuff they drink during their workouts. Despite its proximity to them, most of them did not feel the least bit threatened by the drought. After all, it's the big cities on Colorado's Front Range, such as Denver and Colorado Springs, which have some of the more extensive water supplies and sophisticated treatment and delivery systems, who are best equipped to march through a drought unscathed.

I was intrigued immediately by the notion of finding ways to show how insulated city dwellers are from this problem and of exploring the impact our thirsty water habits have on other regions of the state, such as depleting mountain streams or drying up farmland. I believed then—and still do—that the vast majority of urban dwellers have little, or no, idea where their water comes from and how their growing demands affect other people and the environment. I've long been interested in how residents in Colorado's semiarid climate spray endless amounts of water over a nonnative plant (bluegrass), trying to put a green blush on a region that is naturally brown almost the entire year.

From several years of covering environmental matters in the southern part of the state for a previous newspaper, I was also vaguely aware of a long-running struggle over water between a booming Denver suburb and a tiny farming community that is a three-hour drive to the southeast. In our small newsroom group, I wondered aloud if that wouldn't be a story to tell more fully to our readers. After all, like so much newspaper work, it had emerged previously only in 10- or 15-inch bites, once every few years. Who really knew the whole story and its relevance to broader water issues?

At the time, of course, I had no idea that this concept would explode into a 24-page, richly photographed special section in the Rocky Mountain

News with a title that was appropriately biblical-sounding, "Dividing the Waters." (Credit for the title goes to our top-notch copyeditor John Moore.) What started as a poorly formed idea became a piece like nothing else I've worked on in my 18 years as a journalist: a narrative tale spanning nearly 25 years, complete with characters, dialogue and loads of dramatic tension.

How this happened is a testament to several factors: the way stories can suck you in and take over your journalistic life; the importance of sharing your excitement and direction with your editors; the advantage of having supportive and enthusiastic supervisors with faith in your ability to carry out a vision, and a willingness to give enough time to be thorough in your reporting. I would add to these the advantage of having an engaged and talented photographer interested in making the effort to grasp the scope of the story—and not always with a camera.

A homeowner blows away grass clippings after mowing her lawn in Aurora, Colorado. Unlike her neighbors, she moved into her home two weeks before Aurora restricted the installation of new sod because of the ongoing drought. *Photo by Marc Piscotty/Rocky Mountain News.*

Constructing the Narrative

Let's start with the fundamentals. Aurora, an ambitious Denver suburb, had forged a reputation for aggressively seeking and acquiring water—a difficult and costly endeavor in Colorado and much of the arid West. In the 1980's, during its most significant growth period, Aurora had obtained a relatively small share from an irrigation ditch running through a tiny farming town, Rocky Ford, in Colorado's Arkansas River Valley.

At the time, the water purchase barely made news in Denver, but in the river valley, where the loss of agricultural water was seen as a cultural and economic deathblow, the deal was scandalous. It pitted farmers willing to sell their share in the ditch against townsfolk who accused them of drying up the town's future. Now, in the drought-ravaged days of 2002 and 2003, Aurora was again turning its eyes to Rocky Ford in the hopes of purchasing the remaining shares of the same irrigation ditch, ones it hadn't bought the first time around.

That's about what I knew after some cursory reporting over a couple of days. But even with that framework in mind, the story provided some challenges. One of the biggest happened in its earliest stages, before it was clear the story would morph into a massive special section, when my initial reporting helped me to realize that some of the most interesting and important elements of the piece were historical. But I was afraid that including so much history would be a turnoff to editors. After all, we're in the news business. We write about now, not then.

But I also believed—and conveyed to the editors—that the origins of the water deal in the 1980's, and the controversy the original water transfer created in Rocky Ford, was critical if we wanted our readers to have the necessary context to understand why current efforts to move even more water out of the region were so important. And we needed to go beyond even that. To set up the story fully, we needed to tell readers a bit about the beginnings of two dusty 19th century Colorado towns—how they first obtained water, how one became a farming mecca, legendary for its melons and cantaloupes, and how one became a municipal powerhouse, addicted to growth.

Doing the historical research was great fun. Looking at old court papers, news clips, and talking to old-timers was nothing new for me, but trying to string it all into a narrative account by trying, for example, to put the several people in a negotiating room two decades ago, posed a new reporting challenge.

My eureka moment—when the general starting point and structure of the story became clear—came while I was researching Aurora's political history. I was on the lookout for symbols that represented the city's desire to outrank Denver as Colorado's signature locale. I came across a few yellowed clips from the late 1970's outlining the city's breathless plans to annex property on which developers were to build an outrageous theme park called Science Fiction Land. The goofiness of the plans appealed to my boyish nostalgia for comic books: security guards flying about on jetpacks, a robot-staffed bowling alley of 1,000 lanes, and holographic wildlife roaming the park. What better way to shatter any notion this would be one more "dry" story about water by starting the tale in Science Fiction Land?

Much to my relief, the editors didn't despair about injecting so much history into this story; they embraced it. They shared my trepidation, but agreed that there's a time when, if a newspaper is to really tell a story, it needs to tell it, beginning to end.

At the same time I needed to track down the necessary characters. Early on, my direct editor on the story, Carol

Hanner, had pushed us to turn this into a narrative tale. But to do a narrative story requires characters. Who would they be, and how do I identify them when the story sprawls over 25 years? One challenge involved the fact that even though it seemed initially that editors were going to give me ample time to do this piece, it wasn't yet clear how much time. I certainly hadn't been given a green light for three months of work, yet I felt pressure (much of it self-generated) to move quickly. But I didn't have the luxury of moving to Rocky Ford for a couple of weeks or canvassing Aurora for days, which is what I needed to do to find people who had driven this story over the years. (My responsibilities at home prevented me from being out of town for more than two days at a time.) I'd make the long trek to Rocky Ford only in short bursts of a few days, and this meant I had to make decisions fast and right: I couldn't afford the time if I staked my claim to the wrong people.

In short, through a blitzkrieg of phone calls, clip research (my desk was stacked so high with musty envelopes from the paper's basement that my colleagues began to wonder if I'd swapped jobs with the archivist), and rushed trips to Rocky Ford, I emerged with a set of people whom I believed would be the backbone of the story. In the case of Aurora, I identified not only its current utilities director, a man desperately seeking more water for the town, as a key character, but the booming city itself, which more than any one person seemed to represent the movement of Colorado's water from farms to cities.

Spending time with these folks and getting their stories, indeed, nailing down many, many specific and historic facts about their stories, became my priority. And it wasn't always easy. One of them, a newspaper editor in the southern Colorado town of Pueblo who'd taken to publicly vilifying those who sold water to the Denver region, granted me only a half-hour interview. A major onion grower in Rocky Ford, who was selling his water, never seemed to be around and was virtually unreachable by phone. But I had to keep trying because he was such a colorful guy and an important player, and finally our paths crossed as I busily crammed my reporting into every available hour I had there.

As the structure, content and characters emerged, it began to dawn on me and my editors that we might want to take this story to another level and to devote significant space to it. In better understanding the weight of these issues—the near-death of a once-bountiful farm town, the inexorable growth of Aurora, the way the story embodied the transition from Colorado's agrarian past to its urban future—we realized the story represented a near-perfect case study of the conflict over water in Colorado. With this one story, in effect, we could tell a thousand stories about water's movement and the political reasons for it—stories that have played out across the state in obscurity for years.

Lessons Learned

I learned some important lessons about long narratives in doing this project. Other than nailing down the concept, the most urgent task involves identifying major characters. This is easier said than done, but it is immensely helpful if, fairly early on, you can find the people who will drive your storytelling. If I could do it again, I'd spend several days in relevant places without even opening my notebook. Of course, that's a luxury that few reporters can afford these days, but ideally I'd try initially to immerse myself without reporting pressures in the two communities.

Something I did that proved helpful for such a long story with so many historical facts was create a research database on my computer that allowed me to compile important facts and figures as I came across them. Later, when I was writing, having this database prevented me from having to thumb through stacks and stacks of resources while it gave me a reference to the information if I needed to go back and reread an old article or other document. I'd encourage this approach for any piece of significant length and depth.

I also avoided spending too much time diving into the complexities and jargon of water issues. It is an area that can swallow reporters up in legal mumbo jumbo. The legal fight going on here was important, but I tried to stay conscious of not letting water law arcania stand in the way of the story. Always stay focused on the simple issue at hand, I'd remind myself: Water supporting an agricultural community was in jeopardy of flowing instead to a booming urban region.

Finally, like in any reporting experience, I'd advise journalists to be ready to jettison first impressions. I had the image of Aurora as a shark on the prowl for water, ready to dry up any farming community standing in its way by unleashing lawyers, money and big-city muscle. Of course, it wasn't that simple. There were no black or white hats in the story—just a lot in shades of gray. This wasn't the infamous story of Los Angeles de-watering the Owens Valley. Aurora had many defenders in the very town it was drying up, as did the farmers who were selling their water. And Aurora officials were keenly aware of their impact on a small town's economy and have continued to help the town find new strategies for coping with the vanishing water.

Those complexities made the story more enjoyable to tell. And readers noticed. Several on both sides of the debate, who'd had the same initial impression as I did, told me later that the story helped them understand it wasn't greedy farmers or cities that were killing farm towns. Rather the culprits in changing the way water moves in Colorado and the West are the large demographic and economic forces far beyond the control of any one person or group. ■

Todd Hartman has spent the last decade as the environment reporter at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver and The Gazette of Colorado Springs. He spent 1998-99 as a fellow at the Ted Scripps Fellowship for Environmental Journalism at the University of Colorado.

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Motion and Sound Tell the Online Story in New Ways

By Sonya Doctorian

After seeing some online videos I did for an independent study project to complete my masters in documentary filmmaking, Carol Hanner, the project editor for "Dividing the Waters," suggested I produce a video for our Web site about Rocky Ford. Because of my role as the project's photo editor, I'd already begun to get a sense of the story and place from photographer Marc Piscotty's images, as he and I would meet to choose photographs and discuss the story's progress.

My goal would be to amplify aspects of Todd Hartman's narrative in two short-form documentary videos. While our Denver-area readers might know the suburb of Aurora, my video would transport them with sound and motion to the rural town of Rocky Ford.

I spent two days videotaping in Rocky Ford. For one piece, I rode with the ditch rider who checks the 13-mile Rocky Ford canal twice a day to read water levels and makes sure it's flowing smoothly. Although he was a minor character in Todd's story, it was a good visual way to show the ditch and its path through the town. The second two-minute video began with a local museum curator giving a brief historical overview, combined with archive photographs and my footage of the town. The curator told the story of Rocky Ford's beginnings as the watermelon capital of the nation. The last half of the video showed a fourth-generation Rocky Ford farmer using a water irrigation system. The sound of flowing water and the trickle of water through the furrows of the sorghum field were the heart of this piece, as well as the farmer's understanding of his neighbors' decisions to sell their water rights. He was also mentioned in Todd's story.

In addition to these two videos, the presentation by my Web site colleagues, Tim Skillern and Becki Dilfer, was multifaceted. It included animated maps of the Arkansas River, a slide show of Aurora, and an interview with an Aurora water official who was a main character in Todd's story. For a "making of the story" segment, Tim interviewed both Todd and Marc, the story's reporter and photographer.

For the digital newsbook, Roger Fidler reworked several of these elements, including using only the audio of the ditch rider from my original video and re-editing the videos into two shorter pieces. ■

Image withheld from Web by request of copyright holder.

Aurora, Colorado once relied on water from Denver but was partly cut off in the 1950's and went in search of its own. The ever-growing population of Aurora and the ongoing drought have made the issue of water use and water rights a top priority for city planners.

Image withheld from Web by request of copyright holder.

A ranch hand clears an obstruction blocking the flow of water in one of the furrows that irrigates a field of oats on the property of a Rocky Ford, Colorado rancher and farmer. *Photos by Marc Piscotty/Rocky Mountain News.*

Sonya Doctorian produces "Video Journal," a series of video essays for the Rocky Mountain News Web site. She also works with the newspaper's photography staff as a coach and project photo editor. The video journals are available at http://cfapp.rockymountainnews.com/video/doctorian.cfm.

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Creating Digital Newsbooks

Newspapers use them to bring enterprise reporting to a new audience on the Web.

By Roger Fidler

The Rocky Mountain News's "Dividing the Waters" story is just one of several thousand special reports that newspapers worldwide collectively publish each year. Newspapers invest a significant amount of their resources to produce these enterprise stories, which can take months of coordinated efforts to gather, distill, write, verify, process and package. Few would dispute that special reports represent the very best that print journalists have to offer and are newspapers' most valuable and distinctive content asset. Why then is the newspaper industry not doing more to capitalize on this asset?

Editors and publishers often tout their special reports to colleagues at other newspapers, especially after they have won Pulitzer Prizes or other coveted journalism awards, but what about spreading the word to those who are not members of the Fourth Estate? In my view, the industry is missing opportunities to more widely disseminate and draw attention to some of its best work and possibly to generate new revenue from its investments.

To make special reports more appealing and accessible to both readers and nonreaders of newspapers, publishers need to look beyond their current approaches. Printing special reports in broadsheet or tabloid formats obviously is convenient and cost-effective for newspapers, despite the many tons of newsprint they consume. However, this approach has some serious drawbacks for prospective readers.

Few people (me included) can find the time to read these extra long stories in print on the days they are published, no matter how interesting or useful they might appear. Moreover, the newsprint used by most newspapers today does not have a long shelf life (especially in our home, where my wife is quick to recycle newspapers in the chinchilla cage), and it does not appeal to the majority of those who have gravitated to the Internet for their news and information.

Even on the Web, special reports are generally unwieldy and unappealing. Most conform to the standard templates used for news stories, so readers must scroll long columns of text that link to page after page with more long columns of text. Photos and graphics along with the occasional video and audio clips typically are confined to separate pop-up Flash galleries or media player windows, which tend to cause delays and to disconnect the written stories from related visual and audio elements.

Printing out these stories from the Web, as many people are still prone to do, is not much better. A complete special report can fill dozens of letter-size pages in the typical Web-page format. The so-called "printer-friendly" versions usually will fill fewer pages, but the wide column width can make reading slower and more tedious, especially when there are no visual interruptions. In most cases, the photos and graphics displayed in pop-up galleries cannot be printed.

Another common problem with special reports posted on newspaper Web sites is that they are nearly impossible to find. Those newspapers that bother to include a small "special reports" button usually bury it in their menu column along with a gazillion other small buttons. Rarely are special reports promoted and linked for more than a day or two on a newspaper's home page, so they quickly fall into the category of "out of sight, out of mind."

Digital Newsbooks

During the past three years, I have worked with the Rocky Mountain News, The Denver Post, and Los Angeles Times to develop a new vehicle for disseminating special reports that I call a Digital Newsbook. My objective was to bring together the strengths of printed publications with the compelling features of the Web and to do it in a way that would provide readers with a comfortable, high-quality reading experience as well as a visually rich environment for multimodal storytelling. Like e-books, Digital Newsbooks are designed to be downloaded from a Web site and read offline on any contemporary liquid crystal monitor, laptop or tablet PC.

The concept derives from the printed newsbooks that began circulating in Europe not long after Gutenberg demonstrated his inventions in Mainz some 550 years ago. European rulers were among the first to see the potential of mechanical printing (the new media of the 15th and 16th centuries, which then was known as "artificial writing") for widely disseminating "news" of their military adventures and accomplishments. Most were written in the form of letters and included woodblock illustrations. Even after newspapers began their rapid spread throughout Europe in the 17th century, newsbooks (also known as pamphlets and newsletters) remained popular. Unlike newspapers, each focused on a single timely event or topic.

While I've given Digital Newsbooks the traditional portrait-oriented (taller than they are wide), nonscrolling page format of printed books and magazines, they also can incorporate the interactive hypermedia features found on Web sites. And like the Web, color can be applied to any and all pages for no extra cost.

Seven Digital Newsbooks were produced under my direction at Kent State University's Institute for Cyber-Information (ICI). The first two were produced for the Los Angeles Times in

October 2002 as part of an ongoing ICI electronic newspaper research project partially funded by the Times and Adobe Systems Inc.

Newsbooks on the Web

The Rocky Mountain News has the distinction of being the first newspaper to post a Digital Newsbook on its Web site. (The Times's newsbooks were distributed on CD's.) John Temple, the Rocky's editor and publisher, became intrigued when he saw me demonstrate the concept at a Unisys Users Group meeting in September 2003. Immediately after that meeting, he asked what I would need to produce the "Dividing the Waters" story in the Digital Newsbook format. The paper had published the story as a tabloid section nearly two months earlier and already had a version on the Web, but he was eager to explore a new way to package and disseminate the story.

After we agreed on a fee to be paid to ICI, he arranged to have all of the text, photos and graphics for the story sent to me on CD's. A graduate assistant and I created the templates and layouts in Adobe InDesign based on the printed tabloid version. Every effort was made to retain the newspaper's design and typographic styles within the newsbook's magazine-size pages. We also edited the video and audio clips to reduce their runtimes and file sizes. All hyperlinks as well as all multimedia elements were added within the InDesign file. When the layouts were completed, the newsbook was exported from InDesign as an Adobe Acrobat PDF (portable document format) file. In Acrobat, the newsbook was set to open in full screen mode and secured to prevent the altering or extracting of pages.

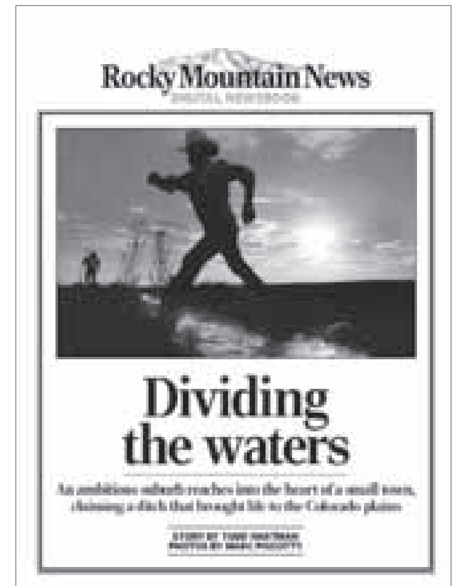
On the day the "Dividing the Waters" Digital Newsbook was posted on the Rocky's Web site, Temple's column, in which he introduced the newsbook concept to readers, was published in the printed editions and on the Web. [This newsbook can be found at http://rockymountainnews.com/drmn/news/article/0,1299,DRMN_3_2100554,00.html.] While the total number of readers who actually downloaded the newsbook is not known (due to a technical problem), all but one of the 20 or so readers who took the time to write to Temple or to complete a survey form included with the newsbook indicated that they liked the format.

So far, all of the Digital Newsbooks produced for newspapers have been posted on the Web several weeks or months after the special reports appeared in print and on Web sites, which undoubtedly has greatly reduced the number of people who might be interested in reading these special reports in the Digital Newsbook format. Ideally, newsbooks should be produced,

How to Read Digital Newsbooks

Unlike the Web, Digital Newsbooks are designed to be downloaded and read offline. Here's what you need to read a Digital Newsbook:

- A computer with Microsoft Windows 2000 or XP operating system, or Apple Macintosh 9.x or 10.x operating system
- A broadband connection via cable modem, DSL telephone line, Wi-Fi or other high-speed service
- Adobe Acrobat Reader 5.0 or later version (free copies are available to download from www.Adobe.com)
- QuickTime Player 5.0 or later version is required to run video clips (free copies are available to download from www.Apple.com)



Digital Newsbooks range between two and 10 megabytes. The download time with a broadband connection should be less than a minute, but the actual time is dependent on the amount of Internet traffic, the capacity of the servers, and other factors.

All Digital Newsbooks are set to open in full-screen mode from within the Adobe Acrobat Reader. To access the Reader application menu, click the view button in the bottom-right corner or press the escape key on your keyboard. To return to full-screen mode click the view button again.

If a newsbook opens in your Web browser, save the file to your computer and reopen in Acrobat Reader. Macintosh computers running OS X can launch newsbooks in Apple's preview application. Preview is a simple portable document format (PDF) viewer that does not recognize hyperlinks, layered content or multimedia elements, such as video and audio clips. If a newsbook opens in preview, quit preview and launch Acrobat Reader, then open the newsbook from the Acrobat Reader menu bar.

Liquid crystal displays (LCD's) found in contemporary flat-screen desktop monitors, laptops and tablet PC's provide the best reading experience. Your reading experience will be even better if you select "CoolType" and "Smooth Line Art" in the Acrobat Reader preferences.

All Digital Newsbooks produced by the Kent State University Institute for CyberInformation, including the Rocky Mountain News's "Dividing the Waters," can be found on the institute's Web site at www.ici.kent.edu/dnb2.htm. More information about Digital Newsbooks and my work on them is available at www.rogerfidler.com. ■ —R.F.

promoted and published on the Web simultaneously with the printed versions. One experienced editor/designer could repackage a typical special report in the newsbook format in two days or less. If information graphics, video and/or audio elements are to be included, additional staff support might be needed.

Also, none of the newspapers so far has attempted to sell its Digital Newsbooks on the Web or to recruit sponsors. I would venture that several hundred of the special reports produced by newspapers worldwide each year would be of sufficient quality and timely interest to justify a purchase price of four or five dollars, which is what people pay for most magazines on newsstands.

If all Digital Newsbooks were aggregated, marketed and sold through a newspaper industry e-commerce Web site, I believe they could reach a large number of readers internationally and could create a new revenue stream that would more than offset costs. And by extending the accessibility of special reports across time and distance, they can be made more useful for educators, researchers, policymakers and other interested parties. ■

Roger Fidler is the inaugural Donald W. Reynolds Fellow at the Missouri School of Journalism, where he is working on the second edition of his book "Mediamorphosis: Understanding New Media" and continuing to pursue his vision of digital newspapers. He is the former director of the Institute for CyberInformation at Kent State University (www.ici.kent.edu).

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Engaging Viewers in Conflicts About Water

Filmmakers invite 'viewers to commit themselves for a while to the characters on screen and the choices they make.'

By Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman

Aqui, no hay acuerdo! "Here, there is no consensus," declares Bolivian community leader Oscar Olivera near the end of our documentary "Thirst," as he tears up the Final Report written by the bankers at the 2003 World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan. His impassioned speech was a message to the gathered international financial and corporate elites that the corporate takeover of global public water supplies and services would not happen without a fight.

As documentary filmmakers, "No hay acuerdo!" could serve also as our mission statement. We see our work as disrupting the tendentious framing of major issues by elites and an often-unquestioning media. We try to provide an alternative framework that challenges the status quo and sparks a debate on contemporary social issues. In "Thirst" and our other documentary work we do this by following stories of conflict and offering multiple points of view to create openings for our audiences not only to see these issues differently, but also to see themselves as potential actors once the film is over.

We were motivated to make "Thirst" in order to chronicle what we see as the pitched and unbalanced battle between the public and private sectors in

At the 2003 World Water Forum, Oscar Olivera, a Bolivian community leader, declares there is no consensus for water privatization.

Protesters gather in Stockton, California in February 2003 to oppose the mayor's plan to privatize the city's water system.

Photos courtesy of Snitow-Kaufman Productions.

the United States. The one-hour film, which was aired nationally on the PBS series P.O.V. in 2004, sheds light on the largely behind the scenes efforts by multinational water companies to take over public water services and supplies. The privatization effort is part of a larger far-right political campaign to convince people that corporations can do virtually anything better, cheaper, faster and more efficiently than supposedly lazy, inflexible, corrupt and self-serving public agencies and employees. The corollary of this asserted ideological "consensus" is that private companies *should* take over most public services, including water.

The customary framing of privatization is in contrast to an alternative story—that corporations are engaged in the large-scale theft of public resources, victimizing families, communities and our environment for short-term profits at the expense of long-term security and sustainability. What we discovered in researching dozens of stories for "Thirst" is that when it comes to the basic life-giving resource of water, people will fight heroically to maintain local control and accountability. Powerful coalitions of labor and environmentalists seem to form spontaneously when the issue becomes whether water is defined as a human right or just as another commodity that is bought and sold on global markets.

In "Thirst," the drama intensifies as viewers get to know and care about people on all sides of these debates, people whose words and experiences we filmed. We chose a character-based, story-driven format for the film rather than a fact-driven, talking-head structure, and we chose to avoid narration. Based on what they see and feel, viewers have to make the political connections and draw some conclusions for themselves. In other words, the viewer has to do some work. Ironically, by demanding this engagement, we also allow it, inviting viewers to commit themselves for a while to the characters on screen and the choices they make. Our aim is to dispel the apathetic ennui so often produced when the media spoon-feeds issues to what's presumed to be an inert public.

Core Themes Emerge

"Thirst" focuses attention primarily on the water privatization battle involving the people who live in Stockton, California, but interweaves that community's struggle with stories of similar conflicts from the city of Cochabamba in Bolivia and rural Rajasthan in India. The stories are linked to one another through vociferous debates in Kyoto, Japan, where political leaders, bankers and corporate executives gathered to determine who will control the world's freshwater supplies. At the Kyoto forum, a diverse group of grassroots "water warriors," including Bolivia's Olivera, defends water as a human right, not a commodity.

The stakes in these debates are very high. The ways in which water is owned and allocated reveals much about the structure of a society. Water conflicts expose the identity of rulers and the structure of their rule.

In Stockton, citizen opposition to water privatization forced city officials, billionaire developers, and corporate leaders out of the back rooms and into a public debate about a $600 million, 20-year contract—the largest water privatization deal ever in the West. Powerful supporters of Stockton's privatization were annoyed, even outraged, by having to go through the motions of public debate. The head of the city's water department was fired for asking hard questions about the plan to privatize. Even the local newspaper was pressured to oust its city hall reporter, who did nothing more than what is usually considered a journalist's job—remaining skeptical of unproved claims and representing fairly the arguments of participants on both sides in the controversy.

The joy of documentary filmmaking is that it allows time for themes to evolve. As we followed our stories, it became clear to us that the fight over water privatization represented something larger: the conflict over perceptions of democracy, public participation, and citizenship. Protagonists in the water battle also began to play out our nation's lack of consensus on the broader issues of national identity and values. Mayor Gary Podesto, Stockton's leading advocate of utility privatization, dismisses privatization opponents as "activists" and calls them "the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker." "It's time," he tells business leaders, "that Stockton enter the 21st century in its delivery of services and think of our citizens as *customers*."

"I'm not a community activist," counters orthodontist Dale Stocking, "I'm an involved *citizen*. If there's an issue I care about, I get involved."

Privatization of a basic public service like water raises these issues of democracy and citizenship because when a private company takes over the water supply, the formerly public conversation about priorities of water use and allocation becomes a private conversation and disappears from public scrutiny. This is happening at a time of increasing government secrecy and antiterrorism measures, which intensify the public's distance from meaningful civic participation.

As one might imagine, "Thirst" was not popular among the major multinational water companies, all of them among the hundred largest corporations in the world. The major companies, their trade associations, and their backers at the U.S. Conference of Mayors condemned the film in frustration, unable to find errors and do more than grouse that the national broadcast, a screening on Capitol Hill, and community showings have "outed" their activities as something other than salvation for cash-strapped cities. Since we completed the film, the battle over the future of water has intensified. We hope the film dramatizes that we, as a nation, are far from consensus on the future of our most basic natural resource. ■

Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman are documentary filmmakers. More information about "Thirst" can be found at www.thirstthemovie.org, including an accompanying study guide written by the Sierra Club Water Privatization Task Force.

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WATCHDOG

Reporting on Water as a Global Story

A network of international journalists produced multimedia reports on the consequences of privatizing water.

By William Marsden

As giant corporations in the 1980's and 1990's gobbled up almost every journalistic enterprise and began reducing them to cash cows and political tools, investigative reporting gradually receded from journalism. Charles Lewis, a producer for CBS's "60 Minutes," responded in the late 1980's by creating The Center for Public Integrity (CPI), an investigative reporting venture started by journalists and run by journalists. It is essentially built on a promise to keep the faith. From its offices in Washington, D.C., CPI has consistently broken major stories on topics including political party financing, the American justice system, the environment, and corruption in corporate America. Its medium is primarily the Internet, but the center has also published numerous books and articles in newspapers and magazines around the world.

In 1997, CPI's founders assembled an international network of investigative journalists from about 45 countries and created The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). In the era of globalization, what happens in our backyard often is happening (or having consequences) throughout the world. Certainly there are common threads of behavior to be found as centralized corporate and political power structures work together to impose systems, ideologies and strategies worldwide. It seemed clear that journalism needed to create new and strategic approaches to reporting these global stories.

At meetings of this network's members, story ideas were discussed. At the 2001 meeting there was agreement that launching a worldwide investigative project about water was a natural fit. The topic also seemed—with water's stunning visual and audio potential—like the perfect candidate for a multimedia treatment using the Internet, print, radio and television. Humans possess a deeply natal attraction to water, so documentary film and even radio are natural media for telling stories about water.

In print, this story would be driven by narrative details and ideas. Water supplied a good story that went far beyond the simple truth of the reckoning with expanding populations, reduced water resources, and projected solutions. The story of water at its essence would offer a revealing look at international corporate and political intrigue and the internal machinations of world power elites.

Defining the Project

When dealing with such a large multimedia and global project, it is crucial—when trying to organize the work of 15 journalists throughout the world—to embark with a crystal clear and agreed-upon focus. To achieve this kind of clarity, our project's theme had to be contained in a single word and line. Given that the United Nations had set millennium goals for delivering clean water to the world's population and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund had devised the financial means to do this, we also knew that major global corporations would control the utilities and supply the expertise. So the word we focused the journalists' attention on was "privatization."

We wanted journalists to examine in a number of countries how the world's political, financial and corporate power centers were privatizing water as they sought to transform this life force into a commodity. Our story would be about how five companies set out to control the world's drinking water. As the project's editor, I sent this theme to every journalist involved in the project. Because the CPI member selection process involves a fairly vigorous vetting of their past work, there are no weak links. This meant there would be no question of us being able to select well-qualified journalists for this project. The issue would be to determine the right countries or regions from which to report this story: We needed to identify countries and characters who played key roles in the battles over privatization and whose stories would clearly demonstrate how the battles unfolded.

My research narrowed our list of potential countries to about 20. I then sent off a list of questions to ICIJ members in those countries as a guide to them providing us with more on-the-ground, in-depth research. Their replies led me to focus reporting on South Africa, Argentina, Colombia, Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, France, England, the United States, and Canada.

While each country told a unique part of this story, what these journalists learned gave our project the ability to report on a global pattern, devised by the World Bank and its corporate partners. France and the United Kingdom were home to the world's largest water companies—Suez, Vivendi and Thames. Both countries aggressively privatized their local utilities, and once their home water markets were saturated, they were ready to push their market strategies out into the rest of the world.

While Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan had supplied the ideology, the World Bank provided the financial muscle. Newly created organizations, such as the World Water Council, the brainchild of the water industry, helped

to sell privatization as the only solution to the world's "water crisis." Business magazines, such as Fortune, applauded the self-proclaimed success of bringing water to the poor of Buenos Aires, Manila, Jakarta and South Africa. Atlanta would be these companies' foothold in North America, as they set out to privatize water in the United States and Canada, promising cheaper rates and more reliable service. Bechtel privatized the water of Cochabamba in Bolivia. Enron jumped into the market with a water utility company that won a major concession in Argentina, while it also started a project to trade California water on the Internet. Wall Street salivated over the billion-dollar potential of water commodity trading. In its customary portrayal, all sounded great.

At ICIJ, we started to take a hard look at what was happening on the ground.

Reporting the Story

What we found is that bribery, corruption and international political haggling drove the business as companies competed for billion-dollar concessions. Once private companies moved in, competition ended and a ruthless, monopolistic capitalism took over. People had their water cut off and homes seized when they were unable to pay their utility bills. In South Africa, one consequence of this was the largest cholera outbreak in the country's history as thousands were forced to get water from contaminated ponds and streams. In Buenos Aires, corporations reaped windfall profits while the poor did not get their promised water or sewage services. Soon the companies demanded contract changes imposing higher water rates and reduced service obligations.

There was no question that in some areas water services improved. But improvement always came with a high price tag that went beyond money. The community ceded its control of its water system, and this often resulted in a loss of community itself. Now everything depended on the whims of the water companies. Even though privatization was sold on the argument that the private sector could do the job more cheaply and more efficiently, the ability to hold these companies accountable vanished, while events also proved the opposite to be the case. The profit motive and high financing costs drove people's costs up and efficiencies were achieved by a reduction in services.

What we learned in reporting on these situations is that when political will exists, water systems are always better run and service is more reliable under government control. The belief that everyone has a right to clean water is simply not compatible with a capitalist approach to its control.

So what happened in many of these places where privatization was tried is that prices skyrocketed, services plummeted, and protestors refused to pay. Many took to the streets. In Bolivia, a protestor was killed by an army sniper—a murder that was captured by a video camera. Over time, companies were unable to meet debt payments and/or service obligations and concessions collapsed, as happened in Atlanta, Manila, South Africa, and Argentina. As the dust settled, one former Enron executive moaned: "Nobody wants anybody to make money on water."

Events such as these continued to occur while we were researching and writing the stories and preparing the radio and television documentaries. The journalists and researchers supplied us with a continuous stream of updates as we prepared these stories for broadcast and publication.

We communicated primarily through the Internet as stories went through numerous revisions. Each journalist was required to footnote every fact and quotation used in the story. Original documents had to be sent to the ICIJ to be included in the legal binder so the lawyers we hired to review the articles would have documentation available for every line of every story. Most of the stories were heavily edited and rewritten to conform to the overall style of the project. None of the journalists complained, because they understood from the start that this was a team effort.

In January 2003, a year and a half after we'd begun work on the project, our findings were published on the CPI Web site under the title, "The Water Barons." The center also published this collection of reports as a paperback. Sections were republished in various newspapers and magazines. Bob Carty, a radio reporter and ICIJ member with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), broadcast a radio documentary series—based on the same reporting—the following month. Parts of this were also aired on National Public Radio.

The TV Documentary

Producing a television documentary, however, would prove to be far more difficult. Our budget numbers showed it would cost about $1 million to do it right. I teamed up with Neil Docherty, a documentary maker with the CBC and "Frontline." We would produce it together, although he would have the lead role as director. We persuaded the CBC's public affairs show, "The Fifth Estate," to put into its schedule a two-hour special on water privatization. Negotiations with the National Film Board of Canada and a Paris-based production company called Taxi-Brousse got us important sources of financing that allowed CBC to spread the risk.

This part of the project, however, remained a battle as promises were not kept and communications among the various companies were problematic too often, resulting in serious misunderstandings. Probably the only reason the film was made on deadline was because Neil and I simply pressed on and an ever-supportive CBC paid the bills. We filmed in South Africa, Argentina, France, United Kingdom, and Switzerland, and in the United States we went to Texas, California, Atlanta, Washington, New York, and Detroit and in Canada to Moncton, Toronto and Winnipeg.

The documentary's narrative line opened with a mystery story: Two thugs were arrested in a Paris train station with a tote bag containing guns, ammunition, brass knuckles, handcuffs and billy clubs. They were on their way to a small city in the south of France called Beziers. We showed how a Vivendi water executive had hired them through a middleman to intimidate a retired

engineer, a former water executive with Suez who now ran a small consultancy business that advised cities and towns on their water concession contracts with private water companies. In his work he'd shown a number of city councils how the companies ripped them off, and this led to cities renegotiating or canceling contracts. Antiprivatization citizen groups followed up on his work and began to file lawsuits against the companies and the city councils for the return of the water utilities to public control. Vivendi wanted him out of action. Around this small tale of intrigue, we wound the story of global water privatization.

The documentary was broadcast on CBC in March 2004 with the title, "Dead in the Water." The French are expected to broadcast their version this year, with the name, "Les Barons de l'Eau."

While the story being told across these various media is largely the same, each medium brings to its telling a different texture, level of detail, and sensorial impact. And with these differences, new perspectives surface. Print provides a durable and detailed intellectual richness that neither radio nor TV achieved. The documentary (in its various forms) lends the subject matter a visual and emotional impact that makes the characters and the issues immediately tangible and real.

Dozens of researchers, writers, editors, photographers, sound and other technicians worked on these projects. For a project such as this to succeed, finding the best, most motivated people is crucial. Doing good journalism these days can be an enormous emotional struggle against corporate and managerial interests that exist in a world in which self-preservation and self-promotion can too often be the major forces motivating journalists. Fortunately, the journalists affiliated with CPI or ICIJ are doing what they do for different reasons. It is not an exaggeration to say that many of them work in countries where they are under constant threat of imprisonment—and many of them have been imprisoned—or even death. Those involved with this project were fearless investigators. If it had been any other way, this project would never have succeeded. ■

William Marsden is an author, documentary filmmaker, and an investigative reporter for The Gazette in Montreal, Canada. He served as project manager of "The Water Barons," which won an Investigative Reporters and Editors' award for its online report.

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WATCHDOG

When Water and Political Power Intersect

A journalist probes the story of water privatization in Jakarta, Indonesia.

By Andreas Harsono

When I got an assignment in late 2001 to report on the privatization of Jakarta's water company, I knew that it was going to be difficult, requiring a lot of research and interviews. But what I could not have imagined then is that I'd be witness to the deterioration of Indonesia's two largest companies, which were closely related to Indonesian strongman General Suharto.

As I began my reporting, Sigit Harjojudanto, Suharto's eldest son, who collaborated with the British-German firm RWE Thames Water to privatize Jakarta's PAM Jaya water company, declined to respond to my faxed messages and phone calls. It turned out that his office was almost deserted. Office workers told me that he rarely visited the office after his father's forced resignation from the presidency in May 1998.

Harjojudanto's advisor, Fachry Thaib, once a flamboyant businessman, suddenly shunned publicity. Harjojudanto's other business associates, once involved in many sport or social activities during the Suharto era, were willing to talk but for background only. "We have seen the turn of our fate, from the hunter to the hunted," said Iwa Kartiwa, an aide to Anthony Salim, the CEO of the then widely diversified Salim Group, which worked with the French Suez to privatize the other half of PAM Jaya.

At the same time I was witness to labor unions in the post-Suharto period transforming themselves quickly from lame ducks into effective if not rude organizations. They mobilized strikes and organized campaigns frequently to protest both RWE Thames Water and Suez. "It was unexpected during the Suharto period. Now we're being sought by many political parties," said Taufik Sandjaja, a leader of the Indonesian Drinking Water Labor Union.

They also actively contacted the media with press releases, documents or other statistical reports. Some unionists even took time to retrieve some original papers to help me understand the water privatization.

Jakarta's Water Story Begins

Jakarta's water privatization story began in June 1991, when the World Bank agreed to lend PAM Jaya $92 million (U.S. dollars) for infrastructure improvements. The loan was matched by one from the Japan-based Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund to build a water purification plant in Pulogadung, in eastern Jakarta. The loans were very much needed because PAM Jaya was practically managing a colonial-inherited water infrastructure that had been constructed in the 1920's.

The World Bank soon encouraged the Indonesian government to privatize its utilities, according to World Bank loan documents. The World Bank expected that the loans would facilitate privatization by bolstering the water and sewage infrastructure and making the waterworks a more attractive investment. Private companies accordingly made their moves to take control of PAM Jaya.

The London-based Thames Water Overseas Ltd. was first to act in 1993. It formed an alliance with Harjojudanto, a notorious gambler among Jakarta's elite circle with no experience in the water business. Thames set up an Indonesian subsidiary and gave him a 20 percent interest. For Thames, forging an alliance with a Suharto was a question of realpolitik. "At the time, any company dealing with Indonesia would have to deal with almost some element of the Suharto family because of the way the government was set up," said Peter Spillett, head of environment, quality and sustainability for Thames.

In Paris, Suez worried that Thames would snap up the entire water concession. To pave its inside track, Suez selected Salim Group, then the largest conglomeration in Indonesia whose founder, Sudono Salim, was a close associate to Suharto since the 1950's. "Access to politics is essential. The water business is always political," Bernard Lafrogne, a Suez representative in Jakarta, told me.

These strong partnerships soon produced results. In 1995, President Suharto ordered his public works minister, Radinal Moochtar, to privatize Jakarta's water. Under official orders, the city was divided in half and split between Thames and Suez. The contract was signed in June 1997. It was a 25-year contract to distribute and to sell water in Jakarta.

A month later, the unanticipated Asian monetary crisis began to bite Thailand's baht and soon Indonesia's rupiah. Staple food prices went up. The rupiah rate to the U.S. dollar went from 2,300 in July 1997 to more than 14,000 in February 1998. Anti-Suharto riots broke out throughout Indonesia. His cronies tried to deflect the public unrest by blaming the Chinese minority. In May 1998, rioters burned many Chinese-owned buildings and killed more than 2,500 people, mostly trapped in burned structures, in Jakarta. Suharto was finally forced to step down after staying in power since 1965.

Using company documents and information gathered from interviews with key officials, I was able to piece together the story of private meetings that took place in those dangerous days. PAM Jaya officials feared that the Jakarta water network might be poisoned. Others said even cholera could break out in the capital, affecting the lives of millions of people living in Jakarta.

Most Thames and Suez executives fled Jakarta, prompting former executives of PAM Jaya to take over the water operation. PAM Jaya president, Rama Boedi, who had just lost control of the company nearly one year earlier, invited Kartiwa and Fachry to his office on May 23, 1998 to tell them the government was canceling the contract and taking back the water. "The situation was very tense," said Efendy Napitupulu, a PAM Jaya manager who was at the meeting. Armed men openly displayed their guns in the meeting room. Suez executive Lafrogne, who was married to a woman from Jakarta and was the only foreign boss to remain in Jakarta, also attended the meeting, with an escort of police officers.

PAM Jaya officials correctly claimed the privatization was totally illegal and rife with corruption. They pressed the company officials to sign the water system back to the public. Boedi warned them he couldn't control the anti-Suharto forces, which could easily turn against the two international companies. Finally, they agreed to sign a document officially handing the water operation back to PAM Jaya.

When the companies learned of the cancellations, their British and French executives raced back to Jakarta and threatened to sue the government if PAM Jaya did not honor the contract. A Suez internal 100-page report that Lafrogne gave me called the cancellation a "coup d'etat." But they also realized they'd lost their most important political support with Suharto no longer in power. Their partners had suddenly become liabilities. By finding the contents of a letter that the consortia sent to President B.J. Habibie, Suharto's successor, I was able to learn that they had decided to severe their ties with the Salim Group and Harjojudanto. They also asked their respective governments to lobby the Habibie government.

The consortia also paid dearly but declined to reveal the numbers. I calculated myself that Sigit Harjojudanto's share was valued at about $700,000 while the Salim Group's 60 percent share was valued at around $3.2 million. The Habibie government was concerned that a fight with two major multinationals would scare off foreign investment. In return, Thames and Suez agreed to renegotiate the contracts.

Finally, on October 22, 2001, a new contract was signed between PAM Jaya and the consortia. Both Thames and Suez established new companies: PT Thames PAM Jaya and PT PAM Lyonnaise Jaya. They are 95 percent owned by their parent companies in London and Paris. The remaining five percent were given to subcontractors of the international companies. Under the new contract—much fairer when compared with the former ones—the multinational companies agreed to give PAM Jaya joint control of the bank accounts. The companies also accepted the establishment of a regulatory body that would independently recommend new water rates, monitor the Jakarta waterworks, and mediate disputes between PAM Jaya and the consortia.

Holding the Companies Accountable

While the vast majority of new water customers were in rich, middle-class and industrial areas, Lafrogne said that Suez was committed to providing water also to the poor. Suez had increased connections for the relatively poor neighborhoods in its districts by 260 percent, he said, from around 9,000 to almost 35,000 connections. But the consortia have not met many of the projections outlined in the original contracts. By 2001 the two companies were to have invested 732 billion rupiah, or about

$318 million at the 1997 exchange rate. The consortia had, in fact, invested around 850 billion rupiah by 2001 but, because of the currency depreciation, that was worth only $100 million.

The Thames and Suez executives blamed their missed connection targets on the economic crisis, whose devaluations led to higher prices for imported equipment. Lafrogne correctly blamed foot-dragging by local employees who refused to cooperate with their foreign bosses. He also claimed the government had refused to grant the extent of rate increases needed to finance improvements to the system.

Atjeng Sastrawidjaja, a Jakarta city auditor, wrote in an audit report that most of the consortia's financial problems were of their own making and grew out of excessively high operating costs. The companies rented new offices in two separate buildings in Jakarta's business district rather than using PAM Jaya assets. In addition, salaries of the international executives, who live in the city's wealthiest neighborhoods, are higher than those paid to PAM Jaya officials. Their top executives—numbering from 15 to 20 in each company—are paid between $100,000 and $200,000 annually, which is a huge sum in Jakarta. PAM Jaya top executives like Rama Boedi received the equivalent of no more than $25,000, according to some audit documents and several sources.

Andrew McLernon, an urban development consultant for the World Bank, told me the project came into being with "birth defects"—a lack of transparency, the failure to raise rates prior to the privatization, and the lack, initially, of an independent regulator.

The work I did on this story for The Water Barons book project proved to be a remarkable assignment—from the reporting I did to watching the project about water privatization issues in many countries come together under the editing of William Marsden. [See Marsden's article on page 43.] Some journalists asked me how I had got some sensitive documents, such as a Suharto memo or cabinet meeting minutes—papers that were still considered confidential, if not classified. I'd like to say that almost everything is leaked in Jakarta, as long as you have a whole network of secretaries, chauffeurs, unionists and sometimes top executives themselves. In the course of my work I was able to collect documents, contracts, photocopies, clippings, as thick as 1.5 meters.

I tried hard to use not a single anonymous source. A number of times I patiently briefed my sources about what being an anonymous source meant to them and to readers. I told them that anonymity means that readers have difficulties in measuring to what extent they should believe or disbelieve their statement. Or at least, the readers are left in the dark about an anonymous statement. I also told them that anonymous sources tend to be less responsible with their remarks than those whose names are published. Interestingly, most of my sources, who initially asked to talk off the record, agreed—after our conversation about this—that they did not deserve such a status and talked on the record. Only Harjojudanto, two of his cronies, and Anthony Salim declined to do interviews.

This water project not only improved my understanding of how journalists should work but also helped my sources to understand this as well. And it was a wonderful surprise after the book was published, when the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the Washington, D.C. group that sponsored this water project, sent me an e-mail letting me know that the reporters who had worked on it had won an award from the Investigative Reporters and Editors. ■

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Using Narrative to Tell Stories About Water

'The imperatives of narrative nonfiction carried me like a current to the book's last words.'

By Jacques Leslie

As a young reporter in Vietnam three decades ago, I occasionally amused myself by comparing Saigon and Washington reports on the same war event. It was bitter amusement, to be sure. Inevitably, the stories with a Vietnam dateline were more accurate: The Washington stories rippled with errors and misinterpretations because their authors were so far from the developments they described and alarmingly dependent on manipulative and mendacious sources.

Part of my attraction to narrative journalism is that it's the antithesis of long-distance reporting: It celebrates immediacy and intimacy and abhors abstraction—the only ones it allows are grounded in the concrete.

From the time I began to read seriously, in my teens, narrative nonfiction held the tightest grip on me. I adored books and essays by its eclectic crew of practitioners—including Gay Talese, George Orwell, Norman Mailer, E.B. White, Primo Levi, Joan Didion, and John McPhee. But it still took me a

couple of decades after Vietnam before I committed the act myself. I'd gotten comfortable with the reliable but pallid voice of standard journalism and kept telling myself I'd write narratives as soon as the chance arose. At last, in my 40's, I realized I had better stop waiting to be asked.

I hung out in a local shoe repairman's shop for a few weeks and spent nearly as much time in a barbershop. The two stories I wrote were never published, but I learned techniques that I could apply to larger subjects and experienced what felt like the firing of my mind's creative synapses, surprising and overdue all at once. I attended a writing conference, where I was shocked to hear my prose harshly criticized, and realized I'd overlooked some basic narrative techniques. ("Write in scenes" is the instruction that hit me with the force of a commandment.) As I kept writing, a lyrical voice, which had previously surfaced only in letters, gradually emerged. At Wired, where I wrote regularly, I declared that henceforth the only stories I would write would be narratives—and, to my surprise, was immediately assigned them. My narrative career took flight.

At a protest in Indore, India, people gathered to try to save land and homes from being flooded by a massive dam project. The protest resulted in some modest concessions from the government. *Photo by Robert Dawson, © 2001.*

Choosing Characters

In a long piece I wrote for Harper's about global water scarcity, I interspersed narrative and exposition. I'd taken on the elemental subject of water, but the piece still felt like a view from the shore: To immerse myself, I'd have to write a book.

At the core of every debate about water are dams, the modern pyramids, generators of extravagantly apportioned electricity, water storage, and environmental and social disasters, where water conflicts are manifested in most dramatic form—I knew dams were my subject. At first I became intrigued by the ambitions and tribulations of the short-lived but influential World Commission on Dams. The commission arose out of the World Bank's frustration in building dams, when the bank found many of its projects stalled by protests: In an act of seeming desperation, it agreed to support an independent commission of leaders from every dam constituency that would review dams' performance and provide guidelines for how they ought to be built in the future.

One of the commission's 12 members was Medha Patkar, the world's foremost antidam activist, who during a decade and a half of protest over a dam in Western India had tried drowning herself in rising reservoir waters (only to be wrested away with water at neck level by police intent on avoiding an embarrassing incident) and went on hunger strikes of 26, 22 and 17 days. Far across the dam divide was Jan Veltrop, a Dutch-born, naturalized-American past president of the dam engineers' trade group, the International Commission on Large Dams, who had helped design the most voluminous dam in the world, Pakistan's Tarbela, with 40 times the volume of the Great Pyramid. From its formation to the issuance of its final report two-and-a-half years later, the commission overcame numerous crises to produce a unanimous report with 26 best-practice guidelines for dam construction. The World Bank, dismayed at being told what it didn't want to hear, labeled the guidelines excessive and rejected the report. The commission's story was a skirmish in the ongoing war of environment, development and globalization, and I thought it deserved to be told.

I confess that I did not at first envision the book as a narrative. In fact, I was on the verge of signing a contract that would have committed me to write a commission history when Paul Elie, an editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, suggested I try approaching dams in narrative form, by focusing on a few key figures in the debate. As soon as he said it, I knew that was what I wanted to do, and I realized the World Commission on Dams provided the structure. To foster a balanced commission, its organizers sorted nominees for commissioner into three categories—pro-dam, mixed and antidam—and selected four commissioners from each. For roughly equivalent reasons, I did something similar: I chose as subjects one commissioner from each group.

The three people I chose were an Australian water manager, struggling

People live under a large pipe in Bombay, India, where they illegally tap into it to get water for their families daily use. *Photo by Robert Dawson, © 2001.*

to reverse the grave decline of the continent's only major river system, the Murray-Darling; an American anthropologist considered the world's foremost authority on dam resettlement who'd spent nearly half a century studying the calamitous impact of a dam on 57,000 displaced people in Africa's Zambezi River Valley, and Patkar, the Indian firebrand. With the shift from one commission history to three commissioner narratives, I felt freed. Now, among other things, I could turn a startling but opaque statistic—that at least 40 to 80 million people have been displaced by dams, usually with disastrous consequences—into stories with flesh and bones.

Once I got started, I realized how fortunate I'd been to escape writing a commission history. The 100-plus principal actors in the dams' debate were spread all over the world, as were the dams themselves. I would have lacked the money and energy to visit all of them, and since I'd hadn't witnessed most commission events, I would have had to rely on others to reconstruct them—I'd have been deprived of the use of my senses. Even if I succeeded in cobbling a history together, the opus would have struggled to overcome the drear emotions inspired in readers by the word "commission."

Gathering Stories

Instead, I visited Patkar's remote monsoon outpost, where she was once more planning to drown herself, and waited with her for rising reservoir water to inundate her hut. As it happened, the water never threatened the hut in what turned out to be a poor monsoon year. But it was hard to think of that as something gone wrong, and nothing else on the trip did. With half a dozen of Patkar's coterie of supporters I slept on the ground in her hut and traveled with her to demonstrations and watched her try to convey her Gandhian/Chomskian/feminist/Mother-Teresian/antiglobalization worldview to bewildered tribal people who faced watery eviction from their mountain plots.

In Mumbai, I visited the posh home of Patkar's mother, who complained that on her occasional visits home Patkar spent all her time on the telephone, organizing and pointed out to me the spot on the living room floor where Patkar, eschewing a bed, insisted on sleeping, beneath a giant-screen Sony. The trip felt effortless, like a gift: Each leg yielded a vivid chapter in a tale that unfolded like a novella. When Patkar held a protest in front of a government office in the town of Indore, 300 of her impoverished tribal supporters traveled to it by taking a five-hour boat-ride, an hour-long hike, and a 10-hour overnight drive on rutted roads while standing in the back of two trucks. The astounding, saddening, largely futile protest lasted seven hours, and I knew as I watched it that it provided my ending. It is the India section of the book that won the 2002 J. Anthony Lukas Work-in-Progress Award.

Deluded by the seeming ease of the India section, I briefly entertained the notion that the other trips would automatically deliver up equivalent dollops of drama and story structure. Africa and Australia disabused me of that idea, if only because the two principals' lives lacked the high-wire drama of Patkar's. My editor suggested focusing less on the personalities, more on the rivers and dams. It was good advice.

Thayer Scudder, the anthropologist, began his career in 1956, when he studied the Gwembe Tonga, people who'd lived for centuries along the Zambezi River in what is now Zambia and were about to be resettled to infertile land because of the construction of what was once the largest dam in Africa, the Kariba Dam. Every year or two since, Scudder or his colleague Elizabeth Colson visited the Tonga resettlers and traced their resulting social disarray in books and papers. I went with Scudder to notable dam projects in Lesotho and Botswana, and I visited the Tonga on my own: Their most recent crop had been a 100 percent failure, and some were waiting to die. (Government and charity aid later staved off starvation.)

In Australia, I was beguiled by the eucalyptus-bordered Murray, the arid continent's only major river, the main stem of one of the world's 15 longest

river systems but with less flow in a year than the Amazon in a day. Dams and other diversions have taken so much water from the river that the flow at its mouth now is little more than a quarter of its predam size, and the river and its surroundings are slowly dying. First, I watched as Don Blackmore, the hugely capable chief executive of the government agency that manages the Murray, negotiated among politicians, farmers and environmentalists to arrive at the culminating achievement of his career—a policy requiring farmers to relinquish some of their water so that the river can survive. The agreement Blackmore secured in October 2003 was unprecedented in providing for the return of farm water to the river, but the small quantity involved will almost certainly not be sufficient to halt the river's decline.

The agreement solidified Australia's reputation as the leading water-managing country in the world, but it also suggested the weakness of the field. Blackmore's maneuvers provided the story line, but the stately river in the continent of extremes was still missing. Thus, on a second trip, I drove from one end of the river to the other, from the sleek, monumental Dartmouth Dam near the basin's crest to the astonishing, depleted Coorong lagoon at the nearly imploded Murray mouth. Along the way I talked with farmers, fishermen, Aboriginals and environmentalists and saw the river from enough vantage points to realize that more than Blackmore, the Murray was the main character in the tale.

Writing Stories

"Write lyrically" was another of my editor, Elie's, instructions, more easily commanded than done. Yet for me, the pleasure of writing narrative arises from the way it facilitates a robust voice: Much more than standard journalism, it rewards spontaneity, suppleness, playfulness. A tiny example: Long before I finished the book, I chose the title "Deep Water" in reference to both the depth of mega-dam reservoirs and the trouble that dams cause. Then, as I wrote the book's last paragraph, I found myself describing a wide, artful circle of stones protruding out of the ebbing Coorong lagoon. It was an ingenious Aboriginal fish trap, abandoned but still intact, which had relied on high tides to bring fish within its perimeter and low tides to trap them behind the stones. The Aboriginals were driven from the Coorong seven decades ago, and the lagoon's fish population nosedived after European settlers placed barrages, dams and weirs across the upstream river.

"The Coorong has lost nearly everything," my last sentence began, "but the trap remains intact, as if awaiting the return of fish, the return of the Murray…"—and what? The sentence's rhythm demanded a third returning entity. It took a day or two before my Eureka moment arrived: "…the return of deep water." In reiterating the title, I discovered its most important meaning: rich, nutrient-bearing water, whose dam-induced absence is one of the book's themes. The imperatives of narrative nonfiction carried me like a current to the book's last words. ■

Jacques Leslie's book on dams, rivers and people, "Deep Water: The Epic Struggle Over Dams, Displaced People, and the Environment," will be published in September 2005 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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Watchdog

Reporting on Dams in Dictator-Run Countries

Journalists' access to construction sites is curtailed, so environmental effects and population displacement can't be easily reported.

By Supalak Ganjanakhundee

Building a dam is not a crime, but governments in Southeast Asia don't want journalists to watch too closely. Sometimes local people get hurt in conflicts with government officials or developers, as pieces of land are transformed into the architecture designed to block a river's passage. Countries in mainland Southeast Asia, notably Communist-run Laos and military junta-ruled Myanmar (formerly Burma) have the potential to utilize their mountainous geography and abundance of rivers for hydropower development as a way to boost their cash-strapped economies.

These two slow-growth economies didn't want to create a huge amount of electricity for local consumption. Instead they planned to build a series of dams to provide power for the more advanced Thai economy, which is not able to move ahead with any proposed hydroelectric projects at home due to strong objections from environmentalists and local residents. Most of Thailand's dams were built when it was ruled by military regimes in the 1960's and 1970's. Pak Mun Dam, the most recent one build there in the 1990's and sponsored by the World Bank, is now under pressure from local residents and civic groups to be decommissioned due to social and environmental damage it is causing while generating little power.

Because of this, the state-run Elec-

tricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) would dispatch its engineers to build dams in the rivers of its immediate neighbors, Laos and Myanmar, whose ample natural resource remains untapped, said the EGAT Governor Kaisri Kannasutra. In a recent interview, the governor did not mention that building dams in neighboring countries is easier than in Thailand since there is no strong civil society to oppose or monitor the negative impact of the projects. It's also difficult for journalists to cover the dam construction there.

In 1996, Thailand signed a memorandum of understanding with Laos to purchase 3,000 megawatts (MW) of electricity from dam projects to be built there by 2008. Two small dams, Theun-Hinboun (214 MW) and Houay Ho (126 MW), have already been plugged into the Thai grid system. Next comes the Nam Theun II (1100 MW), the biggest and perhaps most controversial hydro-project in Southeast Asia.

Despite heated debate over excessive supply in Thailand's power system from the Laos projects, the kingdom is still looking for more supply from Myanmar, whose series of five dams in the virgin Salween River is being seriously discussed with the Thai purchaser and potential developers.

Thai electricity consumers know very little about these huge deals with their neighboring countries. This is due to limitations on news coverage and inadequate information supply from the concerned parties. Very few people in Thailand—or anywhere else in the world—have solid information about the impact of these dams on local residents who are mostly ethnic minorities and who, to some extent, continue armed struggle for their autonomy. Usually, the reservoir created by the dam displaces people who live along the river, but these people are given no chance to bring their concerns to a wider audience since media in these countries are under state control. Those who work in the news media usually are not authorized to publicize much more than the beautiful flowers, colorful butterflies, and bright future ahead when the dams light the lamps.

Nam Theun Dam Project

The Nam Theun Dam has a long history. The Mekong Secretariat, a regional body that oversaw utilization plans for Southeast Asia's longest river, the Mekong, identified its hydropower potential in the 1970's. Between 1989 and 1991, a feasibility study was done by the United Nations Development Program. The name "Nam Theun" was publicized in 1993 when an Australian company sent a one paragraph press statement to media offices in Thailand saying that it signed a pact with the government in Vientiane (the capital of Laos) to develop the project. Nobody got excited at this notice, since the signing was reported as investment news without detail.

Journalists in Thailand still had no clear idea where the Nam Theun River was—or what the consequences of this project might be—until a nongovernmental organization led by conservationist Witoon Permpongsachareon acknowledged that at least two dams would be built on a tributary of the Mekong River called Nam Theun, which runs from the eastern mountains through Nakai Plateau down to the Mekong, the natural border with Thailand.

Backed by studies done by Western academics and environmentalists, Witoon supplied information to journalists indicating the dam would affect a huge area. It would deforest one of Laos's virgin forests and displace many thousands of people. Furthermore, the Nam Theun II project would not be a normal dam—blocking a river and installing a turbine at the bottom—but it would be a trans-basin dam, diverting water from the Nam Theun River to flow through its turbine before releasing it to another river called Xe Bang Fai. This meant that some 40,000 people in Xe Bang Fai basin would also be affected.

At the beginning, Vientiane refused to allow any news media access to the construction site as it commissioned a military-run Bosilat Pattana Khet Phudoi company to deforest the inundated areas. I, along with other Thai media, sat on the Thai bank of the Mekong where we watched trucks take logs to supply sawmills in Thailand. Log traders were quoted in many stories as saying that "deforestation of Nakai Plateau clears way for Nam Theun Dam." By 1994-1995, reporters managed to sneak into the site to confirm the vast deforestation, as well as report related stories about corruption among officials in illegal timber-logging trade. This prompted angry replies from Vientiane, and soon journalists in the Indochina section of my newspaper at that time were blacklisted in Laos. The list was not announced, but our visa applications were rejected without clear reason time after time.

Strong criticism from conservationists about deforestation and corruption led officials at the World Bank to force the Lao government to restructure the project management and to withdraw the military-run company from the project. The concession was handed over to an Electricite de France-led international consortium. Then the project

Usually, the reservoir created by the dam displaces people who live along the river, but these people are given no chance to bring their concerns to a wider audience since media in these countries are under state control. Those who work in the news media usually are not authorized to publicize much more than the beautiful flowers, colorful butterflies, and bright future ahead when the dams light the lamps.

faced a long delay between 1997-1998 following the Asian economic crisis. Still, the World Bank needed to be involved in the project since the Lao government requested financial support, and developers wanted to cut down on their political risk with a guarantee for breach of agreement or nationalization by the Communist regime. But the bank would not extend its support without receiving consensus from international donors regarding the project's social implications, environmental protections, and the government's strategy for poverty reduction.

To have transparency, in accordance with the bank's requirement, the government and project developers organized press tours to the site in 2002 and 2003 for Bangkok and Hanoi-based journalists to see the areas and talk with some "guided-to-speak affected villagers." The World Bank also organized consultative workshops in Bangkok, Tokyo, Paris, Washington and Vientiane, in which journalists and civic groups were invited to have some input.

These days journalists are allowed access to the dam's construction site but only with a Lao official guide, and they also need to pay the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs service charge of $100 for an accreditation card and $20 per diem for each accompanying official. To try to sneak into Laos without permission can result in a journalist easily getting arrested and, if that happens, only "money language" is likely to help, unless your government has influence over Vientiane.

Salween Dam

In the late 1970's, Global Infrastructure Fund, a political and business association in Japan, proposed building a series of dams on the virgin Salween River. A survey in 1981 indicated two possible locations, one in Myanmar's Shan State, the other in the lower basin of the river in Mon State.

Many private investors are eager to tap the hydroelectric potential of the Salween, which runs from Tibet through the eastern part of Myanmar before reaching the Gulf of Mataban. Since the early 1990's, the military-run government of Myanmar has granted permission to many groups to conduct feasibility studies, but these failed to make progress due to the river's inaccessibility. Living along the banks of the river are strongholds of many rebellious minorities who have waged an armed struggle for independence, or at least autonomy, since Myanmar was freed from being a British colony in 1948.

Some of these potential investors tried to make a deal with the junta *and* the rebels to clear areas for the construction. I once met a group of Thai investors standing in line to talk with a leading opium kingpin, Khun Sa, about the Salween project when I interviewed him in 1994. They wanted Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army to secure the area for experts to conduct field survey, but the opium lord did not have the chance to do so before he forcibly surrendered to the government in January 1996.

In 1997, the project was raised again when the Thai government signed a memorandum of understanding to purchase 1,500 MW from Myanmar. But the Asian economic crisis intervened again. The project began anew in 2003 when a private investor agreed to develop a dam on the Salween, at a place called Ta Sang. (Meanwhile EGAT proposed a joint investment with its Myanmar counterpart to build a series of five dams on the Salween. Thailand wanted to develop something like Itaipu—a mega-hydroelectric project jointly owned by Brazil and Paraguay. The EGAT project is still only on paper.)

Ta Sang's developers began field surveys as the junta deployed troops to the west bank of the Salween to secure the site, though it is still not totally safe since several insurgent groups remain active. Government troops have removed thousands of minorities from the area to unknown destinations, and some hill tribes migrated to Thailand.

The Salween projects regularly are written about in Thai newspapers. But most of the quotes are from the mouths of Thai officials and conservationists, as well as documents we can find. Very few journalists can get to the proposed site to see and talk with affected people due to ongoing fighting. Myanmar's blacklist of journalists—of which my name is on the top—is not a key barrier for coverage since the junta cannot effectively control the border. Sneaking across the border means confronting armed fighting at times, so my reporting trips to the area are often postponed after news of fighting. We have no clear information about the number of people affected by this project since EGAT and the Ta Sang developers have offered no exact figure. But the Thai-based conservationist Southeast Asia River Network has said some 2,000 households would be affected from the Ta Sang project. The number affected by EGAT's proposed series of dams remains unknown.

Unlike Laos's Nam Theun, international financial institutions could not be involved in the Salween project due to sanctions against Myanmar over its suppression of democracy and human rights violations. This means no international organization is there to monitor the construction, as well as its social and environment impact. EGAT Governor Kaisri said Chinese investors will be joining the Salween projects. China, which has political influence over Yangon, has demonstrated its own harsh handling of affected communities with its Three Gorges Dam, which displaced 1.9 million people in its construction.

Of course, building a dam to generate electricity is not a crime but, in many cases, what happens during its construction appears to be. Illegal deforestation and forced relocation—perhaps without monetary compensation—and the environmental impact of constructing dams are topics routinely covered in countries where news reporters are able to function effectively. In this region of the world, many dams are being built, but those who should be watching are kept away, and the people are being kept uninformed. ■

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Reporting From the Nation of the Nile

A journalist describes approaches to and experiences with coverage of Egypt's water issues.

By Nadia El-Awady

I first met Ahmed Nasr El-Din, Al-Ahram newspaper's notorious "water man," in Kyoto, Japan during the World Water Forum in March 2003. Dubbed "victor of the Nile" by his colleagues—a play of words on his family name, which literally translated from Arabic is "victor of the religion," Nasr El-Din has been working the Egyptian water beat for the past 15 years. He talks about Egypt's water issues with the expertise and knowledge of the country's top academics and with the zest of a man with a mission.

Nasr El-Din found his niche in covering water issues for Egypt's largest national newspaper in 1989, when water issues were just beginning to gain momentum in the international arena. He paid several visits to the archives of the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation, collected all the market had to provide in terms of literature on water issues, and gradually compiled a huge database of material for Al-Ahram on this most precious of resources. Since then he has traveled the world far and wide, covering water topics for Egyptian readers.

Home to the longest river in the world, the Nile, few would think of Egypt as a water impoverished country. However, the average per capita share of water is already below the water poverty line of 1,000 cubic meters per individual annually. According to 1996 statistics, the average per capita annual share of water in Egypt was 936 cubic meters, and this is expected to decrease to as low as 582 cubic meters by the year 2025. Even so, Nasr El-Din emphasizes that "the problem in Egypt isn't one of water scarcity. It's one of providing the people with the necessary infrastructure to give them access to that water."

A water pump is located alongside a trash-lined canal in Shamandeel Village in Egypt. *Photo by Nadia El-Awady.*

Challenges of Water Coverage

The Nile waters are shared by nine riparian countries, a source of on- and off-again tensions between neighbors. Nasr El-Din believes that journalists have played an important role in metamorphosing a potential conflict situation into one of peace. For example, one focus of the Nile Basin Initiative has been to create more awareness among journalists of the importance of their role in covering water issues. Journalists in the region now exchange visits to each other's countries to cover relevant water issues. "Traditional conflicts are being solved by media relations," Nasr El-Din told me. "We are now in a phase of retrieving lost trust among riparian countries, and journalists play a very important role in influencing public opinion back home."

But is the picture of water coverage in Egypt's media as rosy as this water enthusiast tends to paint it? Nasr El-Din's colleague, Hatem Sidqy, who directs Al-Ahram's science and environment department, believes that a primary challenge in water coverage in Egypt is that the country's national newspapers focus primarily on the government's achievements in the water sector, whereas opposition newspapers focus only on the problems. "We need more balanced coverage of water and sanitation issues. Our articles should refer to at least three sources of information: the man on the street who is affected by the problem, a government officer for the official point of view, and an expert scientist, to understand the issues behind the problem," Sidqy said. "Opposition newspapers never get the opinion of the government officials in their stories, making their coverage ex-

treme and unbalanced."

Sidqy explained that at times journalists encounter difficulties in getting accurate information on water issues. "It's difficult to get an official statement if water samples analyzed in water treatment plants or in the National Research Center show traces of viruses or parasites, for example," Sidqy explained. On the other hand, he is aware that publishing such information could result in raising "unnecessary public fears," since it is such a rare occurrence and usually happens only in trace amounts, according to Sidqy.

An express pipe releases untreated industrial effluent into Al-Khadrawiyah waters in Egypt. *Photo by Nadia El-Awady.*

Nasr El-Din and Sidqy agree, nevertheless, that journalists are playing an important role in responding to readers' qualms and complaints about water and sanitation issues that directly affect their daily lives. The newspaper receives many letters from readers either imploring journalists to cover a particular issue, or providing feedback on coverage.

A glance through a week's front-page coverage of water issues in two Egyptian national newspapers, Al-Ahram and Al-Akhbar, and one opposition newspaper, Al-Wafd, indicates that water issues are one of journalists' top priorities in terms of news coverage. With few exceptions, each day of the week of December 25-31, 2004 (the week I chose to look at the coverage) the three newspapers covered a water issue on their front pages.

In addition to reporting on the devastating tsunami that hit Asian countries on December 26th, with detailed scientific explanations of the phenomenon and its public health impacts, each newspaper also covered a variety of local water issues. All three reported on the torrential rains that hit northern Egypt that week, while Al-Ahram covered such topics as the rupture of a main water pipe in one of Cairo's upper-class neighborhoods, millions of pounds in damage to the Suez Canal due to environmental factors, and renovations in the Aswan High Dam's electricity facilities. Al-Akhbar confined its water coverage primarily to tsunami and weather coverage, but reported on its December 31st front page about providing the public with half a million new water meters in order to control drinking water consumption in the country.

The opposition newspaper, Al-Wafd, was diverse in its coverage of water issues on its front page for that week. It included stories about cleaning up an oil spill from a Kuwaiti tanker in the Suez Canal, Egyptian villages asking the government to provide for more water and sanitation services, construction debris dumped by government into a major irrigation canal, and a story that purportedly claims that Egypt might buy water from Turkey in the future.

A Foreign Journalist's Experience

Dutch writer and journalist Francesca De Chatel has been covering water issues in the Middle East for the past few years as she prepares a book to be published in the summer of 2005. De Chatel has a negative impression based on her experiences in trying to gain access to information on water issues in Egypt. "Basically it was a nightmare," she said. "I could actually write a small novella just about getting permits and comic events at the International Press Office in Cairo. It was also interesting that the mistrust started as soon as I said I was a journalist. Looking back, I realize that I should have said I was an academic researching a PhD. I did this in Jordan and the response was immediately more open."

In her first visit to the country, after she received the necessary press permits, she was shocked to find that most Egyptian officials she interviewed were "not very forthcoming as they unanimously denied that there was any problem with water in Egypt." One year later, in her second visit to Egypt, she experienced fewer problems with the necessary paperwork (this time she did it before her arrival in the country) and reporting was more fruitful—relatively speaking. De Chatel was allowed escorted access to some of Egypt's water projects, and "while officials still denied there was any problem with water scarcity and pollution, the lower-placed officials were more open," she said.

De Chatel expressed frustration at the fact she wasn't provided the chance to interview people working on the Toshka project, an ambitious attempt to irrigate Egypt's Western Desert, without a press officer being there "making sure I heard and saw the right things," she said in exasperation.

An Egyptian Journalist's Experience

My experience in covering water issues in Egypt is quite contrary to De Chatel's.

After I attended several local and international workshops and conferences about water issues, I decided it was time for me to do this kind of reporting in my own country. I approached the Egyptian Water Partnership, which has been involved in local water projects for the past two years, and they readily provided me with information about some water problems in Menofiya Province in the Nile Delta and asked a local official from the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation to escort me on a daylong trip in the province.

Raw sewage is illegally dumped into waters less than 100 meters upstream from where children swim. *Photo by Nadia El-Awady.*

I am most grateful to Gamal Girgis, director of the Menofiya Province's Irrigation Maintenance Program. It is because of his sincerity and concern for the water problems affecting those who live in his region that I was able to write my first award-winning article. Girgis patiently showed and explained to me the region's water problems. I took pictures and spoke freely with farmers and villagers and asked them as many questions as I could come up with. After spending a heart-rending day witnessing the various sources of pollution to this province's irrigation canals, Girgis took me to a beautiful village where the residents had taken on the responsibility of solving their water problems. I later spoke with the director of the province's environmental department to get background information for the article and was invited to again visit the region during the winter when water levels decrease in the irrigation canals and dead fish float to the surface due to the high levels of pollution. This invitation reinforced my sense of the government officials' desire to show journalists the extent of the water problems they were confronting in this region.

In May 2004 my story, "The Nile and its People: What Goes Around Comes Around," was published as an environment story in IslamOnline.net's health and science section. The story portrayed a situation in which industrial effluent and raw sewage from homes and industries along the Nile are dumped with alarming frequency into irrigation and drainage canals and pollute the water and crops. Only two of the region's 47 villages even have a sanitation system in place, and individual septic tanks leak pollution into the region's groundwater. Beyond showing the misery and disease these practices bring with them, the story reported on the remarkable community-wide efforts in the village of Kafr Wahb that have transformed its garbage-strewn streets and polluted waters into a livable, healthy environment.

This story began with these words:

"As Egypt succumbs to summer and the temperatures slowly rise to a searing 40 degrees Celsius, four young boys skinny-dip in a canal while their fathers and older brothers labor in the nearby fields. With a carefree spirit that only boys their age can feel, they playfully splash each other with the refreshingly cool water.

"Less than 100 meters upstream, however, a crime is being committed that will have a direct impact on these boys for the rest of their lives. A truck carrying raw sewage collected for a minor fee from the local villagers is dumping its contents directly into the irrigation canal.

"The River Nile has been Egypt's 'vein of life' since time immemorial. Now facing a variety of threats ranging from bilharziasis to the dumping of raw sewage, industrial and agricultural effluents, the longest river in the world has slowly been turned into a death sentence for Egypt 's millions."

Heightened international awareness of the importance of finding fast and lasting solutions for the world's water and sanitation problems has led to the organization of a series of international conferences and workshops about how to address these problems. In turn, this has led government officials in developing countries to realize the importance of involving citizens and communities in solving pending water and sanitation problems. More and more, too, government officials in the water and sanitation sectors in Egypt are recognizing the important role journalists can play in motivating such efforts. ■

Nadia El-Awady is IslamOnline.net's health and science section editor. She recently won first prize in the media awards given by the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for All (WASH) campaign for her story about pollution, sanitation and water issues along the Nile. Her story is at www.islamonline.net/English/Science/2004/05/article09.shtml.

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When Coverage of a Water Crisis Vanishes

'Unless there is a real and apparent danger … reporters will find it hard to convince editors to dedicate time and space for water stories.'

By Zafrir Rinat

One of the most frustrating things in journalists' work is to assume that they have managed to raise public awareness of an important issue only to discover that same issue has vanished from the public domain into almost complete oblivion. In many ways this is the story of what's happened with the water crisis in Israel, which started in 1999 after a year with severe drought and gradually disappeared two years ago, after two good winters.

The disappearance of the basic problem is, of course, illusionary: The danger of water shortage still lurks, and it will show up again when the next cycle of drought hits the region. And when it does, it could create a real threat to water quality and intensify the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians who will have to share the meager resource.

Israel uses three major water sources—the Sea of Galilee, which is known in Israel as Lake Kinneret, and two other sources that involve a coastal and mountain aquifer. Those two aquifers are the only water sources available to the Palestinian population in the territories occupied by Israel.

When the last drought hit, water levels in all sources dropped sharply, and there was a danger of imminent water shortages. There was also a genuine threat to water quality since the drop in water level intensified the process of saline water contaminating freshwater by moving into it from the sea and from deeper geological layers.

Water Issues Surface

For quite a long time, reporting on water issues gained a central place in the local media, after years of neglect. The news was alarmist in many cases and echoed concerns about the imminent catastrophe that some water experts and environment organizations were predicting. But there were also important aspects of the water crisis tackled and discussed in the media, especially in the written media.

There have been two major characteristics of water coverage in recent years. The first involved the dramatization of the extent and consequences of the drought and future water shortages. The second thread of this story—which did not interest many in the media or the public—involved the discovery of old water problems that had occurred after the previous serious drought.

Journalists reported what politicians and the ministers of environment said as they warned that Israel—in the wake of the drought—would be left without available drinking water. Pictures of the shrinking Lake Kinneret accompanied the lead headlines of written media and television news. Evident in the coverage, too, was a sense of humor, familiar in a society so familiar with existential threats. One of my editors was skeptical about the enduring threat posed by the drought. When I told him that experts said the situation in the coastal aquifer was especially bad, he commented that they couldn't be sure because, after all, they did not actually visit the place.

As part of this crisis coverage, the problem of water quality finally received some serious attention. Cases of devastating water contamination by armament factories were published for the first time, and with publication of this information came public demand to treat the pollution. For the first time in Israel's history, the water commissioner had to explain on the national radio program what the government was planning to do with the pollution caused by the defense industry. Until then, this topic, which involved the entire defense industry, had been treated like a sacred cow because of its importance to national security.

While the spotlight was turned on water issues, economists and media commentators also started to emphasize the topic of the price agricultural interests paid for water. This, too, was a subject few people were willing to touch before this time, because the farmers have a strong political lobby. Some economists even denied the claim that Israel is facing a severe water shortage and argued that raising the water price for agriculture will force the farmers to use it more efficiently and will prevent any water shortage. At the same time, many water experts supported a plan to construct several huge desalinization facilities that would transform saltwater into water that could be used in farming and in homes. But many of these same economists, along with the Ministry of Finance, claimed there was no need to spend this large amount of money on a desalinization program if there was a way to change water demand.

In time, politicians, water experts, and the news organizations had to take more seriously the implications of the water crisis on the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. In Palestinian villages and towns, the water shortage was a daily reality and was leading to problems with sanitation and health. Political forces and environmental organizations issued a clear demand to the Israeli government to allocate more water to Palestinians. Policymakers responded (up to a certain point) by admitting that the water issue did require action and then by making some important decisions to act. In a special meeting

during the summer of 2000, the government decided to build the first big desalinization facility in Israel that could produce 50 million cubic meters in one year. Then in a more dramatic move the next year, the government raised the country's capability in desalinization production so it will reach 300 million cubic meters annually by the year 2010. There were also commitments made to rehabilitate the water sources that were polluted by the defense industry. Other important government decisions involving water followed, including changes in the agricultural subsidies system.

The media did more than just report on debates and chronicle government decisions. New information on the influence of power groups, like farmers, was published, and research led to new data on water contamination. The leading tabloid in Israel, Yedioth Ahronot, dedicated its front page lead story to a water survey that found heavy contamination in the Tel Aviv area groundwater. It was one of the first times that the newspaper gave an environmental issue such a prominent position.

One important example of reporting was the exposure of close personal ties between the prime minister, Ariel Sharon, and one of the former water commissioners. This enabled the commissioner to influence water policy even after he'd completed this job. The media also presented arguments in favor of specific policies. In Haaretz, at least two or three lead editorials reflected the view that Israel must consider geopolitical, social and environmental aspects in dealing with its water crisis and not focus only on questions of water demand or price.

One of their more crucial contributions was the education about these issues that many people could find in the written and electronic media. Basic facts about the source and quality of drinking water were published. When a Haaretz reporter in the occupied Palestinian territories, Amira Hass, visited towns and villages, people in Israel learned for the first time about the desperate shortage of water. Other reporters struggled hard with officials from the Ministry of Health and forced it to publish the full results of surveys of water quality.

The Press Turns Its Eye Away

As the water levels rose during the wet winters from 2002 to 2004—refilling Lake Kinneret—the level of media reporting about water issues went down. Interviews with water experts now were out of fashion, and few reporters exhibited much interest in new ideas about water conservation. And few were keeping a watchful eye on all of what the government had promised when it instituted its new water policies—and, in the absence of press scrutiny, there was a worrisome erosion in the process of implementing the steps the government had decided to take.

First came the slowing, and then shrinking, of the plan to build desalinization facilities. Today only one, in southern Israel, is under construction. Another one is scheduled to be built in a year or two, but the future of other promised sites is not clear. The Ministry of Finance is using the fact that water resources are quite full again to delay the construction of more desalinization facilities. Nor is there pressure today—from the public or from the press—to stop water subsidies for farmers or to allocate more water for Palestinians. And the plans to rehabilitate groundwater, polluted by the defense industry, remain mostly at the research stage, and funds for water treatment are still not allocated. When it comes to long-term plans, the water commissioner wrote a comprehensive master plan taking the country up to the year 2010, but the government did not bother to examine it, let alone approve it.

The troubling question is why news organizations let the water issue vanish from their pages and broadcasts and thus made it easier for politicians to abandon implementation of a much-needed, long-term water policy. It could be argued fairly that the media could not maintain its higher level of coverage once the drought was over, but there are many critical issues that remain. Certainly, the media could follow the water story with some consistency, albeit with more limited coverage.

The basic reason they do not has to do with the nature of today's news reporting. It is almost impossible for reporters to closely follow such long-term stories that involve science (in this case, hydrology and environmental issues) and also the government's bureaucratic processes. But this situation is made even worse in Israel, where civil and environmental issues are pushed aside because geopolitical and security tensions are so intense and have such dramatic and daily effects. Unless there is a real and apparent danger—such as was experienced during our years of drought—reporters will find it hard to convince editors to dedicate time and space for water stories.

Another reason for the media neglect of the water crisis is a sociologic and cultural one. Policymaking in Israel is largely based on an endless chain of reactions to emergency situations instead of careful and balanced planning. Because the state was created with the reality of having a constant need to improvise, deal with security pressures and with its large number of immigrants, things start to work here only when the heat is on. When circumstances improve—as in the case of water—the root problem is ignored and, in time, forgotten.

News organizations in Israel should play an ongoing and consistent role in creating the civil, social and environmental agendas that will have a central place in our nation's future, even if the geopolitical situation does not improve. The water crisis is sad proof that so far the media have not played such a role as either a strong civil guardian or a reliable watchdog. ■

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Water Surfaces as a Story Only When It Floods

Three years after the Elbe River flood, 'it is even harder to get these topics back into the news.'

By Dagmar Dehmer

The mere mention of water issues can cause experts in international conflict management to wrinkle their foreheads. And it can bring politicians into serious discussions of future armed conflicts. But what it seldom does is create excitement within a newsroom about a story for tomorrow's newspaper. In Europe, journalists don't have a lot of chances to write about the problems of water management involving the continent's many river systems. The only time water stories seem to be wanted—and then everyone wants them immediately—is when a river overflows in some spectacular manner, as it happened in 2002 with the Elbe River as it moved through Germany on its way toward the North Sea.

Some 20 years ago this situation was very different. After a huge accident on the Rhine River, when a fire occurred at one of the Basel chemical factories of Sandoz (now Novartis) and thousands of liters of poisoned water flew into the river, water coverage was a priority. With a huge number of fish dying after this accident, years of recovery were needed. And what was involved in that changed a lot about European water management.

An international commission for the protection of the Rhine River (Internationale Kommission zum Schutz des Rheins, IKSR) was founded in 1950. It was a small and not very efficient body that worked hard on multilateral treaties and, in 1963, it was transformed into an entity examining international water rights. But still the commission had not too much to do. After the Sandoz accident in 1986 that changed. The staff was doubled and action taken by the four countries—Switzerland, Germany, France, the Netherlands—involved with the commission was accelerated, including the efforts to clean up the Rhine.

As a result of this work, IKSR formulated environmental goals but let the member-countries determine what actions to take to reach them. To this day, this goal-setting mechanism is the principle in every international environmental contract, whether it involves actions to reduce poisonous inflows into a river or to try to bring salmon back. The IKSR salmon initiative was an important news story for a few years—at least in the regions around the river. And after several seasons of devastating high waters on the Rhine in the early and mid-1990's, a new round of protective actions was undertaken.

The lessons from the Rhine experiences are important ones. Countries near the origins of the river can do a lot of harm to the people on its lower parts. They can do so when they build power stations or many houses on the riverside and then dam the river. Or when they let their farmers use the agricultural space around the river and dam this land, too, which means there is not enough space left for an overflow. The damage can be immense. (The cost for Germans from the Elbe flood was about nine billion euros.) Damage can be done, too, when the countries at the river's beginning take too much water out of the river.

These kinds of conflict involving water usage happen along every river system in Europe. But attempts to manage them occurred first along the Rhine. Since Europe's eastern edges have opened, new river commissions have been founded along the Elbe, the Oder, and the Danube.

For those journalists inclined to write about these water issues, the gathering of information is relatively easy. The river management entities are generally competent nongovernmental organizations. For example, an institute—the Aueninstitut in Rastatt, Germany—works mostly on the protection of natural swamps as flood support areas. But the problem is that most of the time the broader public just doesn't show much interest in water topics. And the newspapers, which are dealing with economic pressures and reduced space for news on their pages, often cannot be convinced to publish something about water, absent a flood.

Reporting on the Elbe Flood

But when a disaster does occur—like what happened on the Elbe—a journalist has to work on many stories over a longer period of time to provide responsible coverage of such an event. After the Elbe flood, for example, I reported stories about climate change, while other journalists wrote about particular weather situations that made this disaster possible. For the first time in my reporting experience, coverage of this event enabled me to write about the loss of space for the river—about the consequences that come with covering the space near the river with concrete—which makes floods happen even faster. I was also able to weave these various topics together for readers.

After the flood, a high-water law was prepared by the environmental ministry in Germany. One of the important aspects of this proposed law was that any new buildings in overflow areas would not be granted building permits and agricultural land near the rivers would be more restricted. But local governments in Germany are working to block this from becoming law. While all of this is taking place, there is very little interest among editors at my newspaper to have

reporters track this story and inform our readers why, two years after the flood, this most important reform is still not happening.

Environmental topics were not the only angles to follow after this big flood. There was the follow-the-money story to be told as those who received funds to help the flood victims were spending it. But how? There was the lack of cooperation between the local and federal government officials—and the implications of this—to report on. It was clear that in the wake of the flood there is a need to reform how disaster relief is handled. Though it is a complicated issue—with cities and nongovernmental organizations also involved in handling the funds—coverage of this important topic is quite limited. In fact, two years later, many of these issues remain unresolved. And now it is even harder to get these topics back into the news, despite a huge ongoing debate about federalism reform in Germany.

What we think of as news today, and how we report on it, is a natural enemy to a topic like rivers in Europe. These are complicated issues with high relevance to people's lives but with no immediate public annoyance to bring the issues to the surface. The only time these topics have a chance to surface are during slow news times, like in high summer when everybody is on vacation or at Easter and Christmas, when nobody is in the mood to read the paper. But if, as a reporter, you keep your eye focused on these issues, when the news slot is available, the story will be ready. And sometimes even in such a slow news cycle, the public can be well informed by what are not popular but are complicated issues and critical ones to bring to their attention. ■

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Mainstream News Reporting Ignores Critical Water Issues

In India, 'reportage on this complex subject has regressed to its earlier character—unsophisticated and immature.'

By Rakesh Kalshian

A few months ago, I was invited to a media workshop on water organized by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The idea was to facilitate a frank dialogue between reporters and water experts on India's current water crisis and what could be done about it. We were seized by the gravity of the crisis.

The symptoms of unrequited thirst were there for all to see and suffer: There are falling groundwater levels as people dig deeper in desperate search for more water; a flourishing water-market, mainly water tankers and bottled water, which too often gets its supplies from borewells in the farmlands located around the city; lastly, the increasing poisoning of groundwater by industrial, agricultural and municipal wastes, not to mention the naturally occurring dangerous chemicals like nitrates and fluorides in groundwater, which threaten to spiral into major public health disaster.

Pollution and excessive extraction apart, inequitable access to this most fundamental resource makes the problem especially egregious. While the rich can afford to spend huge amounts of money to set up borewells, install expensive water-purifying machines, or simply live on bottled water on a daily basis, the poor suffer scandalous indignities for lack of safe and clean water.

Lest it seem like propaganda of its vested interests, ADB had chosen speakers such that a wide spectrum of views was represented. So while the ADB consultant argued in favor of treating water as an economic good, a former bureaucrat-turned-academic tried to demonstrate that this position was fundamentally incompatible with the more laudable goal of equity. Likewise, a grassroots activist, who fervently believed in traditional water harvesting systems as the solution to India's rural water problems, crossed swords with a technocrat who appeared convinced that mega water projects were the long-term answer to India's water woes.

Journalists and the Water Debate

As for the journalists, they too reflected a range of opinions depending on, among other things, their social class, language of reporting, place of work, and the ownership of their newspaper. For instance, while some were openly critical of public water agencies, some others candidly expressed their distrust of corporations.

The workshop was intended to enhance our understanding of this complex subject. However, at the end of two days of discussion, most of us seemed as perplexed as ever by questions such as: Are private managements inherently better than public agencies?

Can, indeed should, water be treated as a market commodity at all? Are big water projects such as dams the answer to the imminent water crisis, or should we go for local solutions, as have been demonstrated by many villages? What should be the best and just way to allocate river waters between upstream and downstream nations/states? Shouldn't industries be forced to pay when they pollute water?

A major reason for this lack of clarity is that journalists' understanding of water issues remains piecemeal. We simply do not know enough to separate the wheat from the chaff. Let me provide an illustration from the ADB workshop. The ADB representative in his presentation tried to convince the audience that privatization inevitably leads to greater transparency, efficiency and accountability. He didn't mention equity. Most journalists who had written about chaos and corruption rife in public corporations tended to agree with this assertion. But then a mild-mannered professor begged to disagree. To prove his point, he fished out a slim book from his bag and read out the main findings of an investigation into privatized utilities around the world.

Much to the surprise of the journalists, not to mention the chagrin of the ADB official, in virtually all the case studies, the corporations were found guilty of corruption, lack of accountability, and a deplorable attitude towards the poor. The book even exposed the nexus between governments of rich nations, their corporations, international financial institutions like the World Bank (W.B.) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), academic institutions, and third world governments in pushing the agenda of privatization.

Incidentally the book, "The Water Barons," is neither leftist propaganda nor a pamphlet of an environmental lobby. It was the result of an investigation of global water corporations by a consortium of journalists from around the world. I was one of them. [See articles on "The Water Barons" project on pages 43 and 45.]

Notwithstanding the frustratingly complicated nature of the beast, it is morally incumbent upon journalists, no matter what their metier—business, politics, culture or environment—to present to the world a lucid, well- informed and cogently argued understanding of the various facets of the global water crisis. The irony is that despite a plethora of information on the subject, the quality of reportage on water issues leaves a lot to be desired.

With the increasing competition from TV, newspapers have become increasingly intolerant of long analytical narratives on water issues. Reporters no longer travel to the arenas of action and are expected to file short snippety stories sitting in their newspaper offices. Indeed, market forces have forced the media to look upon themselves as more of an economic than social good.

Things, it would appear, haven't changed all that much since I first began writing on the environment about 15 years ago. At the time, media coverage of water doubtless lacked rigor, sophistication and maturity. Typically, most stories on the subject tended to revolve around the seasonal theme of the Indian monsoon—whether it would be good or bad, how it would affect India's economic growth, if there would be more floods, which regions would be drought-hit, and so on. Outside the pale of the monsoon, water rarely registered a blimp on media's radar.

Cycles of Water Coverage

In the early 1990's, there was a brief interlude of sensible and insightful reportage. It coincided with, rather than stemmed from, the global campaign against big dams that became really hot during those years. Largely inspired by India's Narmada (a much-revered river) Bachao Andolan (NBA)—the Save the Narmada Campaign—the antidam struggles around the world symbolized a fundamental challenge to the received wisdom of so-called development. In particular, they attacked the Benthamite notion of the greatest good for the greatest number that the state often invoked to justify its repression of the poor and underprivileged.

This was arguably the Indian media's first crucial lesson in the political economy of development. And it was during this period that environment reporting came of age. Needless to say, many Indian journalists, at least those who had been covering social and ecological movements, realized for the first time that water was much more than a meteorological phenomenon. It now resembled the proverbial Indian elephant. To capture its complex character, one had to delve deeper into its social, economic, cultural and political genealogy.

The ensuing years saw many examples of accomplished reporting on various aspects of water and its connectedness with other aspects of life. Newspapers sent their reporters far and wide to write powerful narratives on the ongoing social ferment against social, economic and political apartheid. Thanks to a strong and vibrant movement against big dams, the politics of water conflicts between castes, communities, rural and urban India, states and nations was conveyed with insight and sensitivity by many reporters. I still remember my early years as a reporter with the science and environment magazine Down to Earth, which produced some of the best reportage on water during those years, in particular an exploration of the revival of traditional water harvesting systems as an alternative to the failure of mega projects to bring water to millions of rural Indians.

But this fever of fine, engaging and

sustained reportage on social concerns, including access to water, lost its momentum as India came under the spell of economic liberalization in the latter half of the 1990's. Two years ago, when the Supreme Court of India ruled against an NBA petition seeking further construction of the controversial dam, media's disenchantment with popular struggles against antipoor policies of the state was almost complete. Before long, newspapers had begun to chant the W.B.-IMF mantra of privatization. As in everything else, privatization was being touted as the key to solving India's worsening water crisis.

Reportage on water has since become rather monochromatic. With the increasing competition from TV, newspapers have become increasingly intolerant of long analytical narratives on water issues. Reporters no longer travel to the arenas of action and are expected to file short snippety stories sitting in their newspaper offices. Indeed, market forces have forced the media to look upon themselves as more of an economic than social good. As corporations take over the media, relevant and meaningful news has almost become part and parcel of the corporate social responsibility.

However, even as environment reporting is languishing, water continues to enjoy media's indulgence, not because rural India is dying of thirst but because the urban middle class is facing an acute water crisis. Even in cities, the water needs of the poor are rarely reported. Indeed, water makes it to the front page only in the summer months, when people in Indian cities start crying hoarse for water. For instance, arsenic pollution of groundwater in large swathes of India and Bangladesh has not been given the prominence it deserved. (As an aside, when I returned home from my Nieman Fellowship, I was told by my editor to focus more on science stories as readers found gloomy stories about the environment boring. Before long, I became redundant in the magazine and had to leave.)

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that in recent years reportage on this complex subject has regressed to its earlier character—unsophisticated and immature. The rather shallow coverage, or the lack of any at all, of India's most quixotic scheme ever to link together all of its rivers as a panacea for its water malaise presents a case in point. At the same time, the news media have tended to be less critical of market-based solutions to environmental crises while overlooking insightful grassroots critiques of water management. Indeed, there is enough evidence to suggest that economic reforms (read privatization) have robbed millions of poor Indians of whatever little access to water they might have had. The mainstream media, even as it sings hosannas for economic reform, have failed to highlight the fact that economic globalization has led to more unsustainable consumption of water by forcing farmers to grow water-intensive cash crops and by promoting water-intensive industries like mining.

… the news media have tended to be less critical of market-based solutions to environmental crises while overlooking insightful grassroots critiques of water management.

Let me give three examples:

1. The newly formed state of Chattisgarh leased a stretch of a river to a private company for its industrial operations. The contract prohibited the local population from drawing water from the leased river stretch, as well as groundwater around the area. The mainstream media completely missed the story. It was only through a sustained popular protest that the project was put on the backburner.
2. The ADB recently loaned one of the Indian states millions of dollars to restructure its water infrastructure. One of the conditions in the contract is that only those who can pay can get water. In other words, millions of poor who live below the poverty line can die of thirst. There have been many popular protests against this development, but it seems the mainstream media are simply not interested, let alone concerned.
3. In recent years there have been several protests against Coca-Cola's bottling plants extracting huge amounts of groundwater, thereby depriving nearby villages of their only source of water, not to mention contaminating groundwater by palming off their toxic sludge as fertilizer on unsuspecting farmers. Even after the High Court ordered the plant to shut its operations, the mainstream media chose not to investigate the matter.

One can cite many such cases where industries have been polluting rivers and groundwater with impunity. The mainstream media's indifference is understandable as the victims are mostly poor villagers or slum dwellers in cities. The fact that the same journalists created a brouhaha over allegations that different brands of soft drinks, including Coca-Cola and Pepsi, had traces of pesticides in them clearly betrays the mainstream media's biases.

That millions of poor people should be denied access to this most basic of resources is a shame for any society. It's ironic that just as the welfare state reneges on its social contract with its citizens under pressure from market forces, the mainstream news media choose to look the other way. As the watchdog of India's democracy, the news media can ignore this hard reality only at their own peril. ■

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Educating Journalists in Nepal About Sanitation and Water Issues

By bringing awareness and information to reporters, stories about these topics are starting to be told.

By Soniya Thapa

A majority of people in Nepal do not have access to basic drinking water and sanitation facilities and lack awareness about alternatives. In some villages in Nepal, people do not feel comfortable using a latrine. "When we have land as big as the sky above us, are we rhinos or blue sheep to defecate in one spot?" is a commonly held belief. Tradition, for example, in many places does not allow a father-in-law and daughter-in-law to use the same latrine. Given these conservative beliefs and practices—in tandem with the lack of sanitation facilities—many people die every day from water-borne diseases. Every year 15,000 children from Nepal die from these diseases, according to UNICEF. And their deaths happen quietly in villages without others taking notice.

This daily context of people's lives explains, in part, why the media in Nepal have also not directed a lot of attention to sanitation issues. In fact, sanitation issues have always been considered a taboo subject, which people do not like talking or hearing much about. Until quite recently, sanitation, latrines and hand washing—all of these issues related to the use and cleanliness of water—were hardly reported on in the media. Instead, the headline news about politics, ongoing conflict, and social crimes is what sells newspapers.

It was in this context that in 2003 Nepal's Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for All (WASH) group was formed to look for various strategies to improve the status of sanitation and coordinate its campaign in Nepal. This group includes members from key organizations, such as the Department of Water Supply and Sewerage, Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Fund Development Board, WaterAid Nepal, UNICEF, World Health Organization, and Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH), a nongovernmental organization that has responsibility for carrying out the WASH activities in Nepal.

Sanitation issues—while important—don't sell newspapers, journalists observed, unless a reporter can bring forth the human element of the suffering that arises for these problems. Even then, once their reporting is done, editors still need to be convinced to print them.

Nepal has committed to halving the proportion of people without access to sanitation by the year 2015. To meet this goal, approximately 14,000 latrines need to be constructed each month for the next 12 years. Clearly, if such a goal has any chance of being met, the media need to play a critical role in increasing awareness of these issues. To improve this likelihood, Nepal WASH group focused in 2004 on building strong partnerships with the local media and organized journalist orientation programs in three regions of Nepal (Central, Eastern and Mid-Western) to coincide with National Sanitation Week in March.

Seventy-four journalists, 35 percent of whom were female, participated in the programs. The purpose of these two-day orientations—with science and policy briefings by experts, field trips and discussions—was to sensitize and educate journalists about sanitation and hygiene issues with the hope of motivating them to write more about them. These talks and conversations focused on such subjects as the health impact of poor sanitation and linkages of gender and sanitation and gave journalists a platform from which to figure out what stories there were to be told about sanitation, hygiene and water. Story ideas about topics not being covered were presented, such as examining the condition of public toilets in Kathmandu and public provisions of latrines for women.

On a field visit, these journalists gained a better understanding of the actual sanitation situation in a rural community. One way they did this was to flag the feces they saw on the ground during a walk around the village. They placed bright colored flags to mark the spot, and at the end of the exercise many flags were visible. A calculation was then made to figure out how many kilograms of feces the village members produce, and subsequently can ingest, each year. Journalists came away from this exercise with a real sense of disgust as they realized, many for the first time, the real consequences related to the

easy mobility of these many pieces of contamination. Stories these journalists wrote about the impact of this poor sanitation appeared in the local press the next morning.

Resource materials on sanitation and related issues were also given to the participants, including global and Nepalese facts, policy documents, lists of Web sites and references for further research reading, and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) media guide. On the second day journalists talked about what they'd seen and learned on their field trip. Many described how they'd not thought that a community's sanitation situation could be a news item before they'd had this experience. Having it, they said, helped them realize the role they could play in informing people about these issues.

A BBC reporter from Nepalgunj interviews a rural woman. *Photo by Bharat Adhikari/ NEWAH (Nepal Water for Health).*

A Change in the News

As part of a journalism fellowship program, during the month of March reporters had articles about these issues published in various broadsheet and local newspapers. For the first time many of those who had participated in the orientation program began to write candidly about urine and feces. Headlines on their stories show how taboos surrounding these issues started to be broken down:

- Gents Urinating, Ladies Watching
- People Living in Mill Area Deprived of Toilets
- It's Gone—The Compulsion of Climbing Trees to Defecate
- Children's Whistles Encouraged Building of Toilets in the Village
- Daily Routine of Going to the River Carrying a Bag of Feces

During its public education campaign the WASH group in Nepal also commissioned and broadcast TV documentaries, comedy programs about these topics, and radio programs.

The journalists shared with each other and us some reasons why they think these issues have received such low coverage in the media. They cited their own lack of awareness as one reason and reiterated the view that coverage of politics, insurgency, violence and murder are seen as stories that sell newspapers. This means that to cover other issues, the journalists told us, they will earn less money. Sanitation issues—while important—don't sell newspapers, journalists observed, unless a reporter can bring forth the human element of the suffering that arises for these problems. Even then, once their reporting is done, editors still need to be convinced to print them. And when editors don't understand the significance of these issues, this creates problems in getting the stories published, or in having them featured prominently in the newspaper. (Some journalists suggested that editors should be invited to such orientations.)

From our perspective, the orientation and fellowship programs for journalists—and the awards for excellent coverage that WASH also gives—have been successful, cost-effective ways to encourage the media to cover sanitation issues. After we began these efforts, the coverage of sanitation issues markedly increased, and stories started to present the issues far more openly. The response from female journalists was particularly encouraging, and half of our awards for coverage went to women. This was a significant achievement considering that the media in Nepal is predominantly male.

To maintain the momentum, the WASH group established a feature news service called "Lekhmala" in partnership with a women's media organization, Sancharika Samuha, to publish articles on gender and sanitation issues in various newspapers. And journalists have started to rely on NEWAH as a source for information about sanitation issues. NEWAH plans follow-up actions, including a news and policy interview show that is like "Meet the Press," more orientation sessions, and more frequent briefings that can keep journalists informed about and motivated to write about sanitation issues. ■

Soniya Thapa, as Nepal WASH campaign secretary, coordinates the campaign's activities. Bharat Adhikary, the campaign's communication officer, and Anamika Singh, its documentation officer, contributed to the conception of this article.

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Tsunami Coverage

"When the tsunami hit Thailand's coastal line … nobody in this country would have thought that Mother Nature could inflict such casualties to the land of smile." With those words, The Nation's managing editor, **Kavi Chongkittavorn**, opens our collection of articles in which journalists from several countries illuminate issues that surfaced in their reporting on this disaster. Reporters whom The Nation sent to cover the devastation speak about the trauma of witnessing so much death, grief and destruction, and Chongkittavorn reports that for the first time at his paper "there have been some consultations between journalists and psychologists."

S. Anand, a special correspondent with the Indian newsmagazine Outlook, speaks about how reporting in the aftermath of the tsunami illuminated long-standing issues regarding Indian journalists' inability to report with real understanding about those who live in the fishing villages. "Correspondents who reported this story had almost never stepped into these ghettoized fishing settlements before the tsunami," he writes. In Indonesia, media observer **Andreas Harsono** discovered a similar disconnect between the stories Jakarta-based reporters were willing to tell and on-the-ground realities of the situation in devastated political hot spots such as Aceh. Harsono urges Indonesia's journalists "to rid themselves of their narrow-minded sense of nationalism and start to report on the Aceh and its people from a broader perspective."

Richard Read, who covers international affairs for The Oregonian, flew to the tsunami region with local relief workers and a staff photographer while asking himself, "Where does one begin to extract meaning from mass destruction?" To do this, Read selected "a few families, a few aid workers, a few towns" and showed them to readers with the up-close detail of narrative storytelling. In the course of his reporting in two countries, the scenes Read used to present his subject's stories "began to form chapters in a narrative."

From Sri Lanka, **V.S. Sambandan**, reporting for The Hindu newspaper readers in India, writes about international journalists whose reporting lacked cross-cultural sensitivity. Sri Lankans whose lives were uprooted by this tragedy told Sambandan how they didn't like being portrayed as "beggars." As one villager told him, "Go tell the world that people here are helpless. They are not beggars. They all lived well. Now they have lost it."

Simon Waldman, who directs digital publishing for Guardian Newspapers in England, explores how bloggers' firsthand accounts of the tsunami were "created, disseminated and consumed instantly," while traditional media came to grips with how to report this massive story. "But the sheer excess of the disaster highlighted both the great strength and the great weakness of the fledgling citizen journalism movement," he says. Like The Guardian newspaper that interwove blog reporting with its news coverage, **Steve Outing**, senior editor for Poynter Online, points out tsunami coverage at other news organizations that demonstrates how the blogging work of "citizen journalists" can complement mainstream reporting, when journalists "assume a different mindset to take advantage of it." ■

Taking on a Traumatic Reporting Assignment in Southern Thailand

‘… the smell of the dead bodies is something you just don’t know without having been through it before.’

By Kavi Chongkittavorn

When the tsunami hit Thailand’s coastal line of Phuket, Phang Nga and Krabi, nobody in this country would have thought that Mother Nature could inflict such casualties to the land of smile. On Sunday—the day of big waves—The Nation did not have any journalist on the ground, except a group of roving reporters in the south following the news on the simmering tension in Muslim-dominated southern provinces. Our reporters were there because we thought that Islamic militants were planning to bomb strategic areas in Narathiwat and Pattani. But terror of a different kind chose to strike the country’s eastern coast.

The tsunami arrived at the worst time, as journalists were preparing for their long year-end holidays. After frantic phone calls on Monday, that night three reporters were dispatched from Bangkok to the affected areas. None had any prior experience in covering a national disaster. Throughout Monday, all flights to Phuket were cancelled, but in the evening flights resumed, and our three correspondents flew south to begin work on their reporting. However, in the meantime, the government and local authorities had banned journalists from gaining access to the damaged villages and resort areas.

Workers at Jen Jen Resort in Thailand’s Phang Nga’s Takua Pa district rest on a hill after the 10-meter high wave came ashore. *Photo by Thawechai Jaowattana/The Nation.*

On the second day, estimates of the number of tsunami victims were still only in the range of several dozen. Nobody dared to give a figure, because no one knew the extent of the damage and loss of life. Yet on the first day CNN Headline News indicated that there were likely thousands of deaths, with more expected. Indeed, that became the source by which Thai authorities made their early estimates. The news editors of all TV channels did not believe the high number of death tolls that were coming in from their reporters in the field.

Government-run Channel 11 was the only TV crew present in these first few days at Phuket. Its news coverage was mediocre, in part because the reporter failed to link the earthquake in Sumatra to the creation of the tsunami. In addition, the reporters there were not able to provide any scientific explanation of the waves nor speak to the power of the tsunami’s destructive force. No graphics were used to help explain what had happened. Since most of the journalists and producers were on holidays, they were unable to report to work. On Sunday, the day of the tsunami, most of the nation’s TV channels continued with their usual weekend variety shows and did so without newsbreaks. On that day, the tsunami casualties were covered as a “normal” disaster, not a major disaster of biblical proportion.

Reporters as Eyewitnesses

One of The Nation’s reporters who went to this area, Somluck Srimalee, who normally covered business and the stock market, was asked to file a report from Khao Lak, the popular sea resort in Phang Nga province. Hundreds of foreign tourists were staying there, and hundreds died there. “I saw rescue workers collecting the dead bodies in a five-star hotel,” she told me. “I have never seen so many corpses as I did in a small alley leading to the La Flora Hotel before in my life. I am speech-

less and almost throw up because of the smell."

In what she wrote for publication, she was more discreet. "My editor asked me to go to the area where the body of His Majesty, the king's grandson, Poom Jensen, was found and take photographs of the surroundings. So I have to force myself walking through the debris and wreckage of the hotel and dead bodies. I'm full of despair. After that, I also feel like I am fainting, my knees were weak. I could no longer walk. I asked a passing car for a lift," she wrote in a story after one week in at Khao Lak.

Srimalee's saddest moment was when she went to Sofitel Magic Lagoon Resort and Spa in Khao Lak and found a mother waiting tearfully to see her missing daughter, who was working at the hotel when the tsunami struck. "She was waiting in the ruins where the rescue workers were searching for the dead underneath the debris. I wanted to interview her, but somehow my conscious asked me not to do it. It is a great human tragedy," she recalled.

This reporter's experiences were certainly not unique. Thai journalists covering the tsunami's aftermath shared many similar moments, and their psychological reactions to what they saw and heard were much the same. Witnessing so much death and grieving—and doing so in such a close way—can be extremely difficult for reporters. Two journalists from The Nation, after two weeks of coverage, were hospitalized for two days upon their return from reporting because they had breathed too much formaldehyde. They did not wear a mask.

Another business reporter, Jeerawat Na Thalang, was shocked to find out that she had been assigned to cover the tsunami. "I am a real coward, I can barely watch a ghost movie," she lamented in our newsroom one morning. Yet she thought she was well prepared after watching TV news from the disaster region and talking to colleagues to drum up the courage. "I have a goosebump," she said, after she went to these areas to report. "Strange thing, the smell of the dead bodies is something you just don't know without having been through it before. I closed my eyes and kept telling my reporter friends that I would get off the truck, because I did not have mental capacity to deal with it. With my eyes closed, I could smell the death everywhere. Every time I opened my eyes, I saw corpses after corpses before me.

"I remained inside my friend's car with central lock on. I told my friend I did not want to go out. I am traumatized," Thalang said. "Even with my eyes closed, I started to smell something

Children scavenge after the tsunami. *Photo by Charoon Thongnual/The Nation.*

On New Year's Eve, volunteer workers carried dead bodies for identification at Yan Yao Temple in Phang Nga. *Photo by Watcharachai Klaipong/The Nation.*

intensely. I opened my eyes and saw a few pickup trucks filled with bodies, and one of them was parking next to my car from where I could see exposed corpses on top of each other. I wanted to walk out, but I could not open the car because of central lock system. Gradually, as one hour passed, I still was inside the car. My fear had become too overwhelming. I slowly opened my eyes with my two hands covering my face. After half an hour or so, I was still scared, but I know I have to be there with piles of dead and bloated bodies. I had to go through this and make peace with the corpses."

Thai journalists are not trained to cover a catastrophe of this proportion. Perhaps no journalist ever could be, but ours were certainly unprepared to endure these emotionally draining scenes. They were flabbergasted by what they saw as soon as they arrived at the scene and snaked through many dead bodies. Of course, they'd never seen anything like this in their lives. At Khao Lak, Don Pathan, a regional editor of The Nation, observed looters going through the piles of the dead inside and outside the five-star hotels. Nobody bothered to stop them. In one case, he said, a hotel manager, who doubled as security guard, chased off looters. Devastated areas were not marked off to outsiders with police tape, so this allowed anybody who had the guts to stroll anywhere they pleased.

As we reflect on the tsunami experience, one lesson Thai journalists have learned is that anything is possible, including a tsunami with such gigantic devastation. From now on, we must be prepared for any circumstance. We realize, too, that we have to pay more attention to issues related to degradation of the natural environment and ongoing global climate changes as well as some unusual phenomenon related to Mother Nature. It is quite interesting to see how the editorial attitude has changed following the tsunami: Any news item related to the global warming now will receive special attention. Nobody ridicules such news items anymore. This next generation of Thai journalists must possess broader knowledge of the world and its environmental condition.

Since some of our journalists had traumatic experiences in covering this story, there have been some consultations between journalists and psychologists. This is not something we have ever done before. In the past, we believe that as journalists we must be able to bear any condition to get the stories without any excuse. This time it is totally different. The scale of destruction and incredible human loss has taken its heavy toll on young and healthy journalists. ■

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A Question of Representation

'When no reporters, photographers or news editors come from the fishing community, it is unlikely this community's problems will be understood ….'

By S. Anand

In Chennai, India, where I live, those who are rich have built apartments facing the sea and, as they build, the fisherfolk are pushed closer to the sea. In several fishing hamlets in and around Chennai, which is the capital of Tamil Nadu state, fisherfolk sometimes live as close as 50 meters from the sea. Since the tsunami, the Tamil Nadu government has admitted that 95 percent of the affected population belongs to the fishing community, which forms an estimated six percent of the entire state's population.

In India's caste hierarchy, fisherfolk are placed above the "untouchables" (who identify themselves as "dalits" today), but their position in society is not very unlike that of the dalits. Given the crucial question of their representation in the news media, dalits and fisherfolk—who are classified as the "scheduled caste" and "most backward class" by the government—almost go unrepresented. Perhaps this is related to their absence as members of the news media. A study published in 2004 found that there were no dalits (who constitute 16.48 percent of India's billion-plus population) or adivasis (the indigenous population, 8.05 percent) visible in the Indian media. The brahmins, estimated to form three percent of the population, hold nearly 60 percent of reporting and editorial jobs in the English-language media.

Print and visual media in India, like other privately controlled industries, do not believe in the principle of diversity. While in the United States there have been concerted and conscious efforts made to improve the presence of social minorities in the media, the Indian newspaper establishment does not even acknowledge the nonrepresentation of certain communities as an issue. Yet it leads to a lopsidedness in priorities about what stories to cover, and the coverage of the tsunami and its aftermath reflects this structural problem. Not surprisingly, a natural disaster in India inevitably and quickly turns into a social disaster in which the news media play a central role.

When no reporters, photographers or news editors come from the fishing community, it is unlikely that this com-

munity's problems will be understood or get fairly represented. This helps to explain what I regard as the largely insensitive and pointless reporting by the media—TV and print, both in Tamil and English—of the tsunami disaster.

Correspondents who reported this story had almost never stepped into these ghettoized fishing settlements before the tsunami. During the last few years, the Tamil Nadu government had been trying to relocate several fishing hamlets in Chennai to landlocked areas six to eight kilometers from the shore to "beautify" the beach. The fisherfolk resisted such moves. The media, including the newsmagazine, Outlook, where I work, were hardly interested in reporting these developments. Now, too, when the government is using post-tsunami rehabilitation as an opportunity to push fisherfolk away from the shoreline, the media are still uninterested.

The fishing ghettoes are no-go zones for those who do not belong to the community. Fish is consumed by everyone, but the fisherfolk are always kept at a safe distance. And they rarely inhabit spaces other than seaside settlements. In reporting on the tsunami, I met several fishing community members who had tried to move away from their traditional occupations of fishing and work as engineers, lawyers and software technologists, but they found it difficult to get jobs or rent houses once their identity was revealed. The popular stereotype of the community is that they are quarrelsome, dirty, smelly and that the men are given to drinking and are prone to crime. Since work in the sea tends to be seasonal, the fishermen are available as 'goondas' (as goons/thugs are known) and mercenaries. Simply put—an antisocial image. When reporters walked through the worst affected areas, these were the images they inevitably carried in their minds. Since this was one of the biggest stories of the century, they could not walk away from the scene, and so they began to peddle the images of these people as victims.

Initially, hundreds of stories were the "how did it happen" ones. Visually, both print and television in Tamil Nadu competed in showing images of gruesomeness and pathos. Sun News seemed to revel in showing bereaved women crying helplessly. Dinamalar, the second largest circulated Tamil daily (selling close to a million copies per day), had a color picture of a dog nibbling a dead child. Though the fisherfolk are not necessarily poor, the news media quickly made beggars of them. Within a few days old, used clothes—the charity of the rest of civil society—flooded the tsunami-hit areas, especially Nagapattinam and Kanyakumari districts. But these donated clothes were rejected by the people. Heaps of clothes lay untouched on the roads as a slap on the face of middle-class charity.

Dangers of Human-Interest Reporting

After the victim stories, reporters began to look for "heroes." They were under pressure to produce "feel-good" stories about hope from the disaster zone. My editors were constantly reminding me to keep the human-interest angle in mind. "At least a box," I was told. Here are some examples of what this reporting looked like and the consequences of it:

- New Delhi Television (NDTV), India's leading 24-hour news channel, showed one correspondent coaxing a 10-year-old to reenact the scene of how she saved two children when the big wave came. It was clear that the children were made to rehearse the scene a few times before it was put on film.
- An English weekly, The Week, published a mid-January cover story on the "heroes of tsunami," featuring on its cover Vivek Oberoi, a movie star from Bollywood who volunteered for relief work. Oberoi was actually there as part of a right-wing Hindutva group led by Swami Chidanand Saraswati.
- With the state government welcoming Oberoi's presence, and the Tamil and international media celebrating his heroics, even a serious magazine like Frontline, which routinely carries features by notables such as Arundhati Roy and Noam Chomsky, failed to see that he was part of a religious right-wing group. It reported: "The most visible among the voluntary organizations working in the district is the Rishikesh-based India Heritage Research Foundation, founded and run by Swami Chidanand Saraswati …. Among the notable followers of this foundation is the Hindi film actor Vivek Oberoi, who rushed to the aid of the affected people within days of the tsunami attack. He camped at Devanampattinam for a week and helped Swami Chidanand Saraswati in a big way in organizing relief."

What Frontline and other media did not report was the strong presence of cadre of the rightwing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Corps) at some of Hope Foundation's meetings. What also went unreported was that young fishermen openly questioned the presence of Swami Chidanand Saraswati and asked him to leave. The reason: Once this organization arrived, government relief had stopped coming to these fisherfolks' village. Then one day, unreported by the media, suddenly this voluntary group packed its bags and left.

The large presence of international and national nongovernmental organizations (NGO) impacted the nature of media reporting. In fact, sometimes NGO's set the news agenda. After being briefed by NGO's, reporters gave a lot of space to the "perceived" importance of psychological counseling (even though none of the counselors who were deployed to help had ever been in a fishing village and understood little of the community's dynamics) and to the "imagined" plight of tsunami orphans. In fact, Outlook did a five-page report on tsunami orphans and, as a reporter working on this story, I had to play along. The ostensible reason was, after the Bhuj earthquake of 2001, a cover story on orphans of the quake sold very well, and now a similar story could be repeated in the context of the tsunami.

However, the perception of urban nuclear families of an orphan as being a child without parents is at odds with the community care that such children tend to get in these fishing communities.

Once the government decided to open orphanages, very few children were enrolled despite some efforts by overly enthusiastic NGO volunteers who tried to force single parents to part with their children to swell the numbers in these orphanages. As of now, fewer than 100 orphans are in the state-run homes in three districts.

For the media, though, orphans were part of the human-interest angle. In part, media interest was triggered by an NDTV story in which the reporter held a cute infant and said on prime-time television that "These babies could be yours for adoption. For all such orphan babies, the need of the hour is a secure, loving home." The perception left by the media and government was that these children might not be safe if left with relatives or the community.

One of the best displays of media insensitivity came from the Outlook photographer who accompanied me on this story. Despite being told that the children in the government-run orphanage were scared of the sea, he wanted them to collectively pose near a catamaran "with the sea in the background" for that would make "a great picture." Denied this, he made the children pose behind the sliding iron grill door of the orphanage to (mis)represent "their plight" and, during the photo shoot, a finger of an 11-month-old girl in the orphanage was crushed in the grill.

Some three weeks after the tsunami, print and visual media remained keen on showing amateur video footage of the tsunami taken by tourists. While visual media thrived on these sensational images, print media was not far behind. The Hindu, a leading English-language national daily printed in Chennai, prominently displayed poor quality photographs taken with a camera that after 20 days washed ashore on Chennai's Marina Beach. A feature story in the daily's January 25th issue was woven around the recovery of this camera and The Hindu's earnest efforts to successfully restore it to its owner, who had come to Chennai as a member of a sports team.

These are a sampling of the human interest/investigative stories the tsunami inspired. By January 26th, it was time for "calendar" journalism involving a spate of one-month-after-the-tsunami stories.

While covering these many aspects of the tsunami's destruction, there are certain topics about which India's media have been almost silent. When India rejected offers of foreign aid, there was hardly any analysis done of this decision, even in the English-language press. On the nuclear installations along the coast not having tsunami-preparedness, there was muted reportage. On the failure of India's scientific community, there was no debate. When the Indian government refused to characterize the tsunami as a "national calamity," members of the news media were largely silent. The media did not report when dalits were employed to clear the dead bodies without even protective gloves. And the media continue to show no interest reporting on the efforts to relocate fisherfolk in landlocked areas far from the sea.

In all this, one factor remains clear and important: The fisherfolk are not people like us. The reporting on the tsunami told us more about the society to which journalists belong than about the society of the fisherfolk, about which they know very little. ■

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Media Bias in Covering the Tsunami in Aceh

'Indonesian journalists do not understand Aceh stories from the Acehnese perspective.'

By Andreas Harsono

One early morning in January, when Hotli Simanjuntak drew water from a well outside a house in Banda Aceh, he was complaining about some messages he had received from his Global TV editors in Jakarta. "They grumbled about having no official quotes on the beating of Farid Faqih. How important is Farid in Jakarta? But here his story is not that important," he told me. "You could check with other Aceh journalists. His story is only important for the parachuting journalists from Jakarta." We ended up trading jokes about the frenzied Jakarta editors, while carrying buckets of water to an adjoining bathroom.

Simanjuntak is a 30-year-old photojournalist, who used to freelance for the Agence France Presse. Like most stringers, his payment depends on how many of his photos or how much footage gets used by his bosses in Jakarta. He is humble, energetic and critical—and this combination makes him an ideal correspondent in the war-torn Aceh. I met him because the December 26th tsunami destroyed his house, and he moved to Nani Afrida's house, which she made into a temporary shelter for visiting journalists, like me, who couldn't find a hotel in Banda Aceh. She is a freelancer who writes daily for The Jakarta Post.

Both Hotli and Nani told me that many Acehnese men and women were

being harassed, scolded, beaten and even killed by Indonesian soldiers. Such violence was frequent, they said, but stories about it go unpublished. As I heard this, I remembered Ryamizard Ryacudu, the Indonesian army chief who openly admitted that in the month after the tsunami his men had killed 120 members of the Free Acheh Movement (Gerakan Acheh Merdeka, or GAM). GAM representatives said only 20 guerrillas were killed and that the others who'd been killed were civilians. I tend to give more credit to the GAM version.

The Jakarta media continuously regard such beatings or killings as minor stories, but when an Indonesian army captain beat more well-known, Jakarta-based activist Farid Faqih, who allegedly stole some relief aid, this beating immediately became a headline. Kompas, the largest newspaper in Indonesia, carried news of the beating on its front page. "Indonesian journalists do not understand Aceh stories from the Acehnese perspective," Hotli said, adding that as a Christian Batak from northern Sumatra he did not understand the perspective until he moved to Aceh four years ago.

Indonesian media are overly narrowminded when they are required to cover anything that relates to stubborn territories like Aceh, Papua or East Timor. Since the 1950's, Aceh has struggled to secede from Indonesia, and Papua set up its own Free Papua Organization in the 1970's, even though each voluntarily joined Indonesia originally. In 1999, East Timor won a United Nations-supervised referendum to become a new state. Today Indonesia is comprised of thousands of islands stretching over a distance from east to west that is approximately the same as from London to Baghdad. Its 210 million people speak more than 300 languages, and 88 percent of its population are Muslims, many of whom live on the islands of Java and Sumatra, making Indonesia the largest Islamic country in the world.

Ethnic violence and separatist movements are escalating throughout the country. The main reasons are injustice, human rights abuses, and the growing gap between the main island of Java and the other islands. Now questions are being raised whether Indonesia can survive as a nation-state. Critics contend that Indonesia is bound to disintegrate like Yugoslavia, given that its people's only common history is their Dutch colonial past. The old strongman, General Suharto, managed to keep the country together by brutal means after he rose to power in 1965. But when he left power in May 1998, the institutions that he had built up also began to crumble.

The Baiturrahman grand mosque in Banda Aceh in Indonesia was not destroyed by the tsunami, prompting an interpretation that it had a divine power protecting it from the killer waves on December 26th. *Photo by Maha Eka Swasta from the book "Ocean of Tears."*

Ironically, almost all of the current media companies were set up during the Suharto era. It is no wonder that I heard so many times these news organization's top editors talking about the need to preserve the Unitarian State of the Republic of Indonesia (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia, or NKRI). "We journalists should be red-and-white first and defend the NKRI," declared Derek Manangka, the news director of RCTI, Indonesia's largest private channel, when talking in a seminar about the Aceh coverage two years ago. (The red-and-white is the name of the Indonesian flag.)

Suryopratomo, the chief editor of Kompas, told me it is always better that those territories remain within Indonesia, even though he realizes that many human rights abuses by Indonesian soldiers take place in Aceh, Papua and others. "Still it is better to be united in this age of global competition," he said. Such views are common, even if they don't totally dominate the media of Palmerah, the Jakarta neighborhood where most of the leading newspapers and TV stations have their headquarters. Frequently, managers and editors at these news outlets put forward their nationalism—and in some cases also their Islamic interpretation—when confronted with ethnic or religious problems in their coverage.

The Politics of Tsunami Coverage

When the tsunami hit Aceh, reporters from these news organizations rushed to cover the suffering of their "Acehnese brothers and sisters." Many also organized fundraising to help relief services. The tsunami raised a genuine solidarity among many Indonesians. Outside Indonesia, from Paris to Beijing, from Warsaw to Lima, many people also shared the suffering of the Acehnese, the people in Sri Lanka, and other tsunami-hit countries.

But just one week after the tsunami, the Jakarta media bias against what they claimed to be "foreigners" and "Christianization" began to appear. They reported that activists of the Muslim-based Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or PKS) put up posters in public spaces in Banda Aceh with this warning: "Don't let Acehnese orphans be taken away by Christians and their missionaries." Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla announced that he would call upon the Indonesian Council of Ulemas to help decide on the adoption of Acehnese orphans. "We will help the children to keep their faith. No adoption could be done without the ulemas' supervision,"

Coconut trees on the coastline of Aceh in northern Sumatra were destroyed by the tsunami that restructured the coastline. *Photo by Maha Eka Swasta from the book "Ocean of Tears."*

Kalla announced.

Hidayat Nur Wahid, a PKS leader and currently the speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly, said the arrival of American, Australian as well as other foreign troops to help the tsunami victims should be controlled. "They should go out within a month," Hidayat said, adding that his party is worried some foreign soldiers as well as the international aid workers might help to "Christianize" the predominantly Muslim Acehnese.

Jawa Pos Group, which controls more than 100 newspapers throughout Indonesia, quoted Kalla without providing an explanation for what prompted him and Muslim activists to focus on religion when the bulk of attention was on how to get emergency aid quickly to the tsunami survivors. Tempo magazine also published a cover story on the "Acehnese orphans" without providing readers with a single bit of evidence that Christians had taken the initiative to adopt the children. Though some American evangelical groups had been working in Aceh to preach the gospel, it was the U.S. media that revealed their religious activities.

Concerns such as these raised in various media accounts were soon brought up in a cabinet meeting led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Kalla, who attended the meeting, later told the media that "foreigners should get out of Aceh as soon as possible." He added: "Three months are enough. The sooner [they leave], the better." Indonesians, not foreign troops, according to Kalla, should be in charge of caring for those who lost their homes to the tsunami. When asked about long-term relief efforts, he said: "We don't need foreign troops."

Such statements irritated the Acehnese, who organized a street rally in Jakarta in late January to demand that the United Nations, Americans and the British remain in Aceh and saying that Indonesia tries to keep foreigners out of Aceh in a bid to keep pacifying the Acehnese. "If the foreigners go out, the Indonesian corruptors will go in," said Nasruddin Abubakar, a leader of the Center for Information and Referendum in Aceh.

Jakarta's top newspaper editors use the red-and-white (Indonesia's national flag) to defend the country's unity. *Photo by Mohamad Iqbal from the book "Ocean of Tears."*

Aceh is an oil-and-gas-rich province of Indonesia. Most of its natural resources, however, have been channeled into Jakarta. In 1976, the Aceh independence movement began when Hasan di Tiro, an Achehnese aristocrat with a doctorate from Columbia University and a past connection with the CIA, declared independence in Aceh. Di Tiro established a guerrilla network, trained his soldiers in Libya, and maintains his position as walinegara, or head of state, from self-exile in Sweden. He wants to see the ancient Aceh sultanate revived. Di Tiro dislikes Indonesia; for him "Indonesia" and "Aceh" are a contradiction. He hates Indonesia's political construction and even uses a different spelling ("Acheh" rather than "Aceh") for his region. He described Indonesia as "a Javanese republic with a Greek pseudo-name."

The Jakarta media, however, has not published news about di Tiro nor about Nasruddin's street rally. The Jawa Pos Group newspapers also did not mention a word about the street protest nor any statements made in Aceh about this situation. The Acehnese, indeed, want the international workers to remain to balance the presence of the Indonesian military, but statements such as those by Hidayat and Kalla were published widely and found resonance in many Indonesian circles opposed to the United States. At this time, U.S. forces are not anybody's heroes after the bad publicity they received from the Abu Ghraib prison atrocities in Iraq. Jakarta media carried the prison scandal pictures in full, and this has only fueled resentment against them. Many Indonesian Muslims see the American troops as staunchly anti-Islam.

In mainstream news reports, the innuendo was palpable: Relief services that had come to Indonesia were motivated by religious considerations and nationalistic factors. Perhaps such worries were sparked because international relief organizations—whose workers are mostly Westerners and presumably Christians—were among the first to rush to Aceh. But this seems to present more of a case of paranoia. Nothing has happened to suggest that international relief workers are keen to take away Acehnese children, and neither have Indonesian churches demonstrated much altruism.

Misunderstanding Nationalism

Benedict Anderson, the Cornell University political scientist who wrote "Imagined Communities: Reflections on

the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," believes that many Indonesian political elite misunderstand the concept of nationalism. Anderson is an old hand in Indonesia's political analysis. He used to be the director of the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project and for more than 20 years edited the Indonesia multidisciplinary biannual journal.

In March 1999, a year after President Suharto stepped down from power, Anderson visited Indonesia and gave a speech to media leaders in Jakarta. In this speech, he said that nationalism is widely misunderstood to be something very old and inherited from "absolutely splendid ancestors." Many misunderstand nationalism as arising "naturally" in the blood and flesh of each Indonesian citizen, he went on to say. In fact, nationalism is a new entity; in countries like the United States and France it is little more than two centuries old and, in Indonesia, which declared independence in 1945, it is in its infancy.

Another misunderstanding Anderson shared is that "nation" and "state" are, if not exactly identical, at least connected like a happy husband and wife in their relationship. In fact, the reality is often just the opposite. In this speech, Anderson also debunked the idea that only Westerners could colonize "native people" by reminding audience members that 90 percent of the government officials of the Netherlands Indies, the colonial ruler of this vast archipelago, were "natives." In the 1950's, when Indonesia began to govern itself, these native colonial officials became the ruling elite.

During the Dutch colonial period, repression took place but was not as extreme as what was observed during Suharto's regime (i.e. torture with electrical cords connected to activists' genitals). And such violence took place excessively in areas like Aceh, Papua and East Timor. "I see too many Indonesians still inclined to think of Indonesia as an 'inheritance,' not as a challenge nor as a common project. Where one has inheritance, one has inheritors, and too often there are bitter quarrels among them as to who has 'rights' to the inheritance: sometimes to the point of great violence," Anderson said. "The situation is today very serious and can only be remedied by a radical change in the mindset of the political leaders in Indonesia."

As Hotli and Nani's comments attest, and Anderson's observations show, nationalism in Indonesia is narrowly understood, especially among leading editors. A necessary change of mindset should start with journalists themselves as they work to rid themselves of their narrow-minded sense of nationalism and start to report on the Aceh and its people from a broader perspective. In some ways this will mean choosing to act first as journalists and then as Indonesians. It is by sticking to my journalistic principles that I believe I serve my Indonesian audience better. ■

Andreas Harsono, a 2000 Nieman Fellow, is head of the Pantau Foundation, a media think tank in Jakarta. The photos in this article appear in the book, "Samudra Air Mata" ("Ocean of Tears"), published in February 2005 by Galeri Foto Jurnalistik Antara, Jakarta.

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Reporting From a 'Calamity That Defies Description'

A tight focus on individuals allowed a U.S. journalist and photographer to present 'these people in scenes that began to form chapters in a narrative.'

By Richard Read

In Sri Lanka, we saw a fishing boat that had impaled a house, its bow protruding into a gutted living room. In Indonesia, we saw coconut trees ripped out by the roots, rice paddies filled with salty black muck, and everywhere people grieving for family members. In our minds, we connected the dots between these two nations, 1,000 miles apart at opposite ends of the Indian Ocean. Although we met people who inspired us in their efforts to rebuild, grief and destruction encircled the region.

Photographer Rob Finch and I walked at one point through a shattered village where we'd met a man who had lost a son. "Some things," Rob said, "are unphotographable." The two-time international newspaper photographer of the year would go on to prove himself wrong. But I knew what he meant. What we were witnessing couldn't all be contained in a frame.

So we confronted the arcane question—arcane, I mean, relative to the life and death around us and mainly of interest to journalists on deadline: How does one cover a disaster of such magnitude, a calamity that defies description? Where does one begin to extract meaning from mass destruction?

Using a Tight Focus

Our answer was to focus in tight. We picked a few families, a few aid workers, a few towns. Only by seeing people up close, we felt, could readers appreciate the dimensions of the devastation. We presented these people in scenes that began to form chapters in a narrative. I tried to include details that newspaper writers often omit—bickering among aid workers, for example, or dissem-

bling by a pilot who forgot to engage his landing gear—but that later seem to engross friends over beers. I don't know if we succeeded, but I like to think the stories differed from pieces I used to write. They had more developed characters and more sense of place.

This disaster also differed from wars and other calamities I've covered. It affected an entire coastal region, leaving more than 290,000 dead or missing. It singled out children and old people unable to withstand the towering waves. It leveled whole towns, meaning journalists had to show up with survival gear, fully self-sufficient.

Like most people covering the tsunami's fallout, Rob and I had little time to prepare. I was halfway down a central Oregon ski trail when I got word to go. Rob made the rounds of Portland outdoor stores, gathering mosquito nets, bug juice, and a water filter. We got inoculations, grabbed cash, and met at the airport, where a shipping clerk thrust a bulky Internet satellite gizmo into our hands. We stuffed the unit and its tangle of cables into oversized shopping bags. We boarded the plane with two doctors and two nurses from Northwest Medical Teams, an organization that dispatches volunteers to wars and disasters.

A 10-hour flight got us to Tokyo, where we filed a story on the team members and their motivations. Another 10-hour flight got us to Colombo, where we filed again on this aid team's hurried preparations. A 10-hour truck ride, narrowly avoiding head-on collisions, got us to Sri Lanka's east coast, where we filed once again, this time a story about the discord within the exhausted team.

The initial coverage might have resembled an aid-workers' reality show. But we wanted to bring readers along with the volunteers, seeing the situation through their eyes. Like journalists, these relief workers tried to beat others to the scene. They were genuinely eager to help. They also knew that the sooner they reported progress on their organization's Web site, the faster donations would roll in.

They hurried to begin treating survivors in the one-room schoolhouse of a fishing village near Batticaloa. The next day they worked in a camp for hundreds of homeless people. Survivors arrived with gashes, bruises, fevers and diarrhea. The doctors took the diarrhea especially seriously, watching for water-borne diseases such as cholera that could explode into epidemics. One man's body was twisted and broken from evident torture years before in Sri Lanka's civil war. Another man showed up weeping, with no physical symptoms. The ocean had taken his son. "He just needed someone to listen," said Dr. Tom Hoggard, a veteran volunteer who fought back tears himself.

In the tiny fishing village of Palameen Madu, Iruthayanathan Justin visits the grave he dug for his oldest daughter, Jeromica. *Photo by Rob Finch/The Oregonian.*

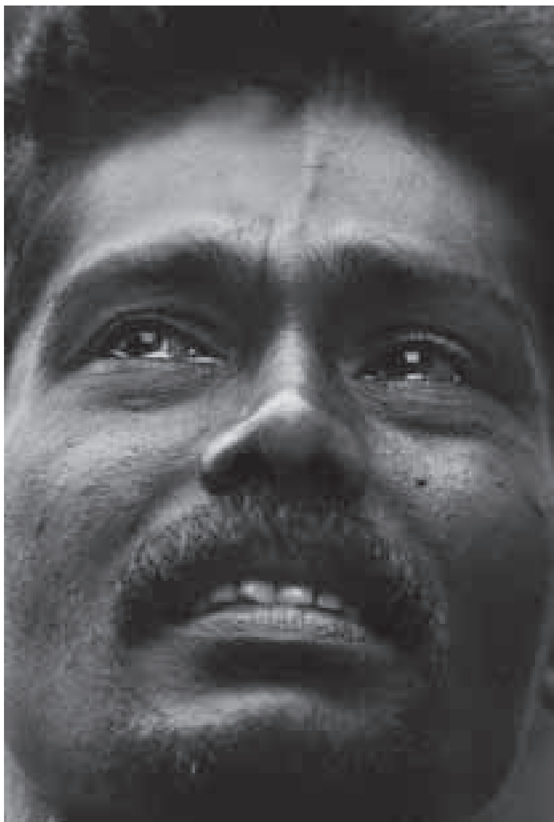
Later Hoggard introduced us to the Justin family. The father, a subsistence fisherman, told a horrific story of saving two of his children while losing a daughter to the waves. "Over and over," I wrote, "Iruthayanathan Justin replays what might be the most horrible predicament a parent could face. Running desperately to save two of his children from roaring tsunami waves, he had to let a third child fall behind. His two younger daughters looked back to see a mammoth wave carry their 13-year-old sister to her death."

Justin took us back to the family's battered home and explained how the sea suddenly turned reddish brown, how the first wave caught him by the knees, and how the biggest black wave claimed his beloved daughter, Jeromica. He showed us the grave he dug himself. Justin cried. I did, too. But he seemed grateful that people would come halfway around the world and care enough to ask what happened.

Moments Tell Larger Stories

We had planned to follow the family until the next turn in their lives. But our editors urged us to press on for Indonesia. On Sumatra two days later, we clambered aboard a Cessna carrying dried fish to Meulaboh, a shattered coastal town southeast of Aceh province. From the air, we could see the devastation was far worse this close to the fault line. Huge swaths of land were flattened, houses exploded as if by a hurricane. Yet here and there, just as in California during the fires, a single house remained by some fluke.

Survivors' responses varied as well. Some families stood or sat, immobilized, on the concrete pads that used to support their homes. Next door, people stacked beams, tiles and roofing. The rebuilders reminded us of barefoot Sri Lankan carpenters we had seen framing a teahouse, constructing a business on a mini-



Justin grieves for his daughter. *Photo by Rob Finch/ The Oregonian.*

mal investment in nails and tea bags.

In both countries, I wrote about government officials and humanitarians struggling to cope. In Sri Lanka, I parked myself in the archaic office of a deputy governor inside a crumbling Portuguese fort. I caught the dialogue as the administrator, who had lost an aide and a stenographer to the tsunami, pressed for food deliveries to camps holding tens of thousands.

I watched as a legislator representing minority Tamils entered and browbeat the deputy governor, demanding more aid from the Singhalese-majority government. During a raucous meeting the next day, the deputy repeatedly rang a bell to quiet local officials and foreign relief workers arguing about how to run camps. The meeting made another scene in my ongoing narrative accounts.

Reporters confronted physical and emotional challenges. Writer Hal Bernton and photographer Betty Udesen, of The Seattle Times, stayed in tents next to ours at a Meulaboh school. But we never saw them; they were stuck on a boat somewhere. Betty gashed her leg, which got infected; she was evacuated to a U.S. Navy ship's hospital, where doctors saved her leg. And I didn't learn until later that Robert Whymant, a talented British reporter whom I knew years ago in Tokyo, had died when the tsunami wrapped around Sri Lanka.

Back in Oregon, I think of Robert a lot, and of the Justins and others we met. The Justins will be able to rebuild, replace their fishing boat and return their surviving children to school—courtesy of generous Oregonian readers moved by their plight. I won't look at the ocean quite the same way ever again. I've learned on a visceral level that the sea can exceed its bounds, just as we discovered that planes can be flown intentionally into buildings.

Predictably, our satellite-phone gizmo never worked. I was thankful to encounter Jocelyn Ford—another former Tokyo cohort based in Beijing for Public Radio International's "Marketplace"—who transmitted my final story after my modem melted down. After I encountered her in that schoolyard, I watched Jocelyn sit with curious children as they arrived for class in the one room not occupied by relief workers. She smiled and laughed with them in the bright morning sun, getting them accustomed to her microphone.

The children wore red and white uniforms matching the Indonesian flag above the school. In clear voices, they sang the national anthem as they might every morning, their words punctuated by giggles as a boy yanked a girl's hair. Jocelyn recorded it all. Her soundtrack reflected a tone of innocence and promise that I have tried to keep alive inside ever since. ■

Rich Read, a 1997 Nieman Fellow, is a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner who covers international affairs for The Oregonian. His tsunami stories and Rob Finch's photos can be found on the Web site www.oregonlive.com/special/tsunami/oregonian/?archive.

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The tsunami washed away four kilometers of a major commercial roadway in Sri Lanka. *Photo by Rob Finch/The Oregonian.*

Global Journalism About a Regional Catastrophe

The need for cross-cultural sensitivity is one lesson a journalist took away from his coverage of the tsunami.

By V.S. Sambandan

In about 20 minutes, coastlines were devastated in South and Southeast Asia, creating a huge global news story and testing newsgathering skills on all fronts. As a foreign journalist based in Sri Lanka, innumerable issues sprang to my mind, and several of these will continue to engage my attention even after the tsunami's wake of destruction has passed. One of these long-term issues involves the impact of the instant globalization of journalism; the second is about cultural gaps that exist between journalists and sources.

These issues are but two of several vital yardsticks to measure the manner in which the media reported and commented on the tsunami story. I regard them as setting up critical parameters by which to gauge the long-term influences this reporting assignment will have on the continuing evolution of journalism.

For me, covering the tsunami as a one-person bureau for a foreign newspaper meant balancing big-picture stories with reporting about ground-level tragedies. In an island where practically everyone along the coast had a story to tell, I viewed my job as one of keeping the stories focused along carefully chosen themes. This need was heightened by the fact that Chennai in India, the publishing center of my newspaper, The Hindu, also suffered from the tsunami. Therefore I alternated between big picture, national impact reporting, and stories of human suffering, which essentially were told as micro-level narratives.

In hindsight, I totally brushed away the first indication of this disaster. Around 6:30 a.m. on December 26th, my wife woke me up to say that she felt a tremor. We were staying at a hill resort on one of our rare visits away from Colombo. I dismissed her words with a joke. Soon, my sister-in-law called from Chennai to say they'd felt tremors there. After hearing this, I called up a colleague in India for further details, and he said he'd get back to me with information.

Matters had not yet come to a boil, but I was on a tentative alert. After breakfast, I went to the room to send our son down for breakfast, when my wife called up to say she heard a radio report of an eastern town hit by a "tidal wave." The tsunami story, unmistakably, had started. Within minutes, through phone calls, I was able to establish that the entire eastern coast was hit—from northern Sri Lanka to the southern tip. By the time I set out from the hill resort to drive down to Colombo, the spread and magnitude of the disaster was clear. I sent the first story—a two-line newsbreak—from my hotel room, then started to drive back to Colombo.

The first day's coverage was essentially a big picture story—based on official versions—both at the capital and from the districts. The sheer numbers were unimaginable. At this stage, I regretted putting off a rather tedious bit of background research that involved collating divisional population statistics, which would have given an overall picture of the number of people living in the coastal villages. I learned that day that the role of background preparation is a critical element in preparedness and can give journalists a cutting edge in their coverage of unexpected events.

The globalization of the tsunami coverage became more apparent with the arrival of TV crews from throughout the world. Journalists were eager to set out to the disaster zone, and a majority headed to the southern city, Galle. With their focus nearly entirely on the south, however, the powerful TV medium sadly used the same bow to play various tunes. A more geographical spread of coverage could have brought out the wider impact of the devastation. Unfortunately, but understandably, the story stopped where the road ended.

Witnessing and Reporting the Devastation

A journalist in Sri Lanka is used to witnessing scenes of gore. I have seen blasted bodies of suicide bombers—a head hanging from a tree and a torso thrown away several feet, a mass hacking of over 30 persons, including children and expectant mothers inside a village house, to name just two. Reporting on the tsunami, however, found scenes of devastation that were impossible to comprehend. In a village in northern Sri Lanka, the bloated, putrefying body of a child—barely five or six years old—lay beneath a canvas, and in a southern city, the stench of the dead suffocated my nostrils as I drove past, even though I was in an air-conditioned and well insulated car.

The entire coastline was obliterated. None of the landmarks used to help identify a place were there. In short, nothing existed. The toll on the journalist's sensitivities is something that one has to be prepared for. And putting what one witnesses into words requires a difficult, but optimal, distancing from the story and a way of bringing to the telling some perspective. Deciding how to embark on telling these stories was complex because of the many angles one could write about, so pegging my reporting thematically to the big picture story came in extremely handy.

While I did not have problems choosing themes and stories, I did encounter

difficulties in finding telephone lines to file my stories. One time I drove nearly 70 km on a devastated road, with a diversion through village tracts, before finding the single communication facility, barely 30 minutes before deadline. The sense of relief one gets after sending the story out from a devastated place is different, for it is not a political story but a human story, often about a voiceless, faceless person on the street who has lost it all. Certainly the world would not have stopped if that story was not sent but, as journalists, we would have failed in our duty to the devastated people.

Cross-Cultural Implications

"Is your friend [from a U.S. TV channel] here?" an agitated Sri Lankan academic friend asked me a week into the tsunami reporting. By then the international media had established a major presence in Sri Lanka and were predictably focused on the southern region. "Please tell them to be sensitive in what they are doing," my nonjournalist friend said. Some elements of the coverage of survivors' accounts, particularly by the high-impact television medium, both domestic and international, had not gone over well in sections of Sri Lankan society. One report, in which a small boy was asked to reenact how he survived and then taken to the site of his mother's grave, had drawn much criticism as an example of insensitive journalism.

When I mentioned this to my friend at the TV channel, he assured me that there'd been no such intent. "In a way it helps the victims and survivors overcome the trauma," he told me, with a tone of conviction.

This exchange demonstrated to me that we were experiencing in the coverage of this story a clear case of cross-cultural consequences, which can happen in situations of such rapid-fire journalism. The most telling comment I heard on this subject came from a Sri Lankan villager who lived deep in the south of the country. Knowing I was a foreign journalist, he said: "Go tell the world that people here are helpless. They are not beggars, they all lived well. Now they have lost it." What his words said to me is that to survivors this was not a time for wallowing or showing pity.

Technology and Reporting

Undoubtedly, text messages and the Internet played a huge role in the coverage of this story. However, with respect to Webloggers, to the best of my knowledge their presence was not so widespread in the print medium in either India and in Sri Lanka. I attribute this to two reasons:

One report, in which a small boy was asked to reenact how he survived and then taken to the site of his mother's grave, had drawn much criticism as an example of insensitive journalism.

- The disaster took place in the backyard and doorstep of South and Southeast Asia, and major news groups with their own correspondents didn't have as much need to resort to bloggers' accounts.
- More importantly, the blogger is still not in the mainstream of journalism. Due to the manner of bloggers' news collection, one cannot be sure if the route of multisourcing and multiconfirmation has been taken.

For instance, I do not file a major story unless it is unimpeachably confirmed from more than one source or it has documentary substantiation. Without taking anything away from the excellent job done by bloggers, I would still consider their work as providing vital leads for me to follow-up meticulously before going to print.

The Global News Story

The tsunami reporting illuminats the global news impact of a regional catastrophe. This reporting offers a rich area for research in content analysis and examination of various media approaches and journalist-source/the victim-as-source dynamics, as well as many other dimensions of the storytelling. I see in this reporting implications for the future of journalism that involve both the preparedness of a journalist, in terms of backgrounder research and up-to-date contacts, and the sensitivity reporters show to victims, often under cross-cultural conditions. And I would add one more: Reporting from this region rapidly tapered away with the departure of the major global visitors, particularly the U.S. Secretary of State, who made a whistle-stop tour of the island and addressed a press conference at the tarmac of the airport, and the U.N. Secretary General, who made, in his words, "a less than 48-hour visit" to the island.

The visitors have gone and so have the major news organizations. Is this right that global journalism be so fleet-footed in its attention to a devastation of this scale? Here in Sri Lanka, the devastation remains, and so do its victims. ■

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Arriving at the Digital News Age

'It is in this fusion of old and new that the future of journalism most probably lies.'

By Simon Waldman

Less than a decade ago, people would talk at conferences about a time in the distant future when digital technologies would allow anyone to be a reporter and publish to the world. Unlike much of what was once discussed, this vision has come true. And if there was any doubt that this era has arrived, then the global sharing of news and stories that happened in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami has laid those to rest.

While traditional media tried to come to grips with this complex evolving story, text messages, blog posts, photographs and video clips appeared online, bringing us thousands of people's firsthand experiences of the horrific event. As viewer or reader, one could not fail to be moved nor impressed by how this enormous amount and range of content was created, disseminated and consumed instantly and effortlessly by people living in every region of the world.

New media commentator Steve Outing saw the volume and quality of this output and wrote, "Mainstream news organizations should consider the tsunami story as the seminal marker for introducing citizen journalism into the hallowed space that is professional journalism." [See Outing's story on page 79.] Indeed, Webloggers' reports were let into that hallowed space—at least certain corners of it. The BBC integrated bloggers reports into its Web site, and a number of papers, The Guardian included, published extracts from various postings on their print pages.

Peter Preston, a former editor of The Guardian, used the following words to describe what this use exemplified: "Your readers and viewers were also your correspondents. Your ability to be in touch was digital as well as conventional. That is a quantum shift, however you phrase it: The world shrinks in an instant. And foreign news desks, maybe, will never be the same again."

It was remarkable. But the sheer excess of the disaster highlighted both the great strength and the great weakness of the fledgling citizen journalism movement. Clearly its great strength was the vividness of first-person accounts and the sheer volume of them. But out of this sheer volume, the movement's great weakness was exposed—the lack of shape, structure and overall meaning to all that was available. There is a fundamental difference between reading hundreds of people's stories and understanding the "real" story.

There is a fundamental difference between reading hundreds of people's stories and understanding the 'real' story.

With the tsunami coverage, the story was big, complex and continually evolving. For the better part of a week, we learned nothing of what had happened at Aceh, in Indonesia, where there were no tourists with camcorders. And the politics of the international aid effort took the evolving story in new directions. Making sense of it all needed the sort of distillation, reduction and, yes, the editing process that happens in traditional media.

The disciplines of traditional media aren't just awkward restrictions. Deadlines, limits on space and time, the need to have a headline and an intro and a cohesive story rather than random paragraphs, all of these factors force out meaning and help with understanding. Without the order they impose, it's much, much harder to make sense of what's happening in the world.

In the online environment, many of these physical guideposts are removed, but that does not mean that the intellectual processes that result from them should not be maintained. They should. And it was here that traditional media carved out their role—and will continue to do so for many years to come.

Of course, smart editors combined the best of both worlds—using the blogosphere as a wire feed of first-person experiences to mesh with their own reporters' information and analysis. It is in this fusion of old and new that the future of journalism most probably lies. In an essay entitled "The Massless Media" in January's Atlantic Monthly, William Powers said he saw "a new media establishment taking form, it's shaped like a pyramid, with a handful of mass outlets at the top and innumerable niches supporting them from below, barking upward."

This clearly defined hierarchy Powers describes is probably a little too neat. If something new is taking form, it is likely not to be a neat "establishment" but an intricate and complex ecosystem in which bloggers, traditional journalists, and news aggregators all feed—and feed off—each other.

When The Guardian published a spread of quotes from bloggers in the days after the tsunami, they appeared on the features pages to complement the news coverage. "This was more a story about the bloggers than a case of entrusting the entire telling of the story to bloggers," says Esther Addley, one of the editors who put the spread

together. "If this was all we'd done in terms of our tsunami coverage, that would have been worrying."

Ironically, the great danger for traditional media is not that, as many bloggers think, they ignore this eruption of amateur content. It is too rich a source for any half decent desk editor to pass by. (Not to mention the fact that it is often free to use). No, the real danger is that editors pounce upon it too quickly and pay the price with their credibility.

The Guardian's features team contacted each blogger they quoted, doing their best to test for veracity. As with any first-person source, it was ultimately a judgment call whether to use the quotes. But as Addley stresses, at the time similar judgment calls were being made by journalists around the world, as eyewitness testimonies were given to print and broadcast journalists following the disaster.

For The Guardian, it worked. Others were not so fortunate. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, The Times of India carried a story on how blogs did a better job than most newspapers in covering the event. The story's headline read "Blogs beat conventional media." A few days later, their enthusiasm for the online world got the better of them as they, along with a number of other newspapers throughout the world, carried a front page picture taken off the Internet of what was meant to be the tsunami. It was, in fact, a photograph of a tidal bore on the Qiantangjiang River in China taken two years earlier.

In this way a thousand hoaxes lie. We have been warned. ■

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Managing the Army of Temporary Journalists

Eyewitness online reporting about the tsunami complements coverage by mainstream news organizations.

By Steve Outing

As surely as the sun will rise tomorrow morning, another catastrophic news event as significant as the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami—be it a natural disaster or terrorist attack—will strike one of these days/months/years. News organizations from throughout the world will respond quickly by dispatching teams of reporters and photographers to the scene. And Peter Jennings (or his successor) will anchor from the center of it all.

Oops. That's not the right response. Actually, before journalists even reach the scene, other "journalists" of a sort will be telling the news, by taking photographs and videos, writing personal accounts, or sharing others' stories. All of their news will be distributed instantly and constantly and shared worldwide. And in a few hours—or maybe days, if the next catastrophe, like the tsunami, is in a part of the world far removed from Western media—mainstream news organizations will catch up. By then, people who just happened to be on the scene will have scooped the conventional newsgatherers by using cell phones, digital cameras, laptops, Wi-Fi cards, and Internet connections to get out word of what they've witnessed or heard.

The New Reporters

The news media landscape is changing. Journalists now share the spotlight, as tsunami coverage powerfully demonstrated. Citizen reporters, armed with 21st century technology, can "cover" a story in ways that mainstream journalists don't:

- Using camera cell phones and digital cameras, eyewitnesses can easily send their photographs to news outlets or friends, who then pass them along to others who might publish them on the Web or in blogs. Powerful and newsworthy photos snapped by "amateurs"—often taken while the event happened and well before the photojournalists' planes have landed—now are seen spreading through the blog community, reaching millions of people when powerful images evoke strong emotions.
- In a world in which anyone can publish a blog and have potential worldwide reach (for free, no less), stories from the scene of a disaster are being told not just through reporters, but also to a worldwide audience directly via the Internet. This means that accounts are being published that might make many editors recoil. Consider the post-tsunami blog of a volunteer doctor describing in graphic detail (with grisly photos) the job of disposing of rotting bodies. His description of his reaction while tending to a child victim whose skull was crawling with maggots is a powerful piece of writing I won't soon forget. I doubt

that kind of graphic detail would survive the typical newspaper editorial process—too much potential for squeamish readers to cancel their subscriptions after losing their appetites at breakfast—yet there was great value in his story being told.

Unconventional "journalism" is being published by those who weren't journalists before the event happened and probably won't be once these stories have been told.

Am I suggesting that traditional reporters and photographers should feel threatened by this "alternative press"? No, no, no. Actually, all of this presents new opportunities for traditional journalism, but its practitioners will have to assume a different mindset to take advantage of it.

… this presents new opportunities for traditional journalism, but its practitioners will have to assume a different mindset to take advantage of it.

When the next big disaster occurs, another army of citizen reporters and photographers will instantly take shape. Among them, they will produce some powerful coverage that will augment—perhaps in some cases even outshine—the reporting of journalists. But those shiny nuggets of citizen-reported news will come amid a lot of dreck: bad writing, inaccurate reporting, and outright falsehoods alongside poorly conceived and confusing photos, even Photoshop-enhanced images designed to deceive.

The New Audience

Today's audience for all this citizen journalism has the difficult task of trying to decide if what they read or see is accurate. Let's face it, most of the public isn't up to that task, and this is where professional editors need to enter the picture. So here's my prescription for the news industry, to cope with—nay, to take advantage of—the age of citizen journalism:

- Follow the lead of pioneers like BBC News Online, which routinely solicits reader photos, stories and commentary about major news events.
- Get out of the old mindset of reporters only collecting and paraphrasing from eyewitnesses and instead let them have these sources say what they have to report directly to the public.
- Incorporate citizen reporting and photography into the main online news product (and selectively in legacy media, too), so that Web readers can choose whether to look to the work of journalists or to amateur reporters and eyewitnesses.

Some news companies are experimenting with citizen journalism, but are keeping it fenced off from the traditional news product. (The Bakersfield, Californian's Northwest Voice citizen-journalism Web site has no branding or link to the parent newspaper. A better approach is that of MSNBC.com, which features a "Citizen Journalists Report" and solicits citizen reporting on major stories.)

- Strike a balance between "anything goes" and "we decide, you read." On a huge story, the number of citizen reports can be overwhelming. The "We the Media" ethos, championed by Dan Gillmor in his recent book of the same name, proclaims the importance of all voices being heard and published, but thousands of photos and personal stories of an earthquake's devastation, for example, can be overwhelming. Allowing everyone who experienced a news event to have a voice is a noble endeavor, but temper it by selecting and highlighting the best stuff. There's still value in letting it all run—as long as citizen contributions meet a news organization's published standards—but most readers will only have time to view what's been selected as the best.
- Most importantly, apply editors' skills to the process of assembling citizen-reporting sections, weeding out the spoofs, the inaccurate, and the just plain bad. This is where journalism can apply its strengths to make citizens' input something truly valuable to the news-consuming public.

Citizen "journalism" is still in its infancy—though the Indian Ocean tsunami helped it grow up a little faster. But there are real shortcomings right now. If another tsunami-level disaster struck tomorrow, online news consumers would still have to search through a variety of far-flung sources to unearth all the eyewitness photos, videos and personal accounts that would quickly begin flowing onto and through the Internet. It wouldn't be easy.

The opportunity exists for savvy mainstream news organizations to establish themselves as the place to go for firsthand citizen and eyewitness reporting and the place where eyewitnesses know they can go to share their experiences and amateur reporting and be rewarded with a large audience.

Citizen journalism might be a train coming down the media-industry tracks. But it's not on a collision course. Mainstream news organizations and journalists just need to jump on board. ■

Steve Outing is a senior editor for Poynter Online, an interactive-media columnist for Editor & Publisher Online, and a long-time observer of new-media trends.

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Words & Reflections

Arguments for journalistic quality typically assert the importance of First Amendment responsibilities. In his book, "The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age," Philip Meyer, Knight Chair in Journalism at the University of North Carolina, argues the case for quality based on the numbers. The data, he says, point to the appeal of quality journalism among readers, and the money spent to support quality journalism can be justified on the basis of higher profits and a stronger market position for newspapers. In reflecting on Meyer's research, **Lou Ureneck**, who is a professor of business and economics journalism at Boston University, believes that while Meyer's argument is reasoned and hopeful, it is insufficient. As Ureneck points out, Meyer's book arrives at a difficult time for the newspaper industry when "the concept of increasing the investment in editorial quality, or even moderating the impulse to cut newsroom budgets, has become a battlefield." In providing a comprehensive look at the result of Meyer's "prodigious skills of analysis," Ureneck expresses gratitude to Meyer for taking on these tough issues despite the huge challenge he confronts in trying "to find a solution to the decline of journalism within the rules practiced by today's publicly traded corporations."

After working for many years as a CNN foreign correspondent, **Rebecca MacKinnon** created a Weblog about North Korea and now, as a fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, explores online participatory media and international news. MacKinnon provides a forward-looking perspective to observations former CNN Vice President Bonnie Anderson makes about the steep and worrisome decline in the quality of TV news in her book, "News Flash: Journalism, Infotainment, and the Bottom-Line Business of Broadcast News." MacKinnon says the conversation needs to be broadened to include new technologies that convey information in different ways. She wonders whether terms used now to talk about these topics will change, too. "Will the concepts of 'journalism' and 'news' become so redefined as to become unrecognizable from the way in which journalists define them today?" MacKinnon asks.

David DeJean, who has worked at the intersection of journalism and technology for 25 years, examines the arguments in two books that address the news media's difficulties in connecting with ordinary people's concerns. In "Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media," authors Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols decry how profit motives have overtaken journalism's critical mission of guarding "the people's liberty" and how by embracing objectivity (as a business strategy), journalists have been transformed into stenographers and lapdogs. In "We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People," former San Jose Mercury News columnist Dan Gillmor describes his vision of how the Internet can "save journalism—and thus democracy … [by] making reporting once again more responsive to the public's right to know than the corporation's right to profit." DeJean writes about how Gillmor envisions journalism, with the aid of the new technologies, becoming "more of a technically aided conversation, rather than a top-down monologue."

Former New York Times correspondent **John Herbers** explores what makes Seymour Hersh, author of the book "Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu

Ghraib," such a skilled investigative reporter during this time of intense government secrecy. As Herbers writes, "It is all the more remarkable at a time when secrecy is on the increase in the Bush administration, when the federal Freedom of Information Act is being weakened, and when the use of unauthorized leaks in journalism generally has become more controversial." **Maggie Mulvihill**, investigative editor at the Boston Herald, delves more deeply into issues of government secrecy and their impact on journalism in writing about Geoffrey R. Stone's book, "Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime From the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism," and the findings of two reports about secrecy, one prepared by the House Committee on Government Reform, the other by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. As Mulvihill points out, "Each of us has to navigate the steep challenges that now exist in gaining access to information as lower-level government officials keep in line with the tone of secrecy set by the White House." In an excerpt from a speech entitled "Democracy, Freedom and Media," Stanford University journalism professor **William F. Woo** explores why the press seems drawn to stories about democracy and is more uncomfortable when it comes to dealing with concepts of freedom and liberty. Woo contends that even though the press vigilantly stands up against threats to the First Amendment "as an institution, [the press] usually has been hostile to citizens whose free expression has been at stake."

Former Boston Globe columnist and editor **David Nyhan** writes about what happened at The New York Times with Howell Raines as its editor, as seen through the reporting of Seth Mnookin in his book, "Hard News: The Scandals at The New York Times and Their Meaning for American Media." "The bottom line to the book is Mnookin's take that Raines wreaked 21 months of hell week upon his staff," Nyhan says. "Raines whipped up fear and practiced favoritism, but he was a ballsy editor." During the time he was writing this review, Nyhan died unexpectedly while shoveling snow. Globe colleague **Kevin Cullen** reminds us of Nyhan's contributions to the Nieman Foundation as well as to journalism.

"Like all great narrative journalists, [Mark] Bowden must be a relentless asker of questions, a painstaking gatherer of minute detail," writes **Russell Frank**, who teaches journalism at Penn State University, as he comments on Bowden's collection of articles in his book "Road Work: Among Tyrants, Heroes, Rogues and Beasts." What Frank feels is missing in these factual accounts are guideposts that could help readers to understand how what Bowden conveys came to be known by him. In her essay about several post-9/11 documentary films presenting alternative opinions and perspectives, filmmaker **Lorie Conway** observes that "As in the past when journalists have not fully fed the public's appetite, a demand for alternative media has arisen." With the publication of "Sahel: The End of the Road," a book of photographs shot by Sebastião Salgado two decades ago in drought-stricken Africa, **Michele McDonald**, a Boston Globe photographer, recounts some of the "intense responses" these stunning, yet haunting black-and-white images have evoked. She quotes one critic as saying that "this beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal." To McDonald, Salgado's photographs "remind us, if we need such reminding, that the visual telling of loss and grief, so personal, is also universal." ■

A Prayer for Quality Journalism as Public Media Corporations Focus on Margin and Financial Return

In crunching the numbers, an author argues that investment is necessary to secure a future for news—in newspapers or on the Internet.

The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age
Philip Meyer
University of Missouri Press. 269 Pages. $24.95 pb.

By Lou Ureneck

As a reporter in the 1960's and 1970's, Philip Meyer pioneered the use of social-science methods in daily newspaper journalism. Using extensive polling, counting and statistical techniques, he tunneled deeply into issues of crime, poverty and education. One of his early stories, which appeared in the Detroit Free Press in 1967, analyzed the backgrounds and attitudes of the city's rioters. His stories challenged conventional wisdom and demonstrated the degree of alienation among the city's young black residents. In 1973 he published his influential book, "Precision Journalism," which opened the door of quantitative methods to a generation of journalists who have investigated innumerable local and national issues from police corruption to airline safety.

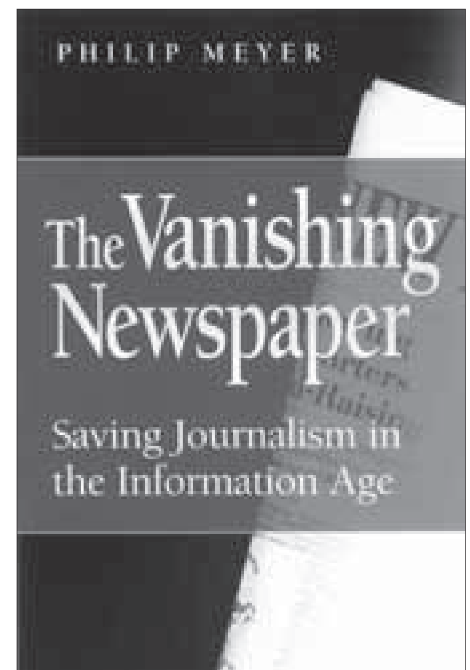
Now, 50 years after entering the newspaper business as a reporter and with fears for its future, Meyer has written a new book, "The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age." In it, he turns his prodigious skills of analysis back on the newspaper industry itself. "Journalism is in trouble," he says in the opening. "This book is an attempt to save it."

The mission he initially set for himself was to show that money spent on putting out a good newspaper could be justified on the basis of achieving a stronger market position and bigger profits. At first glance this hardly seems a controversial idea. It's difficult to imagine other manufacturers arguing over whether consumers would respond to better-made cars, clothes or refrigerators. Isn't the pursuit of quality how Japan came to dominate the auto industry?

In the newspaper industry, though, especially in the past two decades, the concept of increasing the investment in editorial quality, or even moderating the impulse to cut newsroom budgets, has become a battlefield. On one side: editors with a blind faith in the power of potent journalism to win readers and improve society. On the other side: business-oriented managers with an unbending commitment to controlling costs and hitting the numbers that reward investors.

While the marketplace is typically left to settle these disputes, the practice of journalism—like public health and education and unlike the manufacturing of automobiles—has implications for the welfare of society that make it a matter of public concern. The failure of newspapers would have a more damaging effect on our nation than, say, the loss of the shoe industry or the flight of textiles to China.

In a period of declining circulation and public trust, it is a commentary on our times that budgets have become the key point of contact between editors and publishers (or corporate CEO's). Most other issues—winning new readers, leading editorial crusades, or developing new editions or services—have been subordinated to secondary status as endless hours are spent on head count, evaluating the costs of overlapping wire services, or trimming freelance expenditures. As anyone who has been close to these matters knows, editors and their budgets have not fared well for quite some time. In fact, because the momentum toward leaner staffs and smaller budgets is so well established, and even accepted, the entire topic has become a little tired. It has come to feel like a settled issue, not unlike the annexation of Texas. Many of the editors who fought against the trend have departed with severance packages or escaped to academia, taking with them years of experience and idealism and reservoirs of talent and energy. Most who remain have reconciled themselves to the new order. In the meantime, newspaper circulation continues to decline, and swaths of the public are uninformed about important world and national events.



The Value of Quality Journalism

It is into this state of affairs that Meyer steps. So in the context of what has happened in the nation's newsrooms and

where journalism seems to be heading, his book amounts to a kind of "Hail Mary" pass in the final minutes of the game. To demonstrate empirically, and in quantitative terms, that quality journalism pays would cause an awful lot of beleaguered journalists to stand and cheer. Meyer is an estimable journalist and scholar who occupies the Knight Chair in Journalism at the University of North Carolina. He had a long career with Knight Ridder, both as a journalist and corporate executive, before entering academia, and his research has been widely published in scholarly journals and trade magazines. He is particularly well prepared to argue the case for an investment in journalism.

In the end, Meyer's book turns out to be less an argument than a prayer. Its most persuasive chapters, unencumbered by numbers, are a recounting of the industry's transition from private to public ownership and an elegy to a gallery of leaders from the past—philosopher-kings, he calls them—who acted, in large part, on the idea that good journalism was important to the lives of their communities. The nostalgia is there, though Meyer tries mightily to resist it.

The frame for Meyer's brief is what he calls the "Influence Model," a way of seeing and managing the newspaper business that he traces back to Hal Jurgensmeyer, a former (and now deceased) vice president at Knight Ridder. At the time of his meeting with Jurgensmeyer in 1978, Meyer had just left his job as a reporter to become Knight Ridder's first director of news research. Jurgensmeyer, a business-side executive, gave Meyer a briefing and sketched out his view of the business. Meyer explains: "A newspaper, in the Jurgensmeyer model, produces two kinds of influence: societal influence, which is not for sale, and commercial influence, or influence on the consumer's decision to buy, which is for sale. The beauty of this model is that it provides economic justification for excellence in journalism." It's an approach that strikes the perfect pitch for an organization such as Knight Ridder: a reasonable, cool, pragmatic and noneccentric statement of mission. It's a mission that wears a suit and sits comfortably at meetings of the board of directors.

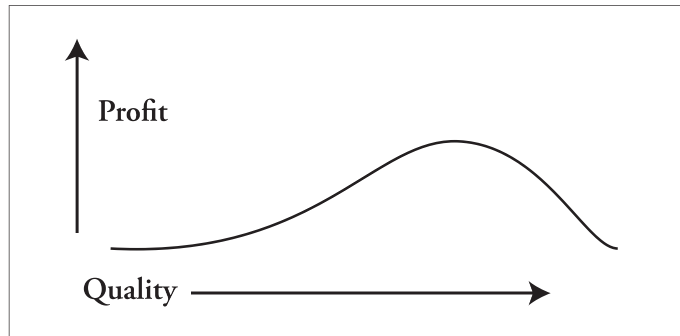


Figure 1-9: Determining Where Quality and Profit Meet

(Note of disclosure: Like Meyer, I'm a former Knight Ridder employee, and I continue to own a small amount of its stock. Soon it will be sold to pay for my son's final semester of college.)

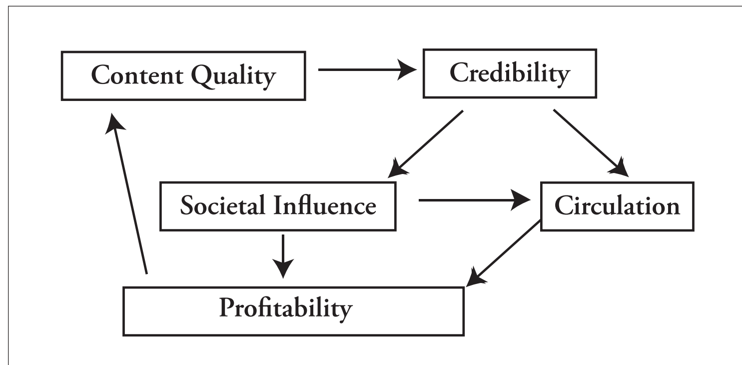


Figure 1-5: Societal Influence Model for the Newspaper Industry

The Jurgensmeyer model is a tidy formulation, but one of the problems with it (leaving out the entire matter of the junk-mail industry's ability to achieve phenomenal financial success without a shred of social influence) is that it lacked a quantitative underpinning. As stated in the 1970's, it was an elegant and appealing concept on which the gentlemen (and occasional gentlewomen) of Knight Ridder could agree. How much influence was necessary to sell advertising, and how much should the organization be willing to spend to maintain or extend it? These were matters that were left uncalculated, and they would not become consequential for another decade when the financial rules of the newspaper business began to stiffen. By then, most editors were already on the defensive.

Much of "The Vanishing Newspaper" is an attempt to provide the numbers to support the logic of Jurgensmeyer's model. Meyer's approach to the data deficit is to establish correlations between the markers of journalistic quality and surrogates of business success, especially circulation performance. One of the marvels of Meyer's creative and analytical genius is his ability to assemble these surrogates. One of the more interesting and useful is what he calls "penetration robustness." It is essentially an index of a newspaper's ability to maintain its penetration of households against the forces that are eroding it. Since circulation penetration, especially in the newspaper's home county, is as good a sign of a franchise's health as one is likely to find, it is a credible stand-in for profitability over the long-term.

Armed with these markers and surrogates, there's no end to what Meyer finds to measure. He finds relationships between credibility and circulation, credibility and advertising rates, readability and circulation, staff size and circulation, and even positive copyeditor attitudes and circulation. Most of this cannot be read without concluding that this book is also a wise old professor's hymn to the very process of measuring and analyzing data. Consider this:

"When we use regression methods, we are trying to explain variance around the mean of the dependent variable. We do it by looking for covariance—the degree to which two measured things

vary together. If we know a lot about these variables and the situations in which we find them, we might even start to make some assumptions about causation. But correlation is not by itself enough to prove cause and effect. No statistical procedure can do that. In the end, we are left with judgment based on our observations, knowledge and experience with the real world. We still have stuff to argue about. But with the discipline of statistics, as Robert P. Abelson has said, it is 'principled argument.'"

In one astonishing section, a digression into the alleged benefits of civic journalism, Meyer shows that newspapers with strong civic journalism reputations enjoy long-standing community-focused organizational cultures. How did he establish that these nascent civic-journalism impulses existed in the newspapers' pasts? He created two "dictionaries," one of words that show a business focus ("profit," "efficiencies," "cash," etc.) and another of words that show a community focus ("awards," "integrity," "quality," etc). Then he collected 179 annual reports going back to 1970 from 19 publicly traded companies. He and his graduate students ran the CEOs' messages to shareholders from the reports through an optical scanner and used a computer program to count the word hits against the two "dictionaries." The companies that scored high on community focus, it turns out, are the same ones that have been pursuing civic journalism agendas in recent years. While this effort could be seen as almost medieval in its fixation with counting, it does make an important point: There are few quick fixes when it comes to changing a newspaper's culture. A company's history predicts its future.

Brick by brick, number by number, Meyer builds his case for quality. In his demonstration of the link between credibility and circulation, he assembles a list of 20 counties in which he has numbers on circulation robustness (drawn from Audit Bureau of Circulation reports) and credibility scores for the counties' dominant newspapers. He draws the credibility numbers from a regularly recurring survey by the Knight Foundation of former Knight newspapers. The survey question asks respondents to rate their daily newspaper: "Would you say you believe almost all of what it says, most of it what it says, only some, or almost nothing of what it says?" For the circulation numbers, he uses his "circulation robustness" index, a measure of the paper's ability to hold penetration against a baseline. A graph that plots the two variables shows a kissing relationship between quality and circulation: "The slope of a straight line defining that relationship is 0.2 percent, meaning that annual circulation robustness—the ability of a county's newspapers to hold their circulation in the face of all the pressures trying to degrade it—increases on average by two-tenths of one percentage point for each one percent increase in credibility."

The exercise yielded a second insight: Credibility scores run higher in smaller communities. By working the numbers, Meyer demonstrates that credibility, not market size, stands as the key variable in predicting circulation robustness. This suggests that newspapers in large markets would benefit from strategies that allow them to break their markets into smaller pieces, thereby boosting the credibility that would give them a lever to raise circulation robustness. Zoning is one obvious strategy.

Narrating Newspapers' Economic Journey

While Meyer's findings are persuasive, they fall short of definitive proof. There are three problems: His work draws almost entirely on numbers from the Knight surveys of former Knight newspapers, which are not necessarily a broad, diverse or representative sample; the research excludes an analysis of the nation's largest and most important newspapers, and finally the research shows only correlations between quality measures and business success, it does not show cause-and-effect linkages. Successful newspapers, for example, tend to have larger news staffs. In other words, the two variables are correlated. But what came first, business success or the larger staff? Which is the cause and which is the effect? To oversimplify, this is a little like going to a party and finding that everyone is well dressed and prosperous. One might ask: Are the guests prosperous because they are well dressed, or well dressed because they are prosperous?

Meyer readily admits this problem. "At the outset, I had hoped to produce evidence that a given dollar investment in news quality would yield a predictable dollar return that would more than justify the outlay. That might be possible, and the evidence in this book provides some support for the idea, but at nowhere near the level of precision that would excite an investor."

Acknowledging the limits of his ability to supply the data to transform the Jurgensmeyer model from concept to equation, Meyer uses "The Vanishing Newspaper" to summarize the story of newspaper economics of the last three decades and put the narrative in a larger context. Here the book begins to shine a more useful light on the current malaise in the business of journalism. It also offers a hopeful if familiar solution: the reinvention of the business of journalism, based on the Jurgensmeyer model, on the Internet.

For decades, Meyer recounts, newspapers were a "tollgate" between retailers and consumers, and they enjoyed a long period of easy money. A cold wind began to blow with competition from new technologies (TV and cheaper offset printing, for example) and declines in readership. Despite these trends, newspaper executives maintained and even increased their historically high profit margins by raising advertising rates. Even though newspapers were losing penetration, they maintained local dominance, which allowed them to squeeze their advertisers. From 1975 to 1990, newspaper ad rates rose 253 percent. In the same period, the Consumer Price Index rose 141 percent. At about the same time, newspaper companies were enjoying big savings that came from their investment in new printing technologies. The money rolled in. There was joy in Mudville.

Clearly, neither of these sources of earnings—steadily rising but unchallenged ad rates and backshop sav-

ings—was sustainable in the long run, and the vice soon began to close. In this period, newspaper companies also were moving from private to public ownership, and they were coming to learn that one of the costs of turning to equity markets for capital was the outward flow of power to institutional investors and analysts—to new owners. An important shift would eventually occur. Where the psychic reward of owning a newspaper once had counted as a return, even if it didn't show up on the income statement, the measure of success now had become strictly financial. If you think of running a newspaper as a board game, it went from being Chutes and Ladders to Monopoly in a hurry.

As managers looked for ways to improve earnings in this tougher-money environment, they turned increasingly to cost cutting. While a dollar added to operating revenues from investment in a new advertising initiative might yield 10-15 cents to net income, every cent of a dollar eliminated from the news department dropped straight to the bottom line. It was the bottom line—reported every 90 days as quarterly earnings—which Wall Street and the new owners of newspapers obsessively watched. At first, the reductions to news budgets came from higher rates of employee attrition as jobs were left "dark." Layoffs soon followed. News bureaus were closed, copy desks thinned, Sunday magazines eliminated, and news holes trimmed. The capacity to cover news was shrinking.

Meyer sets these trends against larger forces operating in the society. He cites the research of Rakesh Khurana of the Harvard Business School: In 1950, large investors such as pension and mutual funds owned 10 percent of U.S. corporate equities. By the turn of the century, 60 percent of the ownership of corporate equities was in their hands. Ownership through the U.S. economy, Khurana found, had shifted from "family and friends of the founders" to institutional investors. Managers at newspaper companies were not alone in feeling the pressures to produce steadily improving earnings for Wall Street.

The pressures, while beneficial to investors, at least in the short-term, were potentially damaging to employees and consumers. Meyer cites the work of Jane Cote of Washington State University, who argues that financial pressures have damaged professional values across a range of industries. Meyer mentions accounting (the Enron debacle) and medicine (doctors selling their practices to health-care corporations) as professions whose codes of practices face potential distortions arising out of efforts to meet outsized financial demands. The biggest potential threat inherent in Meyer's book, though, is the eventual demise of newspapers altogether.

Future Strategies

Courageously, Meyer enters the fray on the question of what constitutes a reasonable financial return for an industry whose product quality is consequential to the functioning of the republic. It seems to me, though, he backs out of the discussion early and without a sufficiently rigorous assessment of the current picture. The financial returns remain high and the reinvestment insufficient. What's the reason?

Corporate managers, Meyer writes, face a dilemma. To make his point, he employs the analogy of a goose that lays golden eggs. His explanation goes like this: Today's newspaper owners (and investors) have made investments based on a goose they expect to lay a golden egg every day. Those golden eggs come in the form of profit margins in the range of 20 to 40 percent. These are the margins necessary to achieve their expected returns on investment. A goose that lays fewer golden eggs, say margins of 10 percent, is a bird worth owning. But it's not the goose in which they have sunk their investment. So CEO's are stuck with managing for high margins. The culprit is return on investment, Meyer asserts, and managers are trapped by the numbers.

Now there are a number of ways of responding to this explanation. First is to look at return on investment, which is the term that Meyer employs or, more specifically, to look at return on equity (ROE), which measures the return earned by common stockholders (owners). Some industries make a higher return on equity than newspaper companies, some make lower. For example, Reuters Fundamentals reports these five-year average for some other industries: autos, 18.84; life insurance, 11.08; retail grocery, 17.65; water utilities, 10.21. Historically, returns on common equity for American corporations run between 10-13 percent, though they have been running a good deal higher in recent years. The difference among industries tends to come down to the amount of risk an investor is taking on. Newspapers are not a risky business. Can you recall a dominant newspaper in a community failing? So one would expect returns on the lower end of the spectrum. Gannett's average ROE over five years has been 18.16, according to Reuters Fundamentals. Other newspaper companies: Knight Ridder, 17.47; Tribune, 17.38; Lee Enterprises, 12.18. For the industry, according to Reuters Fundamentals, the average ROE is 16.81. For S&P 500 corporations, the five-year average is 19.02

A second, and I would suggest better, way of looking at the situation is to begin with a consideration of stock price. Investors place a value on a company when they buy its stock. The current value of stock in a company is based on the expectations of earnings in the future. In other words, investors look forward at earnings rather than back at investment when deciding how much to pay for a share of stock. So, the expected profits and returns are already built into the stock price. Any strategy that reduces those expected returns would lead investors to sell their shares. The value of the stock would fall, probably rapidly. One result of a sharp reduction in stock price would be that the people who hold lots of stock would experience a painful reduction in personal wealth. Another result would be the ability of a new investor to gain control of the company by picking up a big chunk of the lower-priced stock. A new owner might change management and strategy. These are powerful motivations for management to stay on the current path.

It's worth asking, then, to what extent is the situation a numbers trap or, rather,

the stubborn (though understandable) unwillingness of CEO's to set in motion events that would sweep away some piece of stockholder wealth and result, possibly, in an unfriendly takeover?

Meyer's argument is to reverse the existing dominant strategy: to reinvest in news coverage, increase influence, and achieve better business results. The problem, he says, is that newspapers face an additional problem, yet more competition in the form of a "disruptive technology" that may subsume, or seriously harm, its business.

So, he says, the stark choice newspapers face is this:

1. Take the money by maintaining high margins and not reinvesting. This is a strict liquidation strategy.
2. Or manage the decline to maintain quality but invest profits in substitute technologies, especially the Internet.

Meyer sees some evidence of the former, but advocates the latter and falls back on Jurgensmeyer's model—a framework, he says, that will work in the future as it has in the past.

A charismatic or committed CEO, who could pitch lower returns to investors as a way to secure the franchise and generate future returns, might be able to maintain investor loyalty as investment is directed to good journalism. In fact, it's the way that has been charted for the flagship papers by leaders of those public newspaper companies that remain within the control of families such as the Sulzbergers and the Grahams. There are probably many more publishers who would argue for more investment, but investment in non-news areas such as circulation or advertising infrastructure as ways to keep the patient healthy.

In looking ahead, Meyer cites the seminal article "Marketing Myopia" by Theodore Levitt, which encouraged managers to see beyond their products and equipment into the essence of their businesses. His resonant example was the railroad industry. Railroad owners should have seen that their business was transportation and that self-knowledge, the argument goes, would have helped them make the transition to a new world in which railroads were less and less relevant. Because the business of newspapers is influence, Meyer asserts, executives need to maintain high levels of credibility in their brands even as they evolve into new platforms for exercising and selling their influence.

Meyer also quotes the work of Herbert Simon, who noted that in an information economy such as ours the scarce resource is attention. Newspapers aren't just competing with newspapers or even just other forms of journalism and advertising. The competition includes video games and anything that occupies eyeballs. One way to capture attention is to become a trusted provider. Trust becomes the door that leads to influence and, eventually, through the alchemy of the right business model, profit in a new medium, possibly the online delivery of journalism. The journalism of the future may be a variation of its current form or some new form altogether.

The essential problem with Meyer's argument, and why the issue remains a matter of open debate, is that journalism is more than a business, and the strongest arguments for quality combine economics and ethics. Of course Meyer knows this, but he keeps his sentiments on a leash. The ethical or social-benefits arguments don't work with investors. The challenge Meyer has set for himself is to find a solution to the decline of journalism within the rules practiced by today's publicly traded corporations.

Occasionally Meyer lets his idealism off its leash. There are sections of "The Vanishing Newspaper" that achieve a kind of lyricism that spring from his personal recollections of what he calls "the Golden Age," when powerful public-spirited proprietors ("philosopher kings") owned newspapers.

It's impossible not to hear the thrill in Meyer's voice as he recalls John Knight's motto, "Get the truth and print it," or when he quotes Jim McClatchy describing the mission of his family's newspapers. To stand up to "the exploiters—the financial, business and political powers whose goal was to deny the ordinary family their dreams and needs in order in order to divert to themselves a disproportionate share of the wealth of the country." These men were counting the social benefits—what economists would call the "externalities"—as returns. Ego probably played a part as well.

In one of the most profound passages of the book, which goes to the nub of the problem with the current model in which journalism is being practiced, Meyer writes:

"The reason newspapers were as good as they were in the Golden Age was not because of the wall between church and state. It was because the decision-making needed to resolve the profit-service conflict was made by a public-spirited individual who had control of both sides of the wall and who was rich and confident enough to do what he or she pleased."

For those of us who have had an opportunity to work under the old system and the new, we know the personal satisfaction and public benefit of an enlightened and public-spirited owner. We also know that private ownership is not necessarily a panacea. Lots of private owners managed their papers for personal gain; public service was an afterthought. It came down, as so many things do in life and business, to character. We also know that the old system is not returning for most newspapers. As Meyer rightly and wisely notes, "The world has moved on." But the need for good journalism remains.

And that takes us back to the argument that an investment in quality must make business sense. Otherwise it is not likely to occur in most organizations. Those of us who have seen the benefits of good journalism believe the quality argument in our guts. Meyer wants to give us the quantitative link. That's the wall that he keeps trying to scale. Bless him for throwing himself against it so stubbornly. ■

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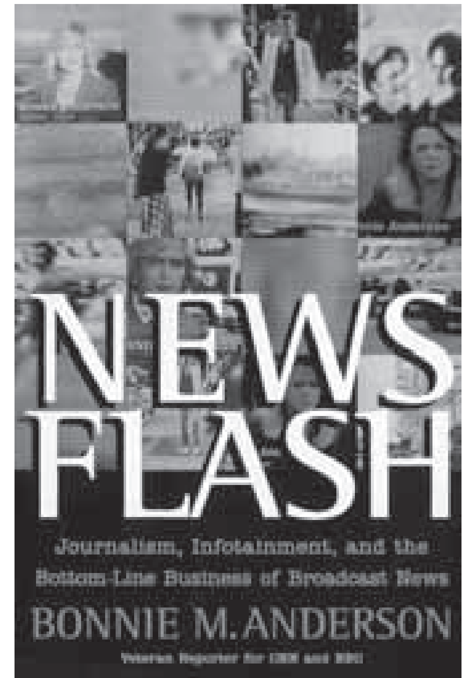
The Precarious State of Television News

‘We’re going to have to completely reinvent it—not only the substance, but the way in which we interact with our audience.’

News Flash: Journalism, Infotainment, and the Bottom-Line Business of Broadcast News
Bonnie M. Anderson
Jossey-Bass. 288 Pages. $26.95.



By Rebecca MacKinnon

“It’s all about money, a desperate attempt to hang on to the huge profits news had earned over the years. And that is far more important to the corporations than the people’s right to know, even more important than a healthy democracy.” —Bonnie Anderson

Bonnie M. Anderson was fired from her job as vice president of recruiting for CNN in 2001. She claims it was due to her resistance to what she describes as discriminatory hiring practices. In her book, “News Flash: Journalism, Infotainment, and the Bottom-Line Business of Broadcast News,” she describes conversations with CNN and Turner Broadcasting news executives who passed over top-notch minority journalists due to fears that their image somehow was not what CNN needed to boost its flagging ratings.

Anderson does not paint a pretty picture of American TV news. It is a world in which the obsessive focus on viewer ratings, the parent corporation’s quarterly earnings and stock prices have caused news executives to completely lose sight—even lose interest—in the American public interest. She describes how news executives have grown so obsessed with boosting ratings that serious journalism is increasingly an afterthought—and only worth doing if there’s a clear ratings payoff. She describes how management is so afraid of offending viewers or losing access that they often back off of controversial stories. She cites many specific examples.

Speaking to Nieman Fellows last fall, Anderson said that after her book came out in spring 2004, CNN attorneys demanded copies of her drafts, access to her hard drive, and even her medical records. They tried to pressure her to reveal her sources. Asked for an update for this article, she would say no more on the record other than “the matter with CNN has been resolved.”

Clearly, the book challenges CNN’s self-proclaimed image as “the most trusted name in news.” While as a CNN bureau chief and correspondent I did not have the same vice president-level access to top CNN and Time Warner management that Anderson had, the CNN described in “News Flash” does indeed sound like the CNN I knew.

The Message Hits Home

In the fall of 2003, when CEO Richard Parsons of CNN’s parent company Time Warner visited Tokyo, where I was based at the time, he held a question and answer session with a group of Time Warner’s Tokyo-based managers whose work ranges from movies to music sales, to online services, and also to news. I asked him whether he believed that Time Warner’s news properties—such as CNN and Time—ought to have a special responsibility for educating the public about current events, or whether CNN was just another commodity like any other product or service sold by Time Warner. In other words, should Time Warner’s news properties such as CNN and Time be viewed as a “public trust” and managed differently than, for example, Mad magazine or the Cartoon Network? He replied that he does not view CNN any differently from any other company owned by Time Warner.

Early last year, my CNN boss told me that my expertise on Northeast Asia (China, Japan and Korea) was “getting in the way” of doing the kind of stories that its U.S. network wants to put on air. I was told to cover my region more from the perspective of a tourist, rather than from the perspective of somebody who has spent her entire adult life living and working in that region. I was told my stories would be better if I wrote my scripts *before* I did my interviews.

At the time of that conversation I was on leave for a one-semester fellowship at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. There had just been a management change. I was getting “the word” from the new team about what they expected from me when I returned to my position as Tokyo bureau chief that summer. After I hung up the phone, I realized I dreaded going back. The job was no longer consistent with the reasons I went into journalism in the first place. I was lucky.

I have no debt or dependents. I could afford to resign.

Journalism's Dimensions Expand

To anybody who works for any U.S. TV network, these conversations are no big surprise. They reflect the accepted state of affairs, internally. Yet in our P.R. and promos, we continue to make public claims as if our owners' intentions were otherwise: we're "the most trusted name in news," "fair and balanced," etc. This is a lie. We all know it.

As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel argue in "The Elements of Journalism," "the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing." I wanted to become a journalist because I believed a free and independent press is a crucial component of a healthy, functional democracy. I think that's why most people I know who became journalists did so. The idea of the news media as public service is also most consistent with public expectations, if recent surveys by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and others are any judge. But in 2004, Pew found that 51 percent of journalists working for national press surveyed "believe that journalism is going in the wrong direction." We need to bring the news media back on track. The questions are: Who will do it? And how?

Anderson encourages frustrated journalists to stay on and fight for change in their organizations—not opt out as I did. In the concluding chapter of her book, "Rx for TV Journalism," Anderson calls on journalists to take back their profession: "… to strengthen standards and ethics, to improve the depth, breadth and quality of the stories presented, and to restore the institutions of a free press, a free media to the respected place they deserve in a healthy democracy. And we *can* improve the state of television journalism in this country while also recognizing the business needs of news corporations."

What Anderson does not address is the way in which rapid technological change and advances in new forms of online, participatory media are changing the whole ball game. We're not going to be able to recreate journalism in the form we idealized back when we first became journalists. We're going to have to completely reinvent it—not only the substance, but also the way in which we interact with our audience. Dan Gillmor, author of "We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People" argues that the "audience" should no longer be considered an audience at all—rather a participant in a two-way collective fact-finding and information-sharing conversation. [See page 90 for more on Gillmor's book.]

As Dan Rather recently discovered, a reporter cannot do a high-profile, controversial investigative TV story these days and not expect the Internet Weblogs to fact-check every detail. Weblog software and cheap or free blog-hosting services make it possible for anybody on the planet to create his or her own media with nothing more than a laptop computer and Internet connection. Some popular blogs have hundreds of thousands of daily readers, giving newspapers and local TV real competition. Blogs also challenge the ideal that has been upheld by many in the mainstream media that objectivity is possible. Webloggers are demanding that journalists reveal their personal biases (which standards of objectivity demand we leave out of our reports) and hold more of a direct conversation about these biases with the public. The bloggers are questioning the credibility of all that journalists do, and this challenge has resonated widely with the news-consuming public. They are also demanding to be included in the journalistic process. And as the CBS "Rathergate" proved, whether or not you welcome them in, they'll let themselves in anyway.

Meanwhile, an age is quickly dawning in which most news consumers will have TiVo, broadband and access to streaming video on the Internet. What's the point of a linear-format, 30- or 60-minute newscast? Why wait for a TV news show to tell you what its producers think is newsworthy when you can get whatever you want, whenever you want it, online? We are going to have to completely reinvent the format of audio-visual journalism to survive this new world in which people will expect to be able to pick and choose the time and length and subject matter of our reports. The viewers and listeners become their own editors. As with text-based blogs, they'll also expect to interact with those who provide the content and be included in our newsgathering process.

As with text, blogs will soon be offering their own rough-and-ready multimedia alternatives to network and cable television, helped by the rapid advance of ever-cheaper technology. In many cases, bloggers in Southeast Asia uploaded amateur video of the tsunami disaster faster than the professional broadcasters could obtain it and turn it around. In January the first video-bloggers' conference was held in New York, inspiring the blog-guru Jeff Jarvis (who runs the blog www.buzzmachine.com) to proclaim the "death of networks" and the "explosion of the TV fraternity." In a January 12th blog post he wrote:

"In the old days of TV, a few months ago, if you wanted to make a show you had to have expensive equipment and expertise, and if you wanted the show to be found, you had to know a guy named Rupert and have a fortune for marketing. In the future of exploding TV, a few months away, anybody can create video programming and do it inexpensively with new equipment and tools; they can distribute it online and they can 'market' it (that is, it can be found) thanks to metadata and search and links. All this levels the playing field."

Anderson argues that responsible news organizations should stop chasing short-term ratings gains and start reporting responsibly: This means reporting stories the public might not be happy to hear but need to know. Citizens of a democracy need to know what their government is up to and the implications of its actions. Informing the public courageously and responsibly is our patriotic duty as journalists. I agree. But in the new disintermediated world of personal online publishing and broadcasting, will there even be a

market for what we now know as network or cable TV journalism—or any kind of journalism—that attempts to be objective, when people can pick and choose to watch the reports they want to watch? Will the concepts of "journalism" and "news" become so redefined as to become unrecognizable from the way in which journalists define them today? Then there are also questions of who should be the arbiter of credibility, reliability and trustworthiness in this new decentralized age. Nobody has a solution. And the business model for the democratized news of the future is completely unclear.

Unfortunately, Anderson's prescription for TV journalism applies to a media world that is fast becoming extinct. But then, her book came out in late May 2004. In the Internet age, that is already ancient history. By the time this article gets edited, published and distributed, it will probably be horribly out of date, too. Maybe by then somebody will have already made some more headway towards restoring honor to audio-visual journalism—to call it TV would be way too 20th century. ■

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Technology Might Return Journalism to Its Roots

Two books set forth causes for concern about U.S. news media, and one of the authors speaks to the Internet's possibilities for rejuvenating journalism's promise.

Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media
Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols
Seven Stories Press. 128 Pages. $9.95 pb.

We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People
Dan Gillmor
O'Reilly. 304 Pages. $24.95.

By David DeJean

We aren't living in a Golden Age of journalism, as evidenced by the fair number of books being written today telling us just how ungolden a time this is for the press and how it got this way. But if there is any good news to be found in the midst of all of this criticism it is that there are still some who are feisty and fractious enough to say some pretty tough things about the press—things journalists might not like to hear, but should.

An indictment of the press is made very forcefully in "Our Media, Not Theirs," a slim volume subtitled "The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media" by two practicing media critics, Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols. The press, they write, was intended by the Founding Fathers to be a "stern watchdog," and freedom of the press was the only guardian of the people's liberty. Things haven't worked out that way. That watchdog has been transformed into a lapdog, and the nature of its coverage is "uncomfortably close to that found in authoritarian societies with limited formal press freedom," these authors contend.

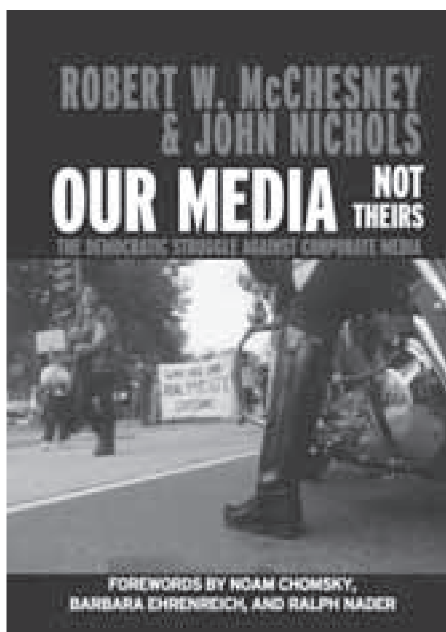
McChesney, who is a professor in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, and Nichols, who is the Washington correspondent for The Nation and associate editor of the Madison, Wisconsin Capital Times, are impassioned about their subject as they argue forcefully against conventional assumptions of conservative conspiracy or liberal bias. The real issue confronting the press, they argue, is profit.

Modern supernational media companies have the ability now to generate profits that go beyond those garnered by almost any entity in history (other than absolute monarchies) when they integrate journalism into a marketing machine for their other products, such as movies, books, TV networks and shows and licensing revenues. This has resulted in the creation of a "media system" that relies on the government and mainstream journalism as smoothly functioning, reliable components of a system built on three things: media concentration, corporate ownership, and unquestioning reliance on official sources.

This system didn't happen by accident, and it isn't working for the greater

good. In their book, McChesney and Nichols focus on two main points. The first is that "the current media system is the direct result of explicit government policies and that these policies have been made in a corrupt manner with minimal public participation." On this point, they write, "there is virtually no debate." And their second point flows from the first: "… the existing media system in the United States operates in a manner that is highly detrimental to the requirements of a democratic and self-governing society. The system works to advance the interests of the wealthy few, rather than the many."

The authors issue a clear call to action: "It is imperative for Americans who care about democracy to come together and organize a mass movement for reform of the media system."



Supporting Evidence

To support their argument, the authors of "Our Media, Not Theirs" cite well-known but still depressing facts about media concentration in the United States, with its media landscape dominated by fewer than a dozen corporations, some of which have annual revenues of up to $35 billion and followed by a second tier of another dozen smaller, less integrated companies. This concentration has been abetted, the authors write, "by a collapsing commitment on the part of the federal government to serious antitrust prosecution, a diminution of the federal standards regarding fairness, and government 'deregulation,' most notably the 1996 Telecommunications Act."

Equally well-known (and perhaps more personally painful to many of us) is the pressure corporate owners have put on newsrooms to cut budgets and join the rush to the bottom in journalistic standards—reshaping coverage away from the controversial and the complex and toward celebrity-driven drivel.

As tough as McChesney and Nichols are on owners and managers, they don't spare journalists in their criticism. Freedom of the press was not written into the Constitution to protect an objective, profit-hungry journalism, according to McChesney: In the Founding Fathers' day there was no such thing. Most newspapers were closely linked to political parties, and the First Amendment was intended to protect the diversity of partisan viewpoints that were competing for popular support.

It was only 100 years ago, at the turn of the 20th century, that the increasing effectiveness of advertising turned newspapers into money machines and drove a major consolidation of media. The new profit-centric ownerships were faced with a problem: how to create a new business model for newspapers in the midst of a drastic reduction in the diversity of opinion as cities with a dozen dailies now had only two or three dailies—a situation that threatened to damage the credibility and thus the profitability—of their properties. So they turned to a "professional" journalism of objective reporting and the use of qualified sources as a solution.

The result, after a century of even more radical consolidation, says McChesney, is that journalism has come to rely almost entirely on official sources. What this means is that corporate and governmental spokespersons too often dictate the story. Reporting has become "stenography." (McChesney has produced a sort of executive summary of their argument that appears as a chapter in another recent book, a second edition of "Into the Buzzsaw," edited by Kristina Borjesson.)

Other works echo these conclusions. For a decade, Project Censored (founded in 1976 by Carl Jensen and now headquartered at Sonoma State University in California) has issued an annual Censored volume that rounds up stories neglected by the "media system" ("Censored 2005" has recently been published). As a title, the word "censored" creates some confusion. These are not stories you haven't heard about because they have been repressed, but rather many of them have been "underreported" or "benignly neglected" but neither of these characterizations express the urgency of this "news that didn't make the news." The top "censored" story in 2004 was "The Neoconservative Plan for Global Dominance." In the 2005 volume, it is "Wealth Inequality in 21st Century Threatens Economy and Democracy."

The common thread that runs through these press criticisms is the media system's willingness to accept official sources rather than devote time and resources to doing independent reporting. To choose this other route might be expensive, embarrassing to the government, or disagreeable to corporate media owners. But to not do this reporting is to, in effect, remove these sensitive topics from the public agenda and shield the special interests they benefit from the public view.

The work done by Project Censored provides the supporting detail that McChesney and Nichols leave out of their brief book. On the "official sources" point, just as one example, in her introductory essay in "Censored 2004," Democracy Now!'s Amy Goodman cites a Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) study that found 92 percent of all U.S. news sources interviewed on the nightly network newscasts in 2001 were white, and in those more than 14,600 reports, six-tenths of one percent of the sources were Latino—a hardly accurate reflection of the actual population of our country.

Who Owns the News?

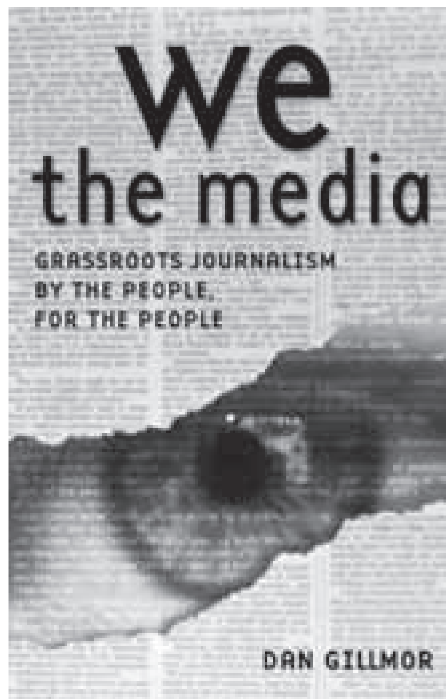
What McChesney and Nichols call the "media system" Dan Gillmor labels as

Big Media in his book "We the Media." Though the authors express similar views about the origins of media concentration and the role of government and corporate interests, Gillmor is less interested in Big Media's causes than its cures, and he's extremely upbeat about those: one cure, he writes, has already been found, and it is the Internet. Gillmor recently left his job as a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury "to embark on a new adventure, a project to help bring online grass-roots journalism to more people and communities," as he explained in his farewell column.

Gillmor's book is as expansive as McChesney and Nichols' book is dense. He has axes to grind, as they do, but he also brings to his writing a good reporter's sense of when and how best to use a story—and he has years of reporting behind him that he uses to illuminate his topic. He shares interviews he's done with technology figures and also writes about the impact of Howard Dean's Web-based presidential campaign. For those who have not been paying close attention to the Internet, "We the Media" provides a valuable tour of its most active edges, both in its technology and its culture. If Weblogs and Wikis, open source and creative commons are not familiar words or phrases, then Gillmor is a chatty and informative guide.

He is also a true believer in the possibility that the Internet can save journalism—and thus democracy. How? By turning Big Media back into its true self, like the potion that reforms Mr. Hyde back into Dr. Jekyll, making reporting once again more responsive to the public's right to know than the corporation's right to profit. To be sure, the Internet will, he says, have profound effects on what journalism is—how it is regarded, defined and practiced. His long-time experience as a blogger leads him to forecast an amalgamation of journalists, newsmakers and the audience, in which "journalism" is seen as more of a technically aided conversation, rather than a top-down monologue.

McChesney and Nichols regard the Internet as a glass that is nowhere near half-full. They acknowledge changes that the Internet has made in our lives "… but," they write, "the Internet has yet



to be proven successful as a platform to launch commercially viable competition to the media giants; again and again, the market trumps the democratic potential of the technology. This tends to marginalize dissident Web sites. And the Internet is hardly some autonomous force in society. Legislative, regulatory and judicial determinations regarding copyright, antitrust and access issues will decide exactly how progressive a medium it will become."

Gillmor doesn't disagree and, in fact, devotes considerable discussion to intellectual property and copyright issues such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act as Big Media abuses of the free flow of information in society. He fears intellectual property claims might eventually be used by corporate interests to limit the wide-open information flow on the Internet itself. (This topic was covered in depth in another recent book, "Free Culture, How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity," by Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig.)

What's the Solution?

Gillmor turns rather pessimistic in the closing chapters of "We the Media." He enumerates several threats to the Internet, efforts that would use technology to reverse the freedom that was created by technology in the first place. He discusses loss of privacy, filtering to control access to particular Internet sites or content, an unrelenting war being waged by media companies against any kind of peer-to-peer data exchanges (which would be, by definition, beyond intellectual property controls), and a sellout by the technology industry—the makers of computers and networking hardware—to Big Media.

The only bright spot in this gloomy picture is the possibility that digital technology might fundamentally disrupt the economics that shapes the broadcast media. "In the case of radio, television, cable and satellite TV," write McChesney and Nichols, "governmental agencies grant monopoly rights to frequencies and/or franchises to private firms at no charge. Whoever gets these licenses is essentially guaranteed a profit. The value of this form of corporate welfare over the past 70 years is mind-boggling. It is certainly in the hundreds of billions, if not trillions, of dollars. Nearly all of our huge media giants today are built on the backs of this corporate welfare, though you would never know it by listening to their rhetoric."

If spectrum space were not scarce, on the other hand—if there were no effective limits on the number of TV channels or radio stations individuals could receive—Big Media would face greatly increased competition, and its advertising revenues (and stock prices) would be greatly reduced. This is what Gillmor sees coming as broadband, high-capacity cable and wireless Internet connections spread—technologies for streaming media that could deliver endless amounts of content—and have the potential to make every Internet user a producer as well. (Just since Gillmor's book was published the emergence of "podcasting" has added substantiation to his view.)

If scarcity were no longer an issue, Gillmor admits, "we have a lot of work ahead to fix a hopelessly broken regulatory system." But if the regulatory system can be fixed, he says, "the sky is literally the limit for future communications."

There are dangers: "Open systems are central to any future of a free (as in freedom) flow of information. Yet the forces of central control—governments and big businesses, especially the copyright cartel—are pushing harder and harder to clamp down on our networks." Still, Gillmor writes, "I've no doubt that technology will eventually win, because it is becoming more and more ubiquitous. I also have faith, perhaps misguided, that public officials will ultimately pay proper attention to the interests of their constituents and not just to the industries that pad their campaign war chests."

Rather surprisingly, McChesney and Nichols sound similarly optimistic: "The question is what will tomorrow's media system look like," they write. "And it will be answered as we decide the sort of regulation the government will provide—and in whose interest and according to what values that regulation will be asserted. Media corporations want more of the same: greater concentration of ownership, bigger monopolies, less responsibility to inform or enlighten, and more profits. Most Americans, if they were given the choice, would opt for something different."

The difference between Gillmor's message and that of McChesney and Nichols is that the media critics are convinced that technology can't win by itself and the regulatory system will resist fixing. They contend that it is going to take a massive grassroots movement to reform U.S. media. In a chapter worthy of the Censored series, they survey media-reform movements around the world and share stories that many Americans probably have not heard before, such as the emergence of the "Third Left" movements that are focused on media issues in several countries, Sweden's ban on advertising to children, and the struggles over the privatization of broadcast media in New Zealand and Australia.

McChesney and Nichols drive home a familiar argument as well: "The fundamental challenge at this point is not convincing people that something should be done about media structures that do more harm than good. The challenge is to convince people that something *can* be done. That simple leap of faith, if it is taken by enough Americans, will provide us with a base that is strong enough to challenge corporate control and radically reshape the media landscape in the United States."

This notion alone—that there is a need to laboriously build a case for the mere *possibility* of change in our media landscape—is by itself the strongest argument for how badly such a movement is needed and ought to point the way to where journalists' responsibilities reside. ■

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An Indefatigable Investigative Reporter

Seymour Hersh 'still comes through as an outsider hungry for the latest scraps of news.'

Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib
Seymour M. Hersh
HarperCollins. 416 Pages. $25.95.

By John Herbers

It has become a maxim in newsrooms that all reporters should be investigative ones. While that may be true, the best of those who spend all their time ferreting out information that should be in the public domain are a breed apart from the generalists and specialists in various areas.

There is no better example than Seymour Hersh, who has had a long career disclosing guarded government secrets, from the My Lai massacres in Vietnam to the inner workings of the Bush administration. I learned how different Hersh was when I had both the privilege and the distraction of sitting at the desk next to his in the Washington bureau of The New York Times in the 1970's.

I would never disclose any of the techniques he used to get information, but a host of government underlings were quick to forward his calls when his authoritative voice came through: "This is Mister Hersh …." No first name, or affiliation, but Mr. Hersh would soon have his source.

From all reports he has not changed in the decades since. Although he now works for The New Yorker, he still lives in Washington where he roams around in shaggy, open-neck clothing and works in a cluttered office. While many journalists of his generation and younger have become part of the Washington establishment, he still comes through as an outsider hungry for the latest scraps of news.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this book, his eighth, is that it is

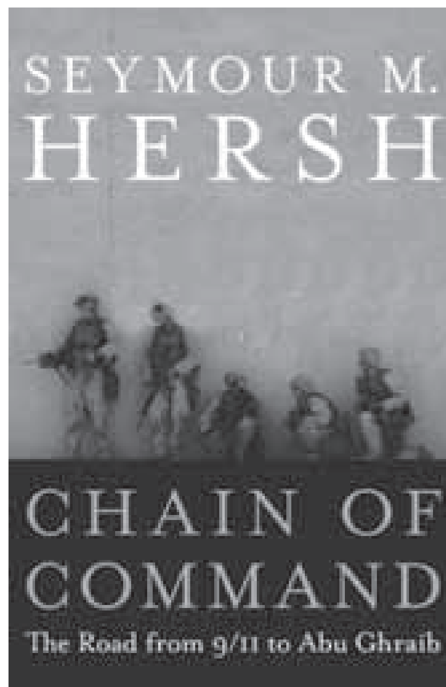
based almost entirely on information leaked from present and former officials of the federal government, its military and intelligence agencies. It is all the more remarkable at a time when secrecy is on the increase in the Bush administration, when the federal Freedom of Information Act is being weakened, and when the use of unauthorized leaks in journalism generally has become more controversial.

Before an audience of college students recently, Brian Lamb, the nonpartisan founder and head of C-SPAN who is highly regarded in both political parties, was asked whether he approved of unauthorized leaks in government affairs. Certainly, he replied, "It is the way the system works." In other words, the public is entitled to a vast amount of information that the authorities want to remain secret.

So Sy Hersh has given us an important view of history explaining the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the causes of prisoner abuse, all without footnotes, though he does credit other news sources for some of the information he uses. Of course, his is a one-sided view of events, but that is clear to the reader. To his credit the administration has not been able to creditably refute the thrust of his charges of mismanagement and deceit. The administration's denials are simply, as President Bush said, that Hersh "lies," but with no facts to back up their accusations.

The book is based chiefly on Hersh's articles published in The New Yorker since 9/11 but contains a number of new details supporting his charges that American abuse of prisoners was inspired by policies from the White House and the Pentagon, where proof of the abuses from a number of sources were ignored before they became public.

"Chain of Command" went to press last September, and one wonders why it did not have more of an impact on the November election. Of course, neither The New Yorker nor the book was widely read in most of the red states, where polls showed up until the election that many voters in those areas still believed that Saddam Hussein had both weapons of mass destruction and a working relationship with al-Qaeda.



And for long-time Bush supporters, his denials easily trumped the documented findings of a liberal journalist.

Another factor is the difficulty most Americans have in understanding the arcane, often clandestine operations of the U.S. military and intelligence services. On the matter of torture, for example, Hersh writes: "The roots of the Abu Ghraib scandal lie not in the criminal inclinations of a few Army reservists, but in the reliance of George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld on secret operations and the use of coercion—and eye-for-an-eye retribution—in fighting terrorism. Rumsfeld's most fatal decision, endorsed by the White House, came at a time of crisis in August 2003 when the defense secretary expanded the highly secret special-access program (a team to operate outside international law to snatch suspected terrorists) into the prisons of Iraq" and thus "encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in an effort to generate more intelligence about the insurgency."

This decision, Hersh concluded, "embittered the American intelligence community, damaged the effectiveness of elite combat units, and hurt the prospects of the war on terrorism."

When he was working as a newspaper reporter Hersh was content to find the facts and let them speak for themselves. As a magazine and book writer he draws conclusions. At the end of his epilogue he discloses some of the puritanical aspects that drive the more dedicated of the investigative reporters: "There are many who believe George Bush is a liar, a President who knowingly and deliberately twists facts for political gain. But lying would indicate an understanding of what is desired, what is possible, and how to get there. A more plausible explanation is that words have no meaning for this president beyond the immediate moment, and so he believes that his mere utterance of the phrases make them real. It is a terrifying possibility."

This book shows how drastically investigative reporting has changed since the 1960's, when Hersh had a hard time finding a newspaper or magazine that would publish his well-documented findings of the murder of innocent women and children in Vietnam. Newspapers were then having some difficulty even adopting the news analysis, an effort to put factual stories in perspective after years of restrictions that sometimes caused distortion in news coverage—for example, the reporting of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's charges of Communism in government that never mentioned how he was manipulating the press.

Now with spot news flooding the television channels and the Internet, reporters are often encouraged to put more analysis in their news stories, then go on television and expand on their version of events. Hersh made the full rounds with his New Yorker stories during the first four years of the Bush administration, and now he is back doing the same at the beginning of another four-year term. His career spans some of the most remarkable changes in American journalism. ■

John Herbers, a 1961 Nieman Fellow, covered the White House, Congress and national politics, and was an editor in New York and Washington during the 1960's and 1970's.

'Perilous Times' for First Amendment Rights

Editors must 'send the clear signal—and offer the necessary support—to make the coverage of government secrecy a priority in their newsrooms.'

Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime From the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism
Geoffrey R. Stone
W.W. Norton & Company. 730 Pages. $35.

By Maggie Mulvihill

In the more than 300 years of our country's history, Americans have fought to secure and maintain the rights granted citizens in the First Amendment to the Constitution: the right to know what the government is up to, the right to doubt its actions and policies, and the right to speak out against them. Of course, the rights to gain access to the government's information and to speak out against what is learned are interdependent. It is not possible to criticize accurately what one doesn't know. And it is in this way that the press and the citizenry it serves depend on each other in the self-governing society that the Framers intended for our country.

But rarely have these rights seemed in more danger than in today's post 9/11 era. The Bush administration has taken unprecedented steps to hide the way it operates from the American people who gave it authority to govern. News organizations are experiencing the slow erosion of legal protections that their predecessors worked diligently to build over three centuries, and these changed circumstances, at times, are preventing them from keeping as close and watchful an eye on government actions as citizens should demand they do.

During past periods of national distress, Americans have witnessed that those who dared to question governmental leaders have been labeled unpatriotic or disloyal to their country, and this is now happening again. Regrettably, these have been times in our history, too, when ordinary Americans and the mainstream press have acquiesced too often in the government's restrictions and been party to the persecution, imprisonment or deportation of dissenters, even if only by their silence.

If we have learned nothing else from these earlier aggressive restrictions on the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment, we should have been taught by history's lessons that threats to our Constitutional principles—the building blocks of our democracy—should never be tolerated.

Wartime Reporting

Those lessons are masterfully sketched out by legal scholar Geoffrey R. Stone in his book, "Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime From the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism." At the same time, two recent reports have been released about the escalating threats to freedom of information and the press. One report bears the name of U.S. Representative Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.), who issued it as the ranking minority member on the House Committee on Government Reform; the other was published by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press.

All of these writings—taken by themselves or considered together—make a strong case for why U.S. citizens and members of the press need to engage more vigorously in a struggle to renew the promise of our fundamental civil liberties if we are to maintain a self-governing democratic system and avoid the tragic mistakes of past wartime eras.

In his book's final chapter, Stone warns Americans that threats to their civil liberties are in greater jeopardy today than they have been in perhaps any other military conflict. The reason: In past wars, there was an expected end to the nation's sacrifice. In the undeclared (by Congress) war on terror, no end point has been defined, nor is one visible. President George W. Bush stated his belief that the "war on terror" will be perpetual; it's a fight in which we will always be engaged.

In the tradition of wartime Presidents, Bush is exercising his constitutional powers in the most expansive way possible. Stone provides a context for this President's actions when he takes readers on an illuminating tour of past wartime Presidents' efforts to suppress information and dissent. As he does so, one thing becomes clear: Bush's stance is not all that different from his predecessors. However history also teaches us that suppression of knowledge and debate during periods of national distress does far more damage to America's institutions and her people than allowing access to government information and tolerating dissent. But as Stone cautions, the Bush administration's "obsession

with secrecy" about the government's decisions and actions both in this country and in the war in Iraq is crippling "informed public discourse," and this restraint in the oversight of the executive branch by the public and the press undermines "the vitality of democratic governance."

Throughout our nation's history, citizens and noncitizens have paid a heavy price for attempting to exercise their rights to know what governmental leaders were up to and expressing doubts about their policies. If he wanted to use it, Bush has the benefit of these 300 years of American history to warn him that the price of secrecy and retribution toward its citizenry is far too high to pay if democracy is to be protected and thrive. What follows is a sample of some valuable lessons from Stone's book:

- The government's criminal prosecution of newspaper editors and citizen critics for criticizing the policies of President John Adams as he prepared to go to war with France in the 1790's led to the ultimate demise of his own party, the Federalists.
- There is also the legal wisdom of Abraham Lincoln, a tolerant leader at a time of great dissent during the Civil War. Even as his critics publicly called him a widow-maker and a butcher, Lincoln ordered a general, who unilaterally shut down a Chicago newspaper for lambasting the President, to revoke his order.
- Suspicions about one's loyalty to America because of their religion or race (such as what confronts Muslim-Americans today) defined Franklin D. Roosevelt's wartime policies with respect to Japanese Americans. His decision to intern almost 120,000 Americans because of their Japanese heritage just months after the attack on Pearl Harbor was arguably the lowest point of his presidential career. But anti-Japanese sentiment had infected the country to such an extent that fellow citizens—apparently ignorant of any possible threat to their freedoms as a consequence of Roosevelt's repressive measures against dissent—profited when these Japanese Americans in California had to abandon their businesses and homes.
- Another wartime President, Richard M. Nixon, saw himself destroyed by the press and the public due in some measure to his secretive policies and disgust for journalists and for citizens who protested against the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.

Reporters could also benefit from reading "Perilous Times" and, in doing so, learn not to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors. Here are a few examples for them from Stone's book:

- During the cold war, journalists not only acquiesced with an alarming frequency in the government's restrictions on free speech, but also often trumpeted on front pages and in opinion columns baseless charges brought by the government. The press, for example, played a large part in elevating the dangerous and reckless Senator Joseph McCarthy to hero status when he embarked on a rampage against accused Communist sympathizers that left a trail of destroyed lives and careers.
- At times, the more spectacular the charges were, the more headlines newspapers gave the accusers. Congressman Martin Dies was regularly given top billing even as he made "wildly irresponsible" charges of disloyalty against hundreds of newspapers, civic groups such as the Boy Scouts, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in the years leading up to World War II.

Nor is the executive the only branch of government that Stone targets for examination. In scrutinizing Congress, he mentions some civil liberties champions, including the conservative Democratic Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland. His prescient and courageous, blistering criticism of Senator McCarthy and his ruinous tactics resulted in Tydings' defeat for reelection in 1950. But dark spots in Congress's conduct abound as it frequently failed to protect the civil liberties of its constituents by limply approving such repressive measures as the Sedition Act of 1918, which essentially criminalized any speech critical of the government. Stone also points to the manner in which Congress "readily acquiesced" in the Bush administration's demand for the USA Patriot Act. The law allows American law enforcement broad spying powers over its own citizens, as was the habit during McCarthyism and other dark periods of our history.

Finally, Stone discusses in detail how First Amendment rights have been interpreted by the courts over time, but he also examines the present-day judiciary, which now seems impotent in its inability to adhere to its Constitutional duty to ensure the President doesn't abuse his authority. More interesting are his accounts of a few heroic judges who would not be bowed by the executive branch as it brought criminal charges against Americans for expressing their political views. Their actions stand in stark contrast—and call into question—other judges' adherence to Constitutional principles, such as the judge who presided over the trial of Rose Pastor Stokes, the editor of the socialist Jewish Daily News. Stokes was convicted under the Espionage Act of 1917 for saying "I am for the people and the government is for the profiteers."

As Stone puts it, what is needed today are not judges who will be "swayed by wartime hysteria," but who are willing to risk their reputations to challenge the government when its officials overstep their bounds in the arena of Constitutional protections.

The Waxman Report and Homefront Confidential

Instances of overstepping the bounds of Constitutional rights and protections is precisely what is detailed in two disturbing reports about the Bush administration's corrosive treatment of civil liberties during the war on terror. Each speaks to the critical need to reverse these trends.

One report was prepared by the staff of the federal House Committee on Government Reform at the request of ranking minority member Henry A. Waxman and so it bears his name. Its

findings present a strong case of an "unprecedented assault on open government" by the Bush administration. Though at times it is laced with partisan language, the 81-page document, "Secrecy in the Bush Administration" echoes Stone's conclusion and that of other presidential scholars who have found that this administration is extraordinarily secretive.

Waxman's report examines three areas affected by Bush's secrecy policies. They include:

- Public access to federal records
- Congressional access to federal records, and
- Laws restricting public access to government records.

Regarding citizens' access to federal government records, the report focused on attempts to undermine the principles behind the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). FOIA was passed by Congress and enacted into law in 1966 to provide Americans with broad access to government documents. But now government officials are reversing the presumption of public disclosure and abusing the use of exemptions permitting some records to remain secret. FOIA—which many journalists rely on to do reporting on actions taken and decisions made by government officials and agencies—is in grave danger of being rendered obsolete, the report concludes.

The report also details many ways the Bush administration has stymied Congress's efforts to exercise its oversight authority. Administration officials have ignored congressional requests for documents and have continued to challenge the legal authority of the General Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress.

Also examined in the report are the numerous legal changes the Bush administration has sought since September 11, 2001 to give law enforcement broad and unchecked powers that amount to creating an ability for government to "spy" legally on American citizens. Also the administration has convinced the courts to keep their investigations and prosecutions of suspected terrorists and their supporters hidden from public view.

In "Homefront Confidential: How the War on Terrorism Affects Access to Information and the Public's Right to Know," the Waxman report findings are taken a step further. This report—prepared by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press— spells out in extensive detail the ways in which the Bush administration's policies directly impede citizens (including journalists) access to what has heretofore been regarded as public information. In a clever take on the White House color-coded terror threat, the report's authors categorize threats to press freedoms with their own color chart, with the risks ranging from severe to guarded.

These categories of threats include reporters' danger in covering the Afghan and Iraqi Wars (high risk); their access to terrorism and immigration proceedings (severe risk); coverage of domestic issues now curtailed by the USA Patriot Act and other legal changes (guarded risk); reporters' privilege (high risk); freedom of information (severe risk), and the rollback in state openness (elevated risk).

While some of these dilemmas are being publicly debated, such as their restricted access to court filings in terror cases or the alarming aggressiveness on the part of the Bush administration to force reporters to reveal their sources, others receive far less public attention and virtually no debate. For example, the USA Patriot Act permits law enforcement not only to search newsrooms and seize a reporter's notes, but also enables officials to listen in on a reporter's home phone calls or seize packages he might receive from sources. It also allows the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to seek a court order requiring a reporter to produce "any tangible thing"—docu-

Documenting Government Secrecy

Secrecy in the Bush Administration
Rep. Henry A. Waxman
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform-Minority Staff Special Investigations Division, September 2004
www.democrats.reform.house.gov

In this 81-page report staff members of the Committee on Government Reform analyze the Bush administration's "unprecedented assault on the principle of open government laws," alleging that laws promoting public and congressional access to federal information have been undermined while those favoring secrecy and the restriction of public access continue to expand. Released in connection to Rep. Waxman's Restore Open Government Act of 2004 bill, "Secrecy in the Bush Administration" urges the public to consider the implications of expanding government secrecy: "When government operates in secret, the ability of the public to hold the government accountable is imperiled."

Homefront Confidential: How the War on Terrorism Affects Access to Information and the Public's Right to Know
Fifth Edition, September 2004
Prepared by The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP)
www.rcfp.org/homefrontconfidential

"Homefront Confidential" outlines recent actions by state and federal government agencies that restrict information from the public. Beginning with a 12-page "Chronology of Events," the report contends that, years after the 9/11 emergency measures taken to ensure immediate safety and security, "secrecy in the United States government is now the norm." The report lists the USA Patriot Act, new ground rules for embedded press, and subpoenaed journalists among the top threats to journalists. Access to terrorism and immigration proceedings and freedom of information receive a 30-page discussion and the highest threat level assigned by RCFP: "Severe Risks to a Free Press." ■ —Sarah Hagedorn

ments and records are included in this definition—that is sought in a terrorism investigation.

The FBI has not been shy about exercising its power in this area. In a little-publicized incident, the agency obtained court orders to seize a package of documents being sent to Associated Press reporter John Solomon and obtain his home phone records to uncover his sources on a terrorism story.

Bush's policies have the potential to affect all reporters, from White House bureau chiefs to those covering their first beat for a small weekly. Each of us has to navigate the steep challenges that now exist in gaining access to information as lower-level government officials keep in line with the tone of secrecy set by the White House. For instance, a new law in Alaska allows officials to close legislative meetings if they believe that public safety would be negatively affected, while in Oklahoma there is new legislation that allows the state's Department of Homeland Security to be exempt from open records and meetings laws.

Every journalist should read Waxman's report and "Homefront Confidential," and their facts and messages should be taught in every journalism classroom and reviewed in every newsroom. Because these policies are having such a profound effect on journalism, it is essential that those working in the field today and those intent on becoming journalists recognize these present-day threats to the news media's ability to play its essential role in our democracy—that of being the citizens' watchdog whose job it is to hold government officials accountable for their actions and decisions.

As Stone's book and the reports illustrate, keeping secure citizens' access to information is vital to maintaining a self-governing society and preserving our democratic system. In our centuries-old system of checks and balances on government power, judges must be skeptical of the executive branch's rationale for secrecy and legislators must question and, if necessary, vote against measures that strip their constituents of hard-fought civil liberties. Citizens also have a duty to exercise their Constitutional rights. When any of these pieces of this interdependent system break down—as history regrettably teaches us—we experience an erosion of our self-governing society.

Journalists, too, have a responsibility to relentlessly seek the best information about government operations on every level, from local coverage of the town hall clerk to the highest White House official, and to consistently report what they find and its impact on citizens and our society. Of course, for reporters to do this requires that editors send the clear signal—and offer the necessary support—to make the coverage of government secrecy a priority in their newsrooms. Key questions for newsroom leaders to ask include:

- What is your state or city spending to classify documents or challenge their disclosure in court when a reporter seeks information?
- How will your state's congressional members vote when the renewal of the USA Patriot Act comes before them? And why?
- Do military families in your state oppose news coverage of coffins from Iraq and Afghanistan returning to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, as the Bush administration claims they do?
- Are judges in your area issuing opinions to justify why they are closing hearings or sealing case files, as they are required to do? If so, on what basis are they doing this?

Opportunities for stories related to these topics are unfortunately all too numerous. And there is yet another reason why every editor and reporter ought to be paying attention to these issues: The public's enduring right to know, to doubt, and to speak depend on it. ■

Maggie Mulvihill, a 2005 Nieman Fellow, is investigative editor at the Boston Herald. During her Nieman year she is examining the role of courts in barring access to public information and restrictions of press freedom since the 9/11 attacks.

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Freedom and Liberty: Tough Stories to Tell

'When freedom and orthodoxy collide, it's interesting to note how the press behaves.'

In December 2004, William F. Woo, a 1967 Nieman Fellow and former editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch who teaches journalism at Stanford University, gave a talk entitled "Democracy, Freedom and Media," at the Conference on Information Society, Media and Democracy that was organized by the Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research at the University of Zurich, Switzerland and Stanford University's department of communication. This article is adapted from his presentation.

Though many Americans use democracy and freedom interchangeably, the two, of course, are different. Democracy is a political system; freedom or liberty are qualities or conditions—those of being unconstrained in thought, expression, choice or action save when the laws are contravened.

In the United States, democracy is the means by which the ends of freedom and liberty are to be achieved. Yet a functioning democracy is not necessarily a place of freedom or liberty, as African slaves in 18th and 19th century America would have attested.

It is not always easy to be certain what the founders of the country had in mind in terms of democracy and freedom, as Presidents who want strict constructionist judges have learned. Nonetheless, in the texts of the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the word democracy never appears. The words freedom and liberty do and not as a result of any imprecision of terms.

The founders were clear that freedom or liberty was their objective. A democracy was the means to it. Yet the media today are far less concerned with liberty than with democracy. How can that be explained? One reason, I believe, has to do with the easily quantifiable nature of democracy. Voter registration, voter turnout, the percentage of eligible as set against participating voters—such statistics make it simple for journalists to report on and draw conclusions about "democracy in action."

For journalists, democracy is synonymous with the electoral process. With its start- and end-dates; its periodic filings of campaign financial data; its primaries, caucuses and conventions; its story lines of candidates and campaigns; its explosive growth in polling; its head-to-head confrontation at debates, and surely not least, its squadrons of academics and pundits ready to interpret every development, the process is easy for the press to comprehend. But a focus on the drama of the unfolding democratic process reveals little about what it might mean for freedom in America.

The emphasis in recent years by news organizations on encouraging civic participation also yields quantifiable results. I have in mind such activities as campaigns to increase voter registration or the creation of local forums to address community issues. These contributions are rarely controversial, except among some journalists who question the mingling news and community involvement. They fall into the realm of "good works," on the order of contributions to charities such as the 100 neediest cases at holiday time. Journalists and news organizations can feel good doing such things, and they can expect praise. For the media, democracy goes with motherhood and apple pie.

A democracy is organized by elections, but it functions through government, and there everyday routines do not lend themselves to easy narratives. At the federal level, consistent coverage of many executive agencies is virtually nonexistent. When an agency makes the news, it usually is the result of some dramatic development, such as the FDA's finding that much of the flu vaccine supply was unsafe. Even Congressional legislation about important issues—health care, for example—is covered in fits and starts.

For several years now, the American Journalism Review has been documenting the startling decline in the coverage of state government, where much that affects the American public is decided. City councils essentially are zoning and land-use bodies, but who would understand that from the coverage of them? When I was a young city hall reporter at the Kansas City Times in the late 1950's, every action taken at a council meeting was published in the paper. Every vacated alley had a paragraph or two, every application for a zoning variance was mentioned. It might have been numbing to read—and difficult in agate type—but it was an account of representative government that is unseen today.

In 1996, the novelist Salman Rushdie spoke to the American Society of Newspaper Editors. He concluded his remarks by saying: "A free society is not a calm and eventless place, that is the kind of static, dead society dictators try to create. Free societies are dynamic, noisy, turbulent and full of radical disagreements. … it is the disrespect of journalists for power, for orthodoxies, for party lines, for ideologies, for vanity, for arrogance, for pretension, for corruption, for stupidity, perhaps even for editors, that I would like to celebrate this morning, and that I urge you all, in the name of freedom, to preserve."

The editors applauded, but their papers were not soon filled with celebrations of the noisy and turbulent aspects of American society. Rushdie's pleas for disrespect went unheeded. Editors were too busy "reconnecting" with their communities to risk being disrespectful of anyone.

The mainstream media are an orthodox institution. Some might be a few degrees right or left of center, but none that seeks a large audience positions itself at the radical extremes. What distinguishes the Fox Network is not the novelty of its opinions but the slash-and-burn way in which it expresses them. None of this should surprise us. When freedom and orthodoxy collide, it's interesting to note how the press behaves. John Lofton, in his 1980 book, "The Press as Guardian of the First Amendment," examined the performance of the press in key moments when the First Amendment guarantees of free expression were tested from the sedition laws of the late 18th century until the late 20th century. Lofton wrote that "… except when their own freedom was discernibly at stake, established general circulation newspapers have tended to go along with efforts to suppress deviations from the prevailing political and social orthodoxies of their time and place rather than to support the right to dissent."

Though the press has been vigilant to stand up for the First Amendment in times such as the Pentagon Papers case or when reporters are threatened with jail, in other instances, the press, as an institution, usually has been hostile to citizens whose free expression has been at stake. When the abolitionist movement emerged before the Civil War, mainstream papers opposed it. Anarchists, Wobblies, Socialists, Communists—all were the target of press opposition to their rights of expression.

Even now, when the Ku Klux Klan or the American Nazi Party seeks to assemble or express its views, the utmost that can be hoped for from the media are grudging acknowledgements that the First Amendment regrettably might apply to them. Never are such occasions seen as necessary for the "noisy, turbulent, radical disagreement" essential to Rushdie's vision of a free society.

In today's bottom-line media economy, with ownership concentrated in a few corporations, the key to success is advertising, which in newspapers accounts for about 85 percent of rev-

enues. Advertising is directed at target audiences, and if those audiences are put off by the news content, they are harder for advertisers to capture. This helps to account for the insipid programming on network television and increasingly bland and uncontroversial presentations in the print media.

All of this, of course, increases the incentive to concentrate on the ordinary or the orthodox. All of this decreases the incentive to tell the stories of people on the margins of society and to feature their struggles for freedom or liberty.

Telling Stories About Freedom

Earlier I suggested that the fact that one reason the media are focused on democracy is that it is quantifiable. In a way, freedom is quantifiable, too. I have in mind the data available through such worldwide agencies as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International. Each year, they document the state of freedom and liberty in the United States. Typically the reports focus on issues like questionable detentions, death penalties, prison conditions, discrimination in public housing, restraints on reproductive choice, treatment of juveniles, and so forth.

To be sure, these reports receive media attention. But when these issues are covered otherwise, they are almost never placed in the context of freedom and liberty. Moreover, the statistics gathered by international watchdog agencies are directed at government actions and policies. But as the founders recognized, it is not only government that restricts liberties. Such curtailments occur every day in ways that are undocumented and unquantified—and unrecognized except by those who suffer at the hands of the powerful or majority.

If the commitment to freedom and liberty were there, nothing would prevent news organizations from showing how these bedrock qualities fare in the lives of America's communities. Nothing would prevent them from disrespecting orthodoxy when it intrudes upon people's freedom.

To do so, however, requires a clear understanding of what constitutes freedom and liberty and how they are related to democracy, but are dissimilar from it. To do so would also require an understanding that a preoccupation with orthodoxy and what is safe to write and talk about is antithetical to the freedom democracy is intended to serve. But for the press, democracy is a safe, easy story; freedom and liberty are not. ■

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The New York Times's Travails in the Reign of Raines

'As the ship veered onto the rocks, those who voiced warnings were ignored, while the bosses told each other how smart they were.'

Hard News: The Scandals at The New York Times and Their Meaning for American Media
Seth Mnookin
Random House. 352 Pages. $25.95.

By David Nyhan

In reconstructing a train wreck, it helps mightily to interview the fellow at the throttle of the locomotive as well as the guy who owns the railroad. Seth Mnookin got nothing but some gingerly generalizations about business strategy from The New York Times's publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr. and a flat-out cold shoulder from Howell Raines, for 21 furious months the most influential newspaper editor in America.

The chief custodians of our "All the News That's Fit to Print" newspaper, Raines and the three editors who preceded him in that exalted throne all chose not to talk to the former Newsweek media writer, Seth Mnookin, though many Times people did. Mnookin logs 100-plus interviews and salts his book with sufficient quotes and notes to make life easier for all the journalism school students who'll be assigned his text by finger-wagging professors.

Lesson One: Brown-nosing the boss is the second-best way to get promoted in American newspapering, if you can't marry into the ownership. And the personal relationships, rivalries, romances and revenge-seeking laid out here suggest the Times is just like a lot of other newspapers, only more so. No bulletin in that department; picking people is still the diciest part of the game.

Lacking direct access to the leading actors in this saga, Mnookin backtracked along the career paths of the Times's brash and inexperienced publisher and the older, savvier, cooler, journalistic gunslinger he picked to revitalize his tradition-encrusted newspaper enterprise. It all came undone for Raines and nearly for the chastened Sulzberger, as well, when a 27-year-old rookie reporter, Jayson Blair, promoted beyond his competence and protected by managers fearful of upbraiding a black up-and-comer, was caught hyping stories, fabricating, plagiarizing and lying about his whereabouts and expense accounts.

Blair was "a journalistic suicide bomb … [whose] story became an indictment of Howell Raines's leadership, and

Raines's leadership became emblematic of every poor decision Arthur Sulzberger had ever made." That's Mnookin's nut graf. Doubts about Blair's reporting on the serial sniper shootings and more high-profile assignments from without and within the top-heavy Times bureaucracy led to an orgiastic exposé (four pages, one-sixth the length of Mnookin's deconstruction) of the paper's Byzantine innards in the Sunday, May 11, 2003 Times, prepared by a rump internal affairs squad of seven men.

Raines, initially defended and retained by Sulzberger, had to be tossed over the side, presumably with a substantial financial settlement, and Gerald Boyd, his number two, was turfed out as well. Raines resurfaced with a blast against his old boss and some colleagues in a May 2004 Atlantic Monthly piece, which seems to have only accelerated his penthouse-to-outhouse trajectory.

How Blair, one of the lowliest, least-experienced, and lowest paid of the Times's 375 reporters and 1,200-odd news employees could rattle the temple's pillars is really a case study in management gone soft. A fifth-generation Times heir is given the keys to the kingdom, falls for the whispered confidences of a southern swaggerer who'd parlayed his political smarts into a meteoric rise without ever having worked in the Times's newsroom over 20 years employment, and he in turn picks as his chief enforcer a chap with blind spots quite similar to his. As the ship veered onto the rocks, those who voiced warnings were ignored, while the bosses told each other how smart they were.

For a while, it worked brilliantly. Raines took over from Joe Lelyveld the week before September 11, 2001. Having secretly bad-mouthed the paper's staff to his publisher as lazy, dull, unimaginative and badly in need of the ass-kicking only he could deliver, Raines oversaw a remarkable post-9/11 run. When Pulitzer time rolled around, the crew Raines inherited from Lelyveld copped six 9/11 Pulitzers, a lopsided showing that should have embarrassed even the Pulitzer hander-outers. But no question, Raines was a big-story guy. And Sulzberger drank in the accolades, his choice of editors seemingly ratified by the tinkling of seven Pulitzers in Raines's first four months. Naysayers seethed and bided their time. The big boss didn't want to hear about any bitching and carping from below decks.

One button that was very easy to push with Sulzberger, Jr. was that minorities were not moving up fast enough at the paper. And Raines, a transplanted Alabaman whose own Pulitzer came for a magazine profile of his family's black domestic servant, was always first to the barricades denouncing racism wherever his hyperactive southern sniffer detected it.

When I ran into Mnookin at the outset of his book research, I told him he couldn't comprehensively do the Times's saga without recapitulating The Boston Globe's previous turmoil. Briefly, the Globe, owned by the Times, was embarrassed when a black columnist was found out to be hyping her stuff and making things up, just when the paper was pushing her for an American Society of Newspaper Editor's prize and a Pulitzer. In the ensuing dustup Raines, as editorial chief, wrote a signed Times editorial column blasting the Globe hierarchy for picking on the black lady.

Raines got key details of the story wrong. But the Globe management, panicking, tossed white male columnist Mike Barnicle into the fire, resurrecting old allegations of shoddy reporting and incomplete attribution. This deflected media attention to the controversial white guy and off the black lady. The upshot was that Barnicle resigned under conditions his supporters (including me) regarded as patently unfair, the Globe management weaseled out of the situation, Sulzberger sacked the Globe publisher, and the Globe's top editor resigned.

Mnookin doesn't go into the Boston debacle, a pity, because it eerily presaged some of the Times's troubles. Blair had been an intern reporter at the Globe, where minority-hiring edicts were stoutly enforced.

With his editorial column, Raines had, in effect, rolled a grenade under the tent of a Times's duchy, at a time he was auditioning for the top editing job in New York. He made his bones in the Boston dust-up, proving to Young Arthur [Sulzberger] that he was willing to knock heads with gusto. And Sulzberger thought he had found himself a gutsy white knight out of Alabama who had credentials as a defender of young black journalists. Race was and is a tender topic at the paper; like National Football League ranks of head coaches, the Times had few black editors. Raines's choice of Gerald Boyd, a black with a similar hard-edged management style, as his chief enforcer caused even more friction within the empire.

It's clear that all three—Sulzberger, Raines and Boyd—as well as their retainers and footmen, badly misunderstood their own journalists and system. Mnookin's account does not reinforce the claims by Times-baiters that Blair, hired under an affirmative action edict from on high, was a classic example of race compensation gone amok: "… the vagaries of his career under Howell Raines's tenure had more to do with the favoritism and factionalism that had gripped the paper."

As to the suspendered big boss, who reveled in Raines's cocky attitude at industry conclaves and seemed to envy Raines's dash and decisiveness, relatively little is mentioned by Mnookin of the Times's business fortunes on Young

Arthur's watch. The stock price declined 20 percent in 2004, much of that having to do with the facts of economic life in a no-growth industry. Pushing dead pine trees bearing the hieroglyphic imprint of soybean-based ink, delivered by truck in an era of two-dollar-a-gallon fuel, is a tough enough sell against the Internet, 24-hour cable TV, talk radio and iPods, cell phones and Palm Pilots.

Sulzberger's missteps at the Times seem more foppish than roguish. On the totem pole of media mogul scandals, his ranks well down toward the lower end. No Citizen Kane he. Nor did he defraud thousands of employees (Robert Maxwell), loot his holding company of many millions while cheating investors (Conrad Black), or ape the machinations of the Dirty Digger from Down Under, Rupert Murdoch.

Mnookin drills deep into the culture of the Times, exhuming a culture of management-by-exhaustion and methods of promotion just as quixotic, perplexing and occasionally mean-spirited as would be found in many other newsrooms. A lot of Times people gave him on-the-record quotes, which is more than can be said for their leaders, who preferred to keep private the details of their own artful paths upwards.

Even now, the microscopic examination by the Times's ombudsman (okay, "The Public Editor," as it calls Daniel Okrent) seems, oh, so very Times-ian, in the way that Okrent, the inventor of rotisserie baseball, burrows into the tiniest detail and statistic of the paper's batting order. For all its fussiness and occasional falls from grace, day-in, day-out, year-in, year-out, the Times is still our most important newspaper ("… not to say it's always the best," as Mnookin writes). And pound for pound it remains our best overall, despite its admitted or obvious deficiencies in business, sports or culture coverage, this last a perennial occasion of Times self-doubt.

Inside the Times

Mnookin's book, concentrating as it does on the sins of the managers on West 43rd Street, does not have the sweep of British journalist Andrew Marr's "My Trade: A Short History of British Journalism," which examines the failings and frustrations of British broadcasting as well as newspapering. But Mnookin drills deep into the culture of the Times, exhuming a culture of management-by-exhaustion and methods of promotion just as quixotic, perplexing and occasionally mean-spirited as would be found in many other newsrooms. A lot of Times people gave him on-the-record quotes, which is more than can be said for their leaders, who preferred to keep private the details of their own artful paths upwards.

The bottom line to the book is Mnookin's take that Raines wreaked 21 months of hell-week upon his staff. His "narcissistic personality" got in the way, with his Tom Wolfe-ish "eye-catching white Panama hat" and tough-guy talk about "flooding the zone" and invoking earthy Bear Bryant-isms from his Alabama adolescence. Sulzberger fell for Raines's gnomic asides about what the paper needed, and for a time the pair were a brash Butch-and-Sundance duo on the newspaper circuit, lecturing the lesser nobility of journalism about the-this-and-the-that of the biz.

The Times tried to ape the glossy magazines for lifestyle relevance, and Raines flogged the horses for more drama, more pizzazz, more splash and dash and buzz, all the words that pretenders whisper into the ears of publishers confused by all the competition for readers' time and easily gulled by bold and confident outriders promising to stride into the bunkhouse and get the ranch hands to work harder for less money.

In modern journalism, the rewards are skewed to flash, glitter and sycophancy. In 40 years in the business, I learned that sometimes loyalty to the paper requires that you try to save the bosses from themselves. Raines was wrong about Blair, natch, but Blair was never really on his radar screen. He was too hard on some top talent and too soft on some over-ripe talent, but every editor makes some dicey lineup decisions. He went bonkers over the overblown issue of women barred from Augusta National Golf Club, and his oversight of the coverage of the run-up into the Iraq War was sketchy and occasionally faulty, as we now can see.

Former publisher Adolph Ochs's famous dictum to his ruling clan was to inform the paper's readers "without fear or favor." Raines whipped up fear and practiced favoritism, but he was a ballsy editor. He didn't try to drive too slowly, once he'd seized the reins. He took his shot. He misfired, but he wasn't afraid to pull the trigger.

In the end, newspapering is all about judgment. An editor's power is judging what goes on Page One, what stories to assign, which to suppress, who can handle a beat, who gets to do what, from the bottom to the person just beneath you. "Hard News" is about hard times at the Times when a bunch of people made a bunch of bad judgments. ■

David Nyhan was a columnist for the Eagle Tribune newspapers of Massachusetts and New Hampshire and a broadcast analyst who was a reporter, editor and columnist at The Boston Globe for 32 years.

David Nyhan: More Irish Than Harvard

When David Nyhan died unexpectedly on January 23rd, his preceding essay about the Times and Seth Mnookin's book was in his computer. We are grateful to his family for helping retrieve his words and letting us share them with our readers, just as David shared so much with Nieman Fellows and the foundation throughout the years. He was instrumental in establishing the Taylor Family Award for Fairness in Newspapers, annually given by the Nieman Foundation as a way of encouraging fairness in news coverage by America's daily newspapers. And last summer, he lent a helpful hand to the foundation's joint effort to publish Media Nation, which offered Boston Globe readers a revealing look at press issues during the Democratic National Convention. What follows is a remembrance written by one of David's colleagues at the Globe and a Nieman Fellow.

By Kevin Cullen

If the timing was a shock, David Nyhan's death at 64 from a heart attack was not entirely surprising. His heart, after all, was bigger than most. It was what informed his journalism and, in the end, left him vulnerable.

He worked his way out of Whiskey Point, a working-class enclave of Brookline, Massachusetts, to Harvard, where he played football and majored in English, and to The Boston Globe, where he spent 32 years as a political insider who always stuck up for the outsider. He earned his journalistic chops as a reporter on Beacon Hill and Capitol Hill in the 1960's and 70's, and in 1985 began writing an op-ed column that espoused a liberal populism. And as he did all of this, Nyhan—in the words of Senator Edward Kennedy, who eulogized him—followed the advice the poet Robert Frost gave John F. Kennedy, another Brookline native who had gone to Harvard, at the 1961 presidential inauguration: "Be more Irish than Harvard."

If his intellect was honed at Harvard, Nyhan's gregarious affability could be traced to West Cork, his ancestral Irish home, where he would sometimes visit just to listen to the singsong lilt of the fishermen. He championed working people in his columns and chatted them up incessantly. His idea of a perfect day was to schmooze with the lobstermen on Chebeague Island in Maine, where he had a summer home.

Besides his prolific newspapering, he mentored not just the young reporters at the Globe, but the telephone operators from South Boston and the janitors from Cambodia. When college kids called him, looking for advice, he dropped what he was doing and gave it freely.

Nyhan was as comfortable in a salon as a saloon. He loved putting journalists, political operatives, and policymakers in informal settings so they could kick around the issues of the day. With his old friend Paul McDermott, he organized lunches every few months at The Inn at Harvard. Sometimes Tom Palmer, a Globe reporter, seemed like the only person in the room who would stick up for George W. Bush, and so, naturally, Nyhan was defensive of him.

"Hey, Palmer digs with the other foot," he'd say, using a phrase that in Northern Ireland denotes one's religion and that Nyhan used to denote one's political leanings, "but he's okay with me."

Nyhan was a diehard Democrat, but he admired many Republicans, including Lamar Alexander and John McCain. There were some critics who suggested Nyhan was too close to those he covered. Some eyebrows were raised when Nyhan served as a pallbearer at the funeral of the former U.S. Speaker of the House Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill. It was O'Neill, the quintessential blue-collar Cantabrigian, who coined the phrase "All politics is local." For Nyhan, so, too, was all journalism. If some accused him of being too friendly with politicians, he thought some journalists were too cynical. But unlike some of the more partisan pundits of today, Nyhan didn't hesitate to criticize his ideological soulmates.

After his death, many people said there wasn't a mean bone in Dave Nyhan's body. Obviously, they had never played basketball with him. On the court, he was a ferocious competitor who hated to lose pickup games.

Nyhan retired from the Globe in 2001. Some of his friends complained bitterly that the Globe too willingly pushed him out the door. Nyhan, however, accepted not happily but with good grace that he and others, who in the Tom Winship era had made the Globe a national player in political coverage, had a great run, but that the business was changing, and they weren't going to be part of that change. In his last Globe column, Nyhan wrote that he had been "downsized but not downhearted."

After a fellowship at Harvard's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, he began writing a column for the Eagle-Tribune of Lawrence, a small newspaper north of Boston. On January 23rd, in the midst of a blizzard, Nyhan took a shovel and stepped outside his Brookline home. His heart, the muscle that most defined him, gave out. He died just a few days before he was to leave for a month-long trip to Sri Lanka, where he was going to chronicle the efforts of 50 nurses and doctors to aid tsunami victims.

Seamus Heaney, who in his considerate nature toward others is more than a little like Dave, could have been writing Nyhan's epitaph when, in 1997, he wrote about a friend who was murdered in Northern Ireland: "He represented something better than we have grown used to." ■

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Strong Narrative Writing Features Character

'Like all the great narrative journalists, [Mark] Bowden must be a relentless asker of questions, a painstaking gatherer of minute detail.'

Road Work: Among Tyrants, Heroes, Rogues and Beasts
Mark Bowden
Atlantic Monthly Press. 288 Pages. $24.

By Russell Frank

A book like Mark Bowden's "Road Work: Among Tyrants, Heroes, Rogues and Beasts" gives hope to the author in every reporter. By hitting it big, as Bowden did with "Black Hawk Down," everything else becomes publishable, whether it deserves to be or not.

"Road Work" is a collection of 19 pieces Bowden wrote for The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Atlantic Monthly, and other publications during the past 25 years. Extending the life of journalistic writing via publication between hard covers can be a risky business. Some of the stories in "Road Work" are timeless, others are yesterday's mashed potatoes, still others simply don't deserve to live on within the pages of a book.

The selection seems designed to show off Bowden's range: He's a sensitive dad here, a hard-boiled cops' reporter there; a political pundit one day, a sportswriter the next; a praise-singer for Americana in one story, a dauntless world traveler in another. We also see Bowden trying on different voices, notably Tom Wolfe's. We hear the glib techno-military Wolfe of "The Right Stuff" in a piece about pilots flying missions over Afghanistan and the italicizing, capitalizing, exclaiming and mocking Wolfe in an article about the battle over the placement of a Rocky statue at the Philadelphia Art Museum.

Bowden has his own voice. He should stick to it.

Probably the weakest piece in "Road Work" is the one on the 2000 Democratic National Convention. Bowden writes in his head note that the tightly scripted infomercial that is the modern political convention made him "pine for the days of smoke-filled back rooms, the days when real decisions were made at the conventions, and when reporters could unearth real news." Name another reporter who doesn't agree.

Character in Narrative Writing

The other clunkers in the book, about an annual Thanksgiving football game between rival Missouri high schools and about tryouts for a suburban Philadelphia high school basketball team, lack the key element in any successful piece of narrative journalism: the delineation of character. As Mike D'Orso wrote in an essay, "Finding Character," that appeared in "Points of Entry" in 2002, "Action, setting, issues—all those things matter in a nonfiction story, but what matters most when it comes to narrative nonfiction is characters. People want to read about people. More than anything we are fascinated—appalled, amused, delighted, dismayed, inspired, entranced—by the men and women who stand up and breathe on the pages of a well-crafted story."

No one quite stands up and breathes in "The Game of a Lifetime" or "The Unkindest Cut." The first story tells us in a general way why the Turkey Day football game is so important to the people who live in Webster Groves and Kirkwood but offers only snapshots of past and present participants, not portraits. (Try out H.G. Bissinger's "Friday Night Lights" for a Texas-sized version of the same basic story.) The second recalls former (Baltimore) Sun reporter Ken Fuson's 1997 chronicle of tryouts, rehearsals and opening night for a high school production of "West Side Story," but next to Fuson's detailed sketches of cast members, Bowden's thumbnails of the aspiring basketball players seem halfhearted. It is as if he didn't find the kids all that interesting or didn't get to spend enough time with each of them to get to know them. When we find out at the end who made the team and who didn't, we don't care much either way.

A reader might feel better acquainted with Massa, the 51-year-old gorilla at the Philadelphia Zoo, than with any of the people in those two sports stories. At the end of "Urban Gorilla," one almost feels as if "this ragged and toothless figure" cannot himself decide whether lifelong confinement has been worth it, after all. On one hand, it is hard to argue with Massa's longevity, which is a tribute to the quality of the care he has received in captivity. On the other hand, there is his profound boredom. Bowden's lovely lead sets up all that is to come: "Day settles softly down from the skylight over Massa's bare confinement like some dim memory of sunshine." Elsewhere we see him "rolling his baleful black eyes vacantly around the familiar edges of his world," swatting his swinging tire in disgust and turning his sorry old buttocks on his human visitors.

Here we also get to see Bowden doing one of the things he is extraordinarily good at, physical descriptions. Near the end of the story, Bowden describes Massa's face and eyes, but his earlier description of the ancient ape's body is even more poignant:

"Age has withered this old brute to almost half his youthful bulk, a transformation that intensifies the alarming resemblance to his slender

cousin, Homo sapiens. His jet-black skin hangs in loose folds at each joint and in chevrons down his shrunken chest and belly. His gray coat is tattered from decades of hair-plucking, a habit long ago identified as a symptom of pathological boredom."

Consider these other finely wrought drawings, this one of Michael Koubi, former chief interrogator for Israel's General Security Services in "The Dark Art of Interrogation":

"He has blue eyes in a crooked face: time, the greatest caricaturist of all, has been at work on it for more than sixty years, and has produced one that is lean, browned, deeply lined, and naturally concave. His considerable nose has been broken twice, and now ends well to the right of where it begins, giving him a look that is literally off-center."

Here's a quick one of minor league ballplayer Rob Swain from "The Great Potato Pick-Off Play":

"Swain was a short, crewcut infielder with a muscular frame and such tiny feet that his teammates used to say his shoes were small enough to drape over a rearview mirror."

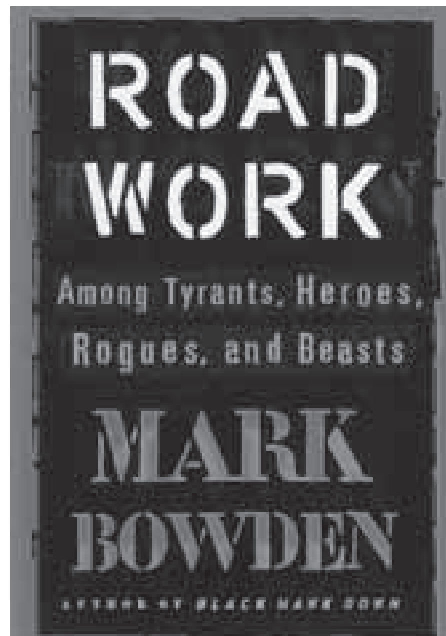
And here, instantly recognizable to a baseball fan of a certain age, is Philadelphia Phillies great Mike Schmidt:

"He has high, prominent cheekbones from which his face cuts down sharply in two angled lines to his chin. What must have been a difficult case of teenage acne has left scars along these chiseled features, softening them somewhat, adding to his weathered complexion a curious blend of ruggedness and vulnerability."

Finally, there's this perfect rendering of Norman Mailer:

"His blue eyes, under a spray of white eyebrows, are quick and playful. He stands on the balls of his feet and seems always intently aware of where his hands are—in his pockets, gesturing, pointing, striking out at some elusive, invisible enemy dodging just in front of him. Mailer's clipped white curls are a happy mess. He has exceptionally large ears, the kind of ears kids probably teased him about when he was little. They protrude like supersensitive listening devices, making his face seem wider than it is long."

This kind of descriptive writing, etching character onto physical characteristics, is harder than it appears to be. The one exception to the character-trumps-all rule is "Rhino," an excerpt taken from a four-part series Bowden wrote about efforts to save the black



rhinoceros from extinction. Like the Turkey Day and basketball tryout stories, this one is more of an ensemble piece. However, unlike the other stories, the landscape itself stands forth as a vivid presence in this one:

"The pitted clay gave way to sand that shifted slightly underfoot with each step, slowing them. The patrol climbed down a small embankment to the surface of a dry streambed. Gnarled remains of trees, washed along during the February floods, lay sunbaked and withered on the sand. Dusty air dried our mouths and throats."

It helps, of course, that around any bend in the trail, Bowden and the antipoaching patrol he accompanies into the Zambian bush are likely to surprise a hippo, a croc, a rhino, or a herd of elephants or Cape buffalo.

Transparent Reconstruction

The most striking thing about "Road Work" is that the stories grounded in Bowden's observations of what went on before his eyes are indistinguishable from the scenes he reconstructed from the recollections of others. Indeed, if Bowden didn't mention his use of reconstruction in some of the head notes, it might not even occur to most readers that he did anything other than describe scenes he had witnessed.

That's a tribute to Bowden's skills as a writer and his even more impressive skills as a reporter: Like all the great narrative journalists, Bowden must be a relentless asker of questions, a painstaking gatherer of minute detail. In "Fight to the Finish," about a man's losing battle against depression, the main character is so palpably present in the story that it's astonishing to learn from the head note that Bowden never met him: What he knows about him, he learned from the man's family and friends, from letters and photographs. The same goes for Bowden's impressive profile of Saddam Hussein, though here it's a bit galling to see Bowden, writing a year before the invasion of Iraq, sounding the alarm about Saddam as an imminent threat to the United States.

In "Cops on the Take," on the other hand, it would be surprising to learn that Bowden did not reconstruct: It's hard to imagine a reporter being welcomed at a pimp's meetings with dirty cops or squeezing into a "surveillance hideaway" with two FBI agents. But how, then, does Bowden know so much? The dialogue wasn't a problem: The FBI agents got the pimp and the police on tape. And certainly Bowden would have visited the restaurants where some of the meetings took place so he could describe the framed prints on the wall to his heart's content. But can we believe that the pimp recalled for Bowden "the sunny silver sheen" of

"steam rising from sewers and manhole lids" as he waited on a street corner to meet the cop he'd have to pay off to stay in business? Or that "fists of gritty air from passing trucks bumped him off balance and steeped him in the stale odor of spent fuel"? This would be one observant sleazeball.

Similar questions arise while reading the irresistibly goofy "The Great Potato Pick-Off Play." Here, if Bowden claimed to be in on the hidden potato trick from the outset, we would probably take his word for it. But the head note reveals that Bowden read about the stunt on the newswire and "got Bresnahan and his teammates to reconstruct the stunt." And so when Bowden describes the stadium lights and the sunlight "mingling to create a setting that seemed eerie, unreal" we have to ask if someone provided that description to Bowden or if he visited the stadium at the same time of day as when the pick-off play took place and sketched in the details after the fact.

It is hard to argue with such atmospherics. They add much to a story, and where's the harm if Bowden spends a March morning on a Philadelphia street corner to get a sense of the look and smell of the air? At the same time, it is important to note that this sort of detail, whether obtained from a keen-eyed source or sketched in later by the writer, represents a significant departure from journalistic practice.

Reporters get their information in three ways: by observing, by interviewing, and by researching documents. All information obtained from human or printed sources is usually attributed to those sources. We can then assume that unattributed information was gathered by the reporter-as-observer.

Not so with narrative journalism. Now the reporter is describing scenes he did not witness and reproducing speech he did not hear without telling the reader how he knows what he knows. Should he? Does anyone other than a spoilsport journalism professor even care?

Perhaps not, but space isn't quite as precious in a book as it is in the newspaper. When an author is writing head notes anyway, why not include some words about how he got parts of the story—as Bowden did in great detail in his masterpiece of narrative reconstruction, "Black Hawk Down"? Journalism students, a primary audience for a book like "Road Work," would find such information instructive. ■

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Iraq War Documentaries Fill a Press Vacuum

'… filmmakers have become a source of alternative explanations for the war in Iraq and the news coverage of it, as well as critics of the administration's policies.'

By Lorie Conway

The Iraq War exposed the news media's strengths and weaknesses. At gathering and transmitting visual images throughout the world, reporting what's being said by White House officials and showing human-interest stories about Americans caught up in the flow of momentous events, they have excelled. Less to be applauded, however, has been the U.S. news media's presentation of alternative opinions and perspectives at a time when there were few areas of disagreement among government officials, including Democratic lawmakers who were largely silent during the buildup to and early execution of the war with Iraq. Deprived of such prominent dissenters, journalists' work revolved largely within this echo chamber, as the White House maintained firm control of the news agenda with its disciplined communication apparatus.

As in the past when journalists have not fully fed the public's appetite, a demand for alternative media has arisen. In the early 20th century, when major U.S. newspapers were mired in yellow journalism and beholden to corporate advertisers, the muckrakers took on these business trusts, writing in magazines like McClure's and, in doing so, they found an eager audience. During the early years of protests against the Vietnam War, dissenting young Americans expressed themselves through folk and rock songs, and their concerns received coverage in alternative outlets such as The Village Voice and I.F. Stone's Weekly.

This pattern—with new twists in the type of alternative media being used—is now being followed during the Iraq War. A sizeable minority of Americans grew upset with the plans for war and then were joined by more dissenters once the war began. As this happened, their anger surfaced on the Internet and then documentary films became popular vehicles for its expression.

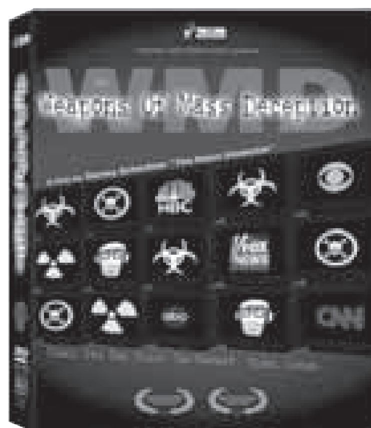
Last spring, Michael Moore produced the blockbuster hit, "Fahrenheit 9/11," and others have followed his lead. At this year's Sundance Film Festival, the Grand Jury Prize for documentary went to "Why We Fight," a film that frames the conflict in Iraq through policies devised by America's postwar military-industrial complex. Two other prominent documentaries have also recently tackled this theme. They are "WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception," produced by Danny Schechter, and "Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear & the Selling of American

Empire," produced by the Media Education Foundation. Like Moore's film, in the process of attacking Bush's policies these documentaries point to the mainstream media's complicity with the administration as seen in their war coverage.

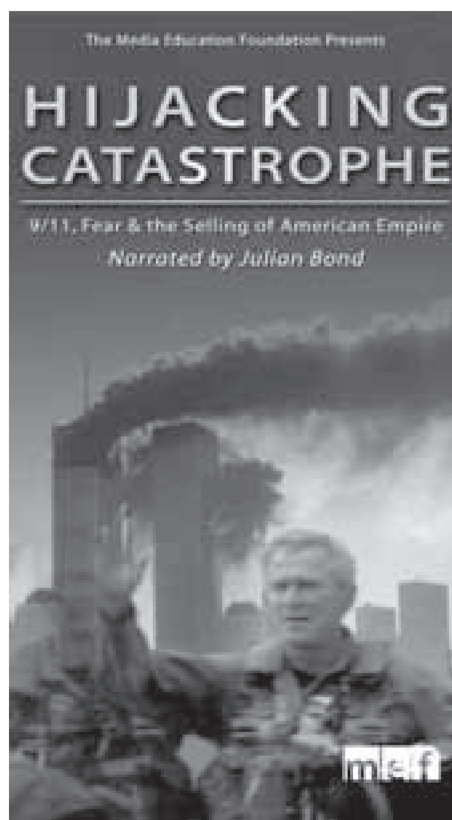
Examining the Press

Armed with digital cameras and sound equipment, and using computer-based editing, these savvy filmmakers have become a source of alternative explanations for the war in Iraq and the news coverage of it, as well as critics of the administration's policies. It is somewhat ironic that these films benefit from the news media's strengths, while their content speaks to their faults. In this era of digital images, nearly everything that's been said on the air or off can be captured on camera and become grist for documentary filmmakers to use.

In "WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception," independent producer and veteran media critic Danny Schechter "embedded" himself in front of his TV, watching and comparing American and foreign coverage. Online he wrote thousands of words about the coverage, as he filed daily reports for Mediachannel.org and eventually transformed them into his book, "Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception: How the Media Failed to Cover the War on Iraq." This film provides his response to what he saw while preparing the book.



Schechter's film features footage from Iraq and video from various news conferences held after the war's initial combat phase was completed. He interviews a wide range of journalists, from veteran Peter Arnett, who reported for NBC News until he was fired after granting an interview to Iraqi TV, to Gwendolyn Cates, an embedded reporter who reports for People. The film asserts that the major U.S. network news divisions allowed the government not only to unduly influence their coverage but also to control it through its planned use of embedded reporters. In "WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception," General Tommy Franks, then the Iraq War's commander, refers to the news media in his "top secret" war plan not as the "fourth estate" but as the "fourth front."



"Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear & the Selling of American Empire," produced by the Media Education Foundation, a watchdog media think tank, is also critical of the press for its willingness to become part of the White House's "propaganda machine." Narrated by Julian Bond, the film shares the views of 20 interviewees, including a Pentagon whistleblower, Lt. Colonel Karen Kwiatkowski. Interviewed in her kitchen, this high-ranking insider tells how the Bush administration manipulated post-9/11 fear to fit its foreign policy goals. Others who appear in this film are more familiar critics of the Bush administration—including author Noam Chomsky, the Pentagon Papers' whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, and United Nations weapons inspector Scott Ritter. It's a tired offering compared with Schechter's, in that nearly everything said in this film has now been said many times over, much of it even in the mainstream press.

Nevertheless, the criticisms of the press in both films are compelling. In these portrayals, journalists were not simply silent sentinels while preemptive war was waged: They were eager participants. Hundreds clamored to be an "embed" and the television networks, broadcast and cable, festooned their screens with war-making graphics. America's press went to war along with the Bush administration. "I felt that we had moved into a post-journalism era where packaging and 'militainment' prevailed," says Schechter, who narrates his film, "WMD."

Journalists, these documentaries contend, should have been wary of the consequences of embedded assignments. It was not simply because in such a position they'd be inclined—almost required—to say good things about the war effort. By embedding its reporters, news organizations would consume much of their news time and space with reports from the front. And this would push out other important stories, such as how the war was being received on the Arab streets, in European capitals, and in the destroyed neighborhoods of Iraq's cities and towns. According to Schechter, "Even as large numbers of Americans and people around the world dissented, their views were rarely seen and heard …. There was a patriotic correctness on the airwaves and a uniformity of viewpoint that did more selling than telling about the war."

Once the combat phase ended, and things started to spin out of control in Iraq, journalists backed away from their patriotic exuberance. In Schechter's documentary, "Nightline" anchor Ted Koppel, who was embedded in Iraq for ABC News, is heard to say at a seminar months later that "live coverage of war is not journalism." At another post-

war conference, three network news presidents agreed that their news coverage should have more aggressively challenged the Bush administration's reasons for going to war. ABC's David Westin said, "… we let the American people down on the weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and I sincerely regret that."

But as the popular appeal of these documentaries seems to illustrate, the news media are not blamed so much for their inability to disprove the prewar WMD allegations, which after all would have been all but impossible to do. Rather the fault lies more with their unwillingness to work hard at playing their essential role as a government watchdog.

In earlier eras, U.S. journalists learned from their mistakes and then guarded against repeating them. After caving in to corporate sponsors in the early 20th century, news organizations created a wall to separate the news and advertising divisions. After propagating Johnson and Nixon's lies about the Vietnam War, journalists launched an era of dedicated watchdog reporting. This time, it's not clear what journalists could do to fix the difficulties these documentaries point out. Competitive pressures are unabated, as are pressures on journalists to maintain access with newsmakers. But until the news media find some way to provide a more inclusive telling of the news, it is likely that bloggers and documentary filmmakers will continue to fill the vacuum. ■

Lorie Conway, a 1994 Nieman Fellow, is a Boston-based producer and documentary filmmaker. Since 2001, Conway has received two National Endowment for the Humanities grants for the development and scripting of her film, "Hope & Healing: The Untold Story of the Ellis Island Hospital."

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When People's Suffering is Portrayed as Art

Sebastião Salgado's photographs 'represent everything that is meaningful, controversial and difficult about "concerned photography."'

Sahel: The End of the Road
Sebastião Salgado
University of California Press. 140 Pages. $45.

By Michele McDonald

"Sahel: The End of the Road" is a book of searing photographs taken 20 years ago by Brazilian-born photographer Sebastião Salgado during a famine that killed a million people in the drought-stricken countries of West Africa. (Sahel, which comes from the Arabic word for "edge" or "border," is land at the edge of the desert, and Salgado's photographs were taken in Chad, Ethiopia, Mali and the Sudan.)

His black and white photographs pair unforgettable horror with great beauty, and they represent everything that is meaningful, controversial and difficult about "concerned photography." Salgado, a relatively unknown photographer in the mid-1980's (his first career was as an economist), was unable to find an American book publisher for the work. One book agent was moved to tears by the photographs, but publishers said no one would buy such a book. Some of the photographs were published at the time in The New York Times and Newsweek, and they were published in book form in France in 1986 and in Spain in 1988.

Since then, Salgado has become arguably one of the world's best-known photographers, and many of the Sahel photographs have become so well known they are icons to the photographers of my generation. Finally, in 2004, these images—accompanied by essays about them—were published in the United States as a book, the third in a series of books on contemporary photography by the University of California's Graduate School of Journalism, in association with the University of California Press.

In the intervening years, Salgado's work has evoked intense responses, not all of which are complimentary. In 1991, in her New Yorker article about the Sahel photographs, Ingrid Sischy wrote "Salgado is far too busy with the compositional aspects of his pictures—with finding the 'grace' and 'beauty' in the twisted forms of his anguished subjects. And this beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal. To aestheticize is the fastest way to anesthetize the feeling of those who are witnessing it. Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action …." And in her recent book, "Regarding the Pain of Others," the late Susan Sontag referred to Salgado (in an uncomplimentary way) as a photographer who "specializes in world misery."

Sontag's label is one I believe Salgado should wear with pride. It is a testimony to the importance of his work. "The First World is in a crisis of excess," Salgado says, "the Third World in a crisis of need."

As we look at these Sahel photographs, we can't help but think of the people struggling today in the Darfur re-

gion of Sudan, not only from the effects of famine, but from ethnic cleansing as well. Though the locations of tragedies change, Salgado's images remind us, if we need such reminding, that the visual telling of loss and grief, so personal, is also universal. His photographs provide a humane, epic look into the lives and deaths of people who inhabit places that few of us would pause to consider on our own.

The aesthetic and ethical response to such photographs can and will be debated for as long as these images exist. But what can't be denied is the importance of photographers willing to bear witness, with visual strength, so all of us can see. ■

Michele McDonald, a 1988 Nieman Fellow, is a photographer with The Boston Globe, whose assignments have taken her to many developing nations.

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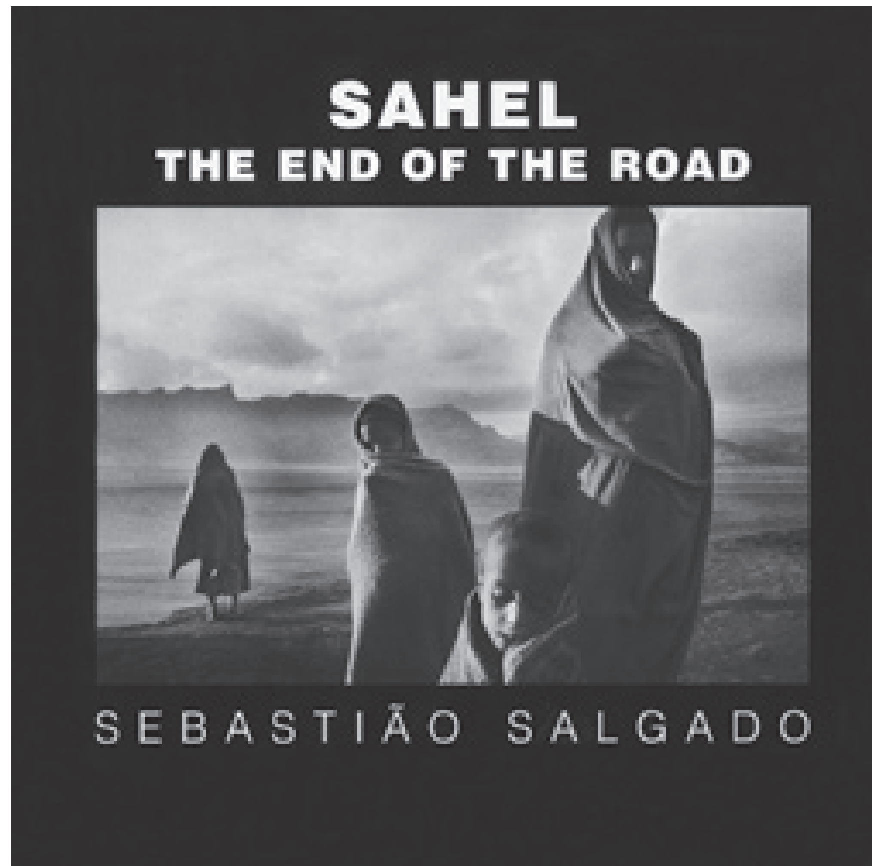

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In the region of Lake Faguibine, nomads have had to walk across the desert in 122-degree heat to reach the outskirts of cities in the hopes of finding food and shelter. In this area, one of the most prosperous villages of Azouera once stood, on the shores of a great lake that has now disappeared. Mali, 1985. *Photo by Sebastião Salgado from the book "Sahel: The End of the Road," University of California Press.*

Korem camp was situated at a very high altitude (about 8,200 feet). At night the temperature often dropped to freezing. Nighttime was when the greatest number of deaths occurred. Ethiopia, 1984. *Photo by Sebastião Salgado from the book "Sahel: The End of the Road," University of California Press.*

Image quality was intetionally degraded for Web use by request.

A mother looked helplessly at her child, who suffered from cerebral malaria. They arrived at the camp in the Darfur region of Sudan too late; the disease was irreversible. 1985. *Photo by Sebastião Salgado from the book "Sahel: The End of the Road," University of California Press.*

Compiled by Lois Fiore

Frank del Olmo's Words Are a Tribute to His Life

While he 'wrote through Latino eyes, the core themes he explored in his columns—the quest for truth and justice—are universal.'

By Frank O. Sotomayor

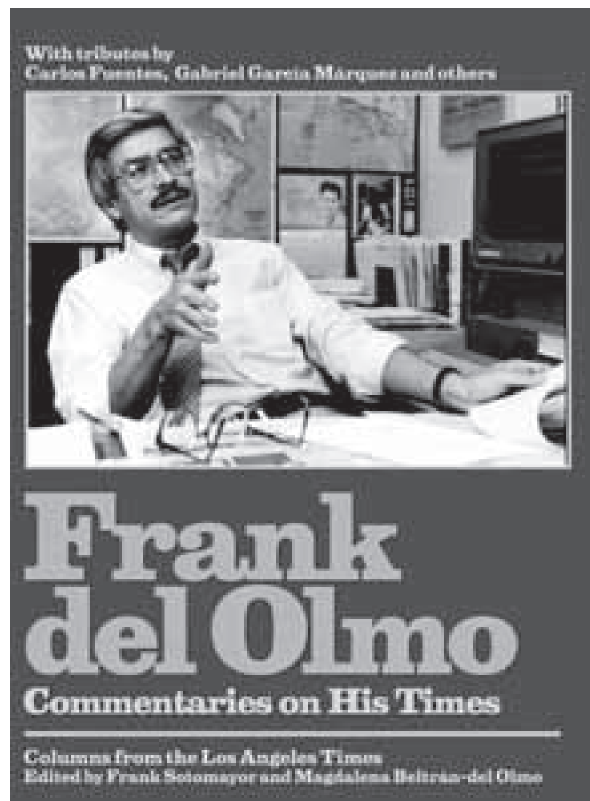
The "two Franks." That's what some Los Angeles Times colleagues called Frank del Olmo and me because we tackled so many projects together. I never imagined that our final endeavor together would occur after his death.

We had been scheduled to have a working lunch on that fateful day—February 19, 2004. Instead, shortly before noon, an editor rushed into my office saying Frank had been stricken. Soon, I was at the hospital with his wife, and we heard the words we didn't want to hear: Frank was dead of a heart attack at age 55.

The question then became how best to memorialize this distinguished journalist, a trailblazer for Latino media professionals and a pioneer in writing about autism. Frank's wife, Magdalena Beltrán-del Olmo, Times Editor John Carroll and I quickly came to an agreement: a book of Frank's best columns.

Within six months, "Frank del Olmo: Commentaries on His Times" rolled off the presses. It is a fitting tribute to someone who forged his way into U.S. journalism history—as cofounder of two professional news organizations, the first Latino masthead editor at the Los Angeles Times, and an influential columnist on contemporary events.

For a quarter of a century, Frank's columns spoke forcefully about developments in politics, education, labor, immigration, media and sports. And in his last decade, Frank also wrote moving accounts as the compassionate father of a young son who is autistic. With eloquence springing from the heart, he described how he and Magdalena had first felt pain—and later hope—about the condition of Frankie, the boy with "the soft, sweet smile and big brown eyes."



Ideally, this Los Angeles Times book would have been published while Frank was alive. But as Magdalena wrote, Frank always felt there were "more important battles to wage." The task of selecting 90 of Frank's best columns fell to her and me. As coeditors, we felt we made informed choices of what columns Frank would have wanted included. Magdalena, whom Frank had called "my very best editor," had conferred regularly with her husband as he developed his commentaries over the 14 years they were together.

I had known Frank as a friend and colleague for 33 years at the Times. Besides being "tocayos" (Spanish for namesakes), we were both Mexican-American journalists from low-income families and passionate advocates for diversity and inclusive coverage of Latinos and other underserved communities. We worked together on a Times series on Latinos in Southern California that won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. And each of us spent a memorable year at

Harvard as Nieman Fellows.

When Frank arrived in Cambridge in 1987, he was an outstanding reporter, foreign correspondent, and editorial writer. The Nieman experience and wise mentoring by Curator Howard Simons gave him skills and confidence "to break through the glass ceiling," Magdalena recalled. A year after Harvard, Frank was promoted to deputy editorial page editor. Through this position and his later job as associate editor, he joined the newspaper's masthead of top editors.

With Frank's access to the editor's and publisher's suites and my feet in the newsroom trenches as assistant city editor, we emphasized to one management team after another the importance of providing more complete coverage about Latinos, who soon will become the majority ethnic populations in Los Angeles.

In the late 1970's, the Times accepted our recommendation that "Latinos" become the newspaper's style, instead of the bureaucratic-sounding "Hispanics." At first, the Times was nearly alone in using the term, but over time it has won increasing national acceptance.

While Frank wrote through Latino eyes, the core themes he explored in his columns—the quest for truth and justice—are universal. In his best-known commentary, he authored a "dissenting opinion" to the newspaper's 1994 endorsement of then-Governor Pete Wilson. He assailed Wilson for "cynically backing" the anti-illegal immigrant Proposition 187 as a divisive ploy for his reelection campaign.

Frank was devoted to his family: Magdalena, Frankie, age 12, and a daughter by a previous marriage, Valentina, 29. He told readers in December 2003 that he intended to write fewer columns and spend more time with Frankie. That intention never came true; sadly, he died within two months of writing those words. But as Frankie has said, he knows his father was a great man who loved him.

To signify Frank's contributions to journalism, the California Chicano News Media Association and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists have begun presenting scholarships and awards in his name.

Frank's friend of many years, author Gabriel García Márquez, a former reporter, wrote that he wished he "hadn't read the news of Thursday, February 19: Frank del Olmo was dead and no disclaimer or correction was possible. Those of us who are born journalists discover early in our lives, and often against our will, that our craft is not just a calling, a fate, a need or a job. It's something we can't avoid: It is a vice among friends."

I miss Frank, mi compadre. Outside the newsroom, we played softball together for the Chicano Cubs, sang along to mariachi ballads, and shared pride in our children. Working on this book was my way to honor our friendship and our journalistic calling. His words live on. ■

Frank O. Sotomayor, a 1986 Nieman Fellow, is a Los Angeles Times editor. He is assistant director of the Minority Editorial Training Program (METPRO) and editorial chair of the newspaper's Student Journalism Program. The book "Frank del Olmo: Commentaries on His Times" is available at www.latimes.com/frankdelolmo.

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'Commentaries on His Times'

Here are some excerpts from columns that appear in the book, "Frank del Olmo: Commentaries on His Times:"

"A Dissenting Vote on the Endorsement of Pete Wilson," October 31, 1994

… Unfortunately, my deeply felt belief that [Governor Pete] Wilson does not deserve the Times's endorsement did not carry the day. Under normal circumstances, I would quietly accept that decision and move on. This time I cannot. Because this is not just another political campaign. And the Wilson endorsement is not … just another endorsement.

… This campaign is unprecedented in the harm it does—permanent damage, I fear—to an ethnic community I care deeply about and a state I love. The reason, of course, is its weapon of choice: the complex and emotional issue of illegal immigration.

In the form of Proposition 187—the mean-spirited and unconstitutional ballot initiative that would deprive "apparent illegal aliens" of public health services and immigrant children of public education—the immigration issue has become the cornerstone of Wilson's desperate and cynical effort to win a second term.

… That is why the Times's endorsement of Wilson is not just another endorsement and why I must register my dissent so publicly. I want people out there to know—especially the young Latinos and Asian Americans who will be the leaders of this state in the future and, I hope, readers of this newspaper as well—that not all of us here at the Times feel good about Pete Wilson. Many of us share your anger.

"Frankie's Journey to Manhood," December 21, 2003

… I have dreaded Frankie's adolescence. But there is no postponing it. My little boy is becoming a young man. He's going to need more of my time, which is one reason I will write less frequently for this page. He's also going to need more privacy than I have allowed him. He'll need it to decide how he prefers to cope with autism.

So the two great gifts I can give Frankie this Christmas, and in years to come, are my presence and his privacy. And he shall have them both. ■

—1948—

Lester Grant died of pneumonia on December 31st in Dallas, Texas. He was 91 years old.

Grant began his journalism career in high school, working as a copy boy at the Oakland Post-Enquirer and later covering high school sporting events. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 1935, he went to work for The Sporting News in St. Louis, Washington's Times-Herald and Evening Star papers, and The New York Herald Tribune. As a medical journalist, he received a George Polk Award and an AAAS-Westinghouse Science Writing Award.

After his Nieman year, Grant moved on to a new career and graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1955. He received his Doctorate of Philosophy in experimental medicine from Oxford University in 1960.

Grant devoted most of his medical career to experimental pathology research and taught until his retirement at New York University's medical school. Following his retirement, Grant served as professor of pathology at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston.

Of his time at Harvard, Grant's son John told The Boston Globe, "It was like a dream for him to be able to talk to people who were on the cutting edge of science and to have the time and resources to pursue any of his interests. I think he knew that this was 'it' for him."

Grant's wife of 56 years, **Margaret**, died in 1994. He is survived by his second wife, **Barbara**, two children, two stepchildren, grandchildren, and stepgrandchildren. The family has asked that donations be sent to Harvard Medical School.

—1953—

John H.K. (Jack) Flower died January 9th in Mona Vale Hospital in New South Whales, Australia. He was 84 years old. His son-in-law, Peter Denton, writes in Flower's obituary: "On his deathbed he waited for the six o'clock news, then passed away peacefully … with his friends and family around him."

Born in 1921 in Gordon NSW, Flower began his career as a cadet journalist at Fairfax's Sydney Morning Herald. When war broke out, he trained as a navigator, joined the 354th Squadron of the Royal Air Force, and completed a full tour of the Indian Ocean with the rank of officer. During his training, Flower also became a heavyweight boxing champion. Following his tour, Flower served as war correspondent for the Australian Association Press and Palestinian foreign correspondent for The Sydney Morning Herald. At age 30, he became Fairfax's youngest chief of staff.

Of his later newspaper years, Denton recalls: "On his return to Sydney in 1966 he became involved in the frenzy resulting from the change from old molten-lead-based methods of newspaper production to complex computer-based systems. … It was a time of great stress, and Jack and many other executives spent more hours in the pressrooms than in their offices. Thankfully many of those industrial campaigns are now over, and it is hoped that those who work at Fairfax these days still enjoy the ethical standards and sheer job satisfaction that Jack and his generation enjoyed. This was also when Jack earned the epithet 'Gentleman Jack' for his adroit negotiating abilities with the unions and his sound knowledge of newspaper production."

Flower held several other positions for Fairfax including chief circulation manager from 1973 to 1979. After his retirement in 1986, he became involved with S.E. Asia Command Association and Probus. Two months before his death, Flower and his wife, **Audrey**, celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary. Flower is survived by Audrey, a sister, three children, and five grandchildren.

—1956—

H.Y. Sharada Prasad's son Ravi writes: "H.Y. Sharada Prasad and his wife, **Kamala**, are in good shape for a couple in their 80's. Sharada writes a weekly column that appears in The Asian Age (www.asianage.com) every Wednesday. A collection of his essays was published as a book in 2003 titled 'The Book I Won't Be Writing and Other Essays.'

"He was awarded a D. Litt. Honorus Causa in March 2004 by the University of Mysore, from where he obtained a BA in 1945. In October 2001, he was honored with the Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration. In 2000, the government of India awarded him the Padma Bhushan, India's third highest honor.

"Sharada and Kamala live in New Delhi, close to their two sons. [I am] a high-technology consultant and columnist. Sanjiva is a professor of computer science. Sharada can be contacted at hy@r67.net or h@50g.com."

India's "Who's Who" includes an entry on Prasad that details his books, translations, career and government involvement, including his 22 years in the Prime Minister's Secretariat and work with Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, and Morarji Desai.

—1966—

W. Hodding Carter III has stepped down as president and chief executive office of the Knight Foundation, although he will continue on as an advisor until February 2006. Alberto Ibarguen, who had been publisher of The Miami Herald, has been elected by the trustees of the foundation to succeed Carter.

Carter became president and CEO of the Knight Foundation in February 1998, after an award-winning career as a journalist and commentator. As head of the foundation, Carter increased funding to their journalism program, helped rework the National Community Development Initiative into Living Cities, and increased the foundation's assets from $1.2 billion to $1.9 billion. The foundation's annual grants payments expanded from $42 million to more than $90 million.

Carter is also a founding partner of the Florida Philanthropic Network, which is a coalition of Florida's leading grant-makers working to advance philanthropy in the state.

Rodolfo T. Reyes brings us up to date on his work: "I was involved in the last Philippine presidential elections as media coordinator, first for businessman Eduardo Cojuangco (who withdrew from the race) and then for actor Fernando Poe, Jr., who ran as opposition candidate against incumbent President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Unfortunately, we lost.

I have had an eventful career in journalism (both print and television) and government service in the past 38 years since my Nieman year.

I was news editor of the Manila Times from 1966-1968, editor in chief of the Manila Chronicle from 1968-1972, publisher of four magazines (Woman's Home Companion, Celebrity, TV Times, and Ginoo) from 1972-1984, and publisher/editor in chief of the Manila Standard from 1987-1990.

My television stint included a four-month course on TV news production at the Thomson Foundation TV College in Glasgow, Scotland in 1968; my setting up the GMA-7 TV Network in 1973, and the government TV station MBS-4 in 1977. I headed the news department of ABS-CBN, first in 1968 and then in 1990 and 1994.

I served as press secretary of President Fidel Ramos in 1992-1993 and the ousted president, Joseph Estrada, in 1998-1999. In both instances, I quit as press secretary after only a year in service as I could not stand the backstabbing in the corridors of power.

My last government post was resident representative (de facto ambassador) to Taiwan as head of the Manila Economic and Cultural Office in Taipei (2000-2001).

I am semiretired, enjoying the company of my six grandchildren, and tending a small fishpond, raising milkfish and tiger prawns, in my hometown of Hagonoy, Bulacan province."

—1977—

Barbara Reynolds has written an autobiography, "Out of Hell and Living Well: Healing From the Inside Out," published by Xulon Press. In the book, Reynolds writes about being "an unwanted pioneer" in the newsrooms in which she worked: the Chicago Tribune, where in 1977 she was the first African American in the paper's Washington bureau, and USA Today, where she was a columnist and editorial writer. She also writes about how a spiritual awakening helped her transcend great personal difficulties, leading her to eventually earn a master's degree from Howard University School of Divinity and a doctorate from United Theological Seminary.

Reynolds now hosts "Reynolds Rap" on XM satellite and World Online radio, mentors students studying journalism and religion at Howard University's School of Communications, and is the religion columnist for the National Newspaper Publishers Association. She is also the author of "Jesse Jackson: America's David," "And Still We Rise," and "No, I won't Shut Up: Thirty Years of Telling It Like It Is."

—1978—

Danny Schechter's film, "WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception," has been adapted by Ithaca College's Project Look Sharp into a secondary- and college-level curriculum created to facilitate discussion and analysis in the classroom.

Chris Sperry, author of "WMD Teacher's Guide: Teaching with the film WMD (Weapons of Mass Deception)," separates the curriculum into nine lessons comprised of introductory information, viewing sessions, questions, "further questions," and suggested answers. The 14-page guide moves beyond a basic critical analysis of the issues in the film to a "critical decoding of the construction" of Schechter's documentary.

"All media have biases," writes Sperry, Project Look Smart's director of curriculum and staff development, "and this film is no exception. To develop fully literate citizens, contemporary educators must train students to ask critical questions about all media constructions, including those we use in the classroom."

Project Look Smart's guide is available to downloaded off the Web at www.coldplay.net. For more on Schechter's film "WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception," go to www.wmdthefilm.com or see the review on page 106.

—1979—

John C. Huff, Jr. writes, "I left The (Charleston) Post and Courier as of December 1. I have 35 years in a newsroom now, and I'm figuring out how I can most effectively spend another seven or eight years working to assure the survival of the kind of journalism that newspapers represent. That might mean running another newsroom, teaching, consulting or writing, or a combination. I have a brief window to collect possibilities, and that's what I'm doing."

—1984—

D'Vera Cohn was part of a group of Washington Post journalists who won the 2005 Selden Ring Award for Investigative Reporting for their series exposing lead contamination in the Washington, D.C. water supply and the failure of public officials to inform and protect the residents. Reporting on the series began in January 2004, and in all more than 200 articles were published. The investigation resulted in the firing of the director of the District of Columbia Department of Public Health, James Buford, and also showed that water agencies across the country manipulated or withheld test results disclosing high levels of lead content. Cohn's article about her paper's investigative reporting on this story appears on page 22.

The Selden Ring Award honors outstanding work in investigative journalism leading to direct results, and is presented by the School of Journalism at the USC Annenberg School for Communication. The award includes a $35,000 prize.

—1985—

Peg Finucane has "finished her midlife crisis," she says, left Newsday, and is now teaching journalism full-time at Hofstra University on Long Island af-

Nieman Reunion, May 6-8, 2005 in Cambridge

If you haven't already made plans to attend the '05 Reunion, now is the time. The Web site (www.nieman.harvard.edu) has all the information you need to register, reserve a hotel room, and even discover if your classmates are planning to attend.

We are putting together a program that will evoke memories of your Nieman year as well as enable you to catch up with old friends, participate in seminars with Harvard professors, and experience the new facilities at Walter Lippmann House.

We have several room blocks reserved in Harvard Square hotels, but they are filling up quickly. So visit the Web site and register now. We look forward to seeing you in May! ■

ter juggling a day job, adjunct teaching, and graduate school for several years. Finucan earned a master's degree in communication at Fordham in 2002 (coincidentally, exactly 30 years after her BA). Her husband, **Bob Heisler**, left Newsday first and is now the entertainment editor at the New York Daily News. Their daughter, Sarah Heisler, was one of a handful of high school singers accepted to Operafestival di Roma, where she hopes to be discovered this summer in the chorus of "Le Nozze di Figaro."

—1988—

Eugene Robinson is now associate editor and op-ed columnist at The Washington Post. Robinson has served at the Post in several capacities, including city editor, city hall reporter, assistant managing editor of the style section, and Latin America bureau chief in Buenos Aires. Robinson is author of "Last Dance in Havana" and "Coal to Cream: A Black Man's Journey Beyond Color to an Affirmation of Race."

—1989—

Julio Godoy writes: "Since our arrival in Paris in 1999, I have been working for the press agency IPS, covering environmental, European and human rights issues. In addition to that, I am a member of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists based in Washington, for which I have participated in two award-winning international investigations on the privatization of water on the global level ("The Water Barons") and on the privatization of war ("Making a Killing"). [An article about "The Water Barons" project begins on page 43.]

"**Barbara** continues to work as correspondent for the German national public radio network ARD, especially for the radio stations in Berlin, Frankfurt, Bremen and Saarbrücken. She covers French and European politics, environment, cultural events, and business."

—1990—

Carla Robbins and her Wall Street Journal news team were awarded the 2004 Elizabeth Neuffer Award for Print Journalism by the United Nations Correspondents Association (UNCA) for a story they wrote on U.N. activities. Robbins and the other journalists each received $10,000 and a gold medal in honor of Neuffer, The Boston Globe bureau chief at the United Nations who was killed in Baghdad in 2003. The UNCA awards the Elizabeth Neuffer prize to those whom the association feels exhibit Neuffer's courage, passion and compassion, as well as prove "objectivity does not have to mean neutrality."

—1991—

Katherine Skiba's first book, "Sister in the Band of Brothers: Embedded with the 101st Airborne in Iraq," was published in March by the University Press of Kansas. Skiba, a Washington, D.C. correspondent for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, was one of 60 female reporters embedded with troops during the war in Iraq and the sole female civilian among the 2,300 soldiers of the 159th Aviation Brigade, a helicopter unit within the 101st Airborne Division. The book is not only about the soldiers and their harrowing experiences in the war, but also explores her more personal journey from the "media boot camp" to the fall of Baghdad, including the reactions and thoughts of her husband, journalist **Thomas E. Vanden Brook**.

Skiba has been with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel since 1982 and has covered stories from the Gaza Strip to the former Soviet Union to postwar Kosovo. She has received 24 journalism awards.

—1992—

Raymundo Riva-Palacio writes: "After a very tumultuous first semester in 2004, things went back to normal. Almost. I went back to working for El Universal, a major newspaper in Mexico, and I was assigned the responsibility of two tabloid newspapers. One is El Grafico, a popular paper with the largest circulation in the country (280,000 copies a day, the most of the five biggest newspapers in Mexico City combined), and The M, a free paper that is distributed in the subway system (65,000 copies a day). I designed a plan for both newspapers, beginning this spring: The goal for El Grafico is increased circulation up to 500,000 copies a day, turning the paper into a national newspaper in five years, and beginning an expansion into Mexican markets in the United States. For The M, I am going to remake it to attack the 18-25-year-old market, expanding its circulation to universities. I will most welcome all kind of ideas to help me in these two projects." Riva-Palacio can be reached by e-mail at r_rivapalacio@yahoo.com.

—1993—

Matthew Zencey received the Alaska Press Club award for Best Editorial Writing, large circulation, in April 2004. Zency is an editorial writer with the Anchorage Daily News in Anchorage.

—1995—

Lisa Getter has left her investigative reporting position at the Los Angeles Times to become the new corporate editorial director of United Communications Group (UCG). In this position, Getter will head UCG's journalism internship program, editorial recruitment efforts, and "teach and preach the tricks of the trade," according to a UCG press release. Prior to her position at the Los Angeles Times, Getter spent 16 years at The Miami Herald, where she won Harvard's Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting for a story on the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Getter was a part of two Pulitzer Prize-winning teams at the Herald—first in 1993 for a story surrounding Hurricane Andrew and South Florida building codes and again in 1999 for a story on voter fraud.

—1997—

Robert Blau has been named managing editor of The (Baltimore) Sun. Blau had been the associate managing editor for projects at the Chicago Tribune, where he oversaw various award-winning series, including the newspaper's landmark investigation of the death penalty.

—1998—

Seda Poumpianskaia writes: "Well, time goes fast! My three years in Guatemala working as the spokesperson and chief of public information for the United Nations flew by. Now closing this page, as the U.N., being successful here, closed its mission on December 31, 2004, I can just say Guatemala is a fascinating country from all points of view, a country in definitive transition after 36 years of being the most silenced in the Central American conflict and a place where part of my professional devotion and heart will probably stay forever.

"The next page is now to be opened. After going through a series of marathon or Wimbledon-type rounds of interviews, I have won and accepted the post of the director of communication and research for the Council of Europe, which I will be starting as of March 14th. I will move to Strasbourg … and work with no less than 46 European countries, currently members of the Council of Europe, on the principles of what is the common European House—I believe, one of the most interesting projects of this century."

Carlos Puig has accepted a new job: "I am managing editor of Rumbo de Houston [Texas], a daily newspaper in Spanish. Rumbo is a new chain of newspapers in Spanish owned by Recoletos of Spain and directed by former Wall Street Journal journalists. There are Rumbo papers in Austin, San Antonio, Houston and the Lower Rio Grande Valley. This year papers will open in other states as well."

—1999—

Christopher Marquis, 43, died on February 11th of AIDS. A reporter in the Washington bureau of The New York Times, he had been staying at the home of a brother, Matthew, in San Francisco, California. Marquis's specialty was Latin American politics, developed as a freelancer in Argentina for the paper La Nación and continued when The Miami Herald hired him in 1987, where he covered Cuba and Central America. He eventually was named chief foreign affairs writer for the Knight Ridder chain, based in Washington, D.C., and covered the U.S.-led invasion of Panama, the guerrilla offensive in El Salvador, and the fall of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

In 2003, Marquis's novel, "A Hole in the Heart," was published by St. Martin's Press to favorable reviews. The book was about the struggles of a teacher in Alaska after the untimely death of her husband. A few months ago, Marquis took a leave of absence from the Times to start on a second novel, which he was working on at the time of his death.

In addition to his brother Matthew, Marquis is survived by his parents, Harold and Nancy Marquis, another brother, Jeff, and a sister, Julie.

Donations may be made in Marquis's memory to the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, 995 Market St. #200, San Francisco, California 94103. The tele-

A Request for Alumni/ae to Update Their Contact Information

A reminder to all Nieman alumni/ae that you are able to review and update your contact information on the alumni network section of the Nieman Web site (go to www.Nieman.harvard.edu and follow the prompts). Now, however, might be an especially good time to be sure your current information is updated in preparation for the May 6-8 Nieman reunion. Also, when updating your information, if you have a personal Web site or if there is a Web site on the Internet that features your work, please enter that URL/Web link into the "Personal Web Page URL" on the alumni contact update page. This will add another dimension to the alumni network Web site and give you a chance to share your work with each other more easily.

Finally, in advance of the reunion, alumni/ae are encouraged to donate copies of any books they have authored for permanent display in the Taylor Seminar Room and the Kovach Collection of Contemporary Journalism. Donated books can be sent directly to the Nieman Foundation, One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138, in care of Frank Vogel. ■

phone number is 415-487-3061.

—2000—

Bill Krueger, after working for more than two decades as a reporter, has made the switch to editing. In October, Krueger became the Capitol/State editor for The News & Observer in Raleigh, North Carolina. His Nieman classmates have promised not to hold it against him.

—2002—

Roberta Baskin has been named executive director of the Center for Public Integrity (CPI) in Washington, D.C, where she will replace CPI's founding Executive Director Charles Lewis. Board of Directors Chairman Charles Piller said of her appointment: "Roberta offers a dynamic mix of probing intelligence, journalistic savvy, and personal courage that will be essential to push the center's work to new heights in a new era. Now, more than ever, the nation needs the center's brand of independent, in-depth reporting, and Roberta's creativity and leadership make her an ideal successor to Chuck Lewis."

Baskin has worked extensively with ABC, PBS and CBS and is the recipient of more than 75 honors including two duPont-Columbia awards, two George Foster Peabody awards, and seven National Press Club awards.

—2003—

Susan Smith Richardson has been named deputy bureau chief northwest for the Chicago Tribune. She oversees government and schools coverage in northwest Cook County as well as overall coverage for one of the fastest-growing counties in Illinois.

—2004—

Ju-Don Marshall Roberts is managing editor of washingtonpost.com, where she oversees a staff of 23 editors and producers responsible for feature news, the Entertainment Guide, editorial operations and tools, copyediting, e-mail and editorial communications.

In addition, Roberts is the lead coordinator for all site-wide editorial and multimedia projects. Currently she is overseeing the implementation of a new content management system for washingtonpost.com.

In previous roles at washingtonpost.com, Roberts supervised the Live Online, metro, health, education and national news sections.

Prior to joining the Web site in 1999, Roberts worked as a copyeditor and freelance writer for The Washington Post. She also was a copyeditor at The Charlotte Observer and The Washington Times.

Roberts studied journalism at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she graduated magna cum laude. She lives in Woodbridge, Virginia, with her husband and 7-year-old daughter, Dashae. ■

End Note

A Photojournalist Returns to Vietnam

'… I finally got to make some peaceful and quiet pictures.'

By Steve Northup

Forty years ago, I was a United Press International staff photographer in the Saigon bureau, and I spent two years making some really scary pictures. Scary to make, scary to look at. I did my best to bring the war home, and I'm proud of the work I did.

I was a young photographer then, and the things I thought were important to photograph were the extraordinary, the outstanding, the different. Over the years I've changed. What I now think is most important to photograph, at least for me, is a careful documentation of our daily doings, our ordinary daily life. How we live, how we dress, the things we cherish.

I loved Vietnam, its people, its colors, its geography, its food and culture. And I've always wished I could have had, or taken, the time to photograph more of the beauty and elegance of that part of the world, more of their daily doings.

I finally had my chance. My old

correspondent and best friend is Martin Stuart-Fox. Martin is now professor emeritus at the University of Queensland, Australia, and a leading expert on Southeast Asia. We were given a contract to do a book on the history of the three capitals of Laos—Champassak, Vientiane and Luang Prabang. That assignment finished, we went on to Vietnam, where I finally got to make some peaceful and quiet pictures. They were a long time in coming but worth the wait. It felt very good to be back again. ■

Steve Northup, a 1974 Nieman Fellow, is a freelance photojournalist.

Musicians on Phung Island, in the Mekong Delta.

A scholar in a Confucian temple in Hanoi.

Photos by Steve Northup.

The giant rock islands, known as "the dragon descending," were the scene of a important naval victory of the Vietnamese, who lured a much larger Chinese naval force into these waters and took them apart. Ha Long: Ha Long Bay, Vietnam.

Pensioners gathered for reading and conversation in one of the courtyards of the Temple of Literature, Hanoi.

Photos by Steve Northup.

One of the most crowded spots in a crowded city is the path around Hoan Keim Lake, where scores of Hanoi's residents arrive for their morning exercises.

A man unloads rice husks to feed giant pottery kilns in Can Tho, Vietnam.

Photos by Steve Northup.