

NIEMAN REPORTS

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

VOL. 61 No. 1 SPRING 2007

Five Dollars

Afghanistan Stories Come Back Into View



A Conference Report
Avian Flu, A Pandemic & the Role of Journalists

Words & Reflections
The Book as an Investigative Vehicle for News

“... to promote and elevate the standards of journalism”

—Agnes Wahl Nieman, the benefactor of the Nieman Foundation.

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Hazara women wait in line to see a doctor. *Photo by Najibullah Musafér/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.*

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Vendors sleep near their chickens at a fowl market in Shanghai, China. October 2005. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.*

Sixty Years of Nieman Reports—And Still Counting

A look back at the magazine's first issue is a reminder of what has changed and all that remains the same.

By Bob Giles

Sixty years ago, the first issue of Nieman Reports was published, beginning a conversation about the rights and responsibilities of journalists that continues to this day.

The decision by Nieman Fellows in the winter of 1947 to publish a quarterly magazine “about newspapering by newspapermen” had received a nudge from the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press whose report was about to be released with a sharp comment about the absence of a regular forum for serious criticism of the press.

A brief commentary on the back of the magazine explained that Nieman Reports would have “no pattern, no formula or policy except to serve the purpose of the Nieman Foundation ‘to promote standards of journalism in America.’” During 60 years, Nieman Reports has been remarkably faithful to that purpose, even though the intent to limit the magazine's scope to American journalism soon gave way to realities such as the onset of the cold war and the inclusion of international journalists in Nieman classes beginning in 1951.

The stories filling the 20 pages of the initial issue in February 1947 were written by Nieman Fellows from their experiences in a news world that was much simpler than the one we know today. The lead story carried the headline, “What's Wrong With the Newspaper Reader.” Its author, Newsweek's William J. Miller, a 1941 Nieman Fellow, observed that in discussions among fellows, “many reasons have been advanced for the publishers' cursed persistence in continuing to publish newspapers that are far from being as honest, as fearless or as outspoken as most of their writers would wish them to be.

“If newspapermen could own and publish their own newspaper, and make it as honest, free and unbiased as their various lights could agree upon, it would be a mistake for them to undertake to tell the public how to think. It prefers to be entertained. So let the perfect newspaper be short, simple, sexy and full of pictures. Let it devote one fourth of its space to a lavish coverage of sports, including who is bribing whom, and another fourth to comics. I predict it will sell like hell. If, on top of that, it is also honest, unprejudiced and unslanted, the public won't mind. The press the American people get is pretty bad, and it is just what they deserve.”

Ernest Linford, a 1947 Nieman Fellow, wrote about his time as a crusading editor at The Laramie Republican-Boomerang in Wyoming, where he learned that it isn't enough to be right. “No town wants to be bossed by even a good

newspaper. It is best to ‘let others take the credit.’”

There are passing references to “communism” and musings about what was learned at Harvard, where Linford became “sensitive to the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative.’” An amusing short story by Ed Edstrom, a 1945 Nieman Fellow, told of a heavy-drinking reporter describing his city editor as “a fat-jowled, big-bellied, rump-sprung sadist ... who fondly imagined that Hollywood had formed its city editor type from a mold much like his own.” And the magazine took some pride in publishing a summary of a “secret government report” by Senator James E. Murray of Montana, which addressed “the trend toward concentration of ownership of American newspapers and the handicaps of the small paper.”

“One great threat to the survival of an American free press ... is the vice-like grip of monopoly-big-business newsprint manufacturers upon the 15,000 small newspapers published in the country.” It is a monopoly, Senator Murray asserted, that is supported by such corporate giants as Hearst, McCormick-Patterson and Scripps. “The newspaper is not only a private business venture, but it is also a basic institution of democracy. With each disappearance of a competitive local newspaper, some vital part of democracy is lost.”

Thumbing through the yellowing pages of the first issue gives a clear impression that the Nieman Fellows had introduced a valuable forum for journalists to talk seriously about their responsibilities. (This issue is available on the Nieman Web site.) The quality and heft of Nieman Reports have grown over 60 years, and journalism's problems seem to have expanded exponentially in that time. But the critical focus of that first issue on the principles that guide us still defines the direction of our magazine. And the conversation continues. ■

The Associated Press Provides a Visual Record

We extend our gratitude to The Associated Press for granting us permission to publish a large number of its images to accompany a series of excerpts from presentations and discussions at a fall 2006 conference about news coverage of avian flu and preparations for pandemic flu. The AP photographs—which begin on page 49—tell the visual story of the spread of avian flu, how it has affected animals and people in various countries, and some preventive measures being taken. ■

Afghanistan: Stories Come Back Into View

Caught in a fierce Taliban ambush while traveling last summer with coalition troops in southern Afghanistan, (London) Sunday Times foreign correspondent **Christina Lamb** writes about her escape from death, her second one while on assignment in that country. “Once I was angry that Afghanistan was no longer in the news,” Lamb says, as she describes the different phases of news coverage she’s witnessed through the years. “Now I feel sad that Afghanistan is back in the news.”

Two years after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette sent reporter **Bob Wigginton** and photographer **Benjamin Krain** on a month-long reporting assignment to Afghanistan. Their words and images describe how they learned what billions of dollars in reconstruction funds “had accomplished for the Afghan people.”

Syed Saleem Shahzad, a bureau chief in Pakistan for Asia Times Online, explains what happened to him, a Pakistani, and his interpreter when they traveled to a place where the Taliban rule, and he knew non-Afghan journalists “faced the possibility of being abducted or killed.” They were held by Taliban leaders and, when released, faced a perilous journey back to Pakistan, where Shahzad wrote a six-part series for Asia Times. A New York Times article describes how Times correspondent **Carlotta Gall** and photographer Akhtar Soomro were treated by Pakistani intelligence officials, who seized their cell phones, computers, notebooks and photo equipment. “All the people I interviewed were subsequently visited by intelligence agents,” Gall wrote.

Renée Montagne, a host of NPR’s “Morning Edition,” writes about the reliance Western journalists have on interpreters and explores the fears accompanying their work. When he went into a Taliban stronghold in the fall of 2006, Montagne’s interpreter erased “many valuable numbers” from his cell phone so he would not endanger sources, family and friends if the Taliban got his phone. Washington Post writer **Pamela Constable**, who first reported from Afghanistan in 1998, describes what it’s been like during Taliban and non-Taliban rule to be a female journalist and report on Afghan women’s lives.

Charles M. Sennott, a foreign correspondent with The Boston Globe’s Special Projects Team and VII agency photographer **Gary Knight** embedded with the Afghan National Army, and a multimedia story conveys what they found. NPR reporter **Ivan Watson** told listeners about the Taliban’s defeat in 2001; now, as he returns to report in Afghanistan, he finds “it is a resurgent Taliban that is knocking at the gates of the Afghan capital.” In an excerpt from his forthcoming book, “How We Missed the Story,” **Roy Gutman**, foreign editor for the McClatchy Newspapers, examines the difficulties Western reporters experienced in reporting on Osama bin Laden’s activities in Afghanistan in 1998. **Craig Pyes**, senior correspondent at the Center for Investigative Reporting, set out to learn how two Afghans died while detained by U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan; Pyes details the many barriers the military put in their way as he and Kevin Sack reported this story for the Los Angeles Times.

Travis Beard, chief editor of Aina Photo in Afghanistan, describes that nation’s first-of-its-kind photojournalism school and introduces four of the Afghan photographers who were trained there. Images by **Fardin Waezi**, **Gulbuddin Elham**, **Najibullah Musafar**, and **Safya Saify** invite us to view their country as they see it in the stories they visually tell. ■

A Dangerous Yet Still Necessary Assignment

“Going inside” was what we called it in the old days, when the Russians were occupying Afghanistan back in the 1980’s.’

By Christina Lamb

I really did not want to die in a muddy field in Helmand. But there I was, cowering in a ditch with Kalashnikov bullets and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) whistling overhead, mortars bursting into orange flame all around. When we tried to run, we found ourselves heading into a hail of bullets. The Taliban had surrounded us on all sides. When I dropped my notebook at the start of the ambush—the first time I’d done that in 20 years on the road—I knew I had abandoned all pretence at journalism. All I could think about was desperately wanting to survive and my little boy whose seventh birthday party I was due to be hosting that Sunday.

What was supposed to be a hearts and minds mission with British soldiers in a village in southern Afghanistan had turned into a desperate fight for our lives. As we walked in, leaving the vehicles and big guns outside, Zumbalay had seemed a quiet, bucolic place. We joked that it would be a nice spot for a cold beer. But our senses should have been alerted by the fact that no children were around. Usually they all come clamoring for candy. Nor did the villagers invite us for green tea. Instead they directed us straight into a Taliban ambush. The commander was telling me “I think that went well” just as the first shots rang out, and we ran for our lives. And when a sergeant major from Britain’s elite Parachute Regiment asks, “Can you use a pistol?” you know you’re in serious trouble. [See an excerpt from Lamb’s Sunday Times article on page 6.]

Ironically I had refused to return to Iraq because it was too dangerous. Yet now here I was staring at death in a ditch in southern Afghanistan for the second time. It was back in 1988,

when I was 22 and in and out of love and thought I was indestructible, that death came close but also passed me by. I was with a young, chubby and then unknown Hamid Karzai and a band of turbaned mullahs who had later gone on to become founding members of the Taliban. (I had lived a block away from Karzai in Peshawar where he was then a spokesman for the smallest of the seven mujahideen groups.) Armed and funded by the Americans and British, they had mounted an ill-conceived operation to attack a Russian base at Kandahar airport, which had ended with us pinned down in a trench by Soviet tanks with hot dust and rubble raining on us and several dead.

Had anyone told me then that 18 years later Karzai would be president of Afghanistan, and I would end up under fire in a similar ditch with British soldiers in the neighboring province of Helmand fighting Afghans, I would never have believed them.

Afghan Coverage: Then and Now

“Going inside” was what we called it in the old days, when the Russians were occupying Afghanistan back in the 1980’s. Most of us covering that war were based in the Pakistani city of Peshawar, divided from where we wanted to be by the jagged mountains of the Khyber Pass. By foot, donkey or motorbike, we would travel back and forth across those mountains with the muj, as the Afghan guerrilla fighters were known, dodging landmines and Soviet helicopter gunships. Sometimes we would darken our faces with a mixture of dirt and potassium permanganate to blend in with the fighters; sometimes we would be disguised in

burkas. We lived on stale naan bread, occasionally supplemented by rice from some villagers, or okra fried in diesel oil.

When we were inside, we longed to be out, but when we were out we spent all our time trying to get back in. There were no satellite phones then so it was impossible to file copy while inside Afghanistan. Crossing the border meant being out of contact for weeks. Even when back in Pakistan, it was so hard to get an international phone line that most of the time the only way to file was through the telex operator in the Pakistan Communications Office who required regular baksheesh to keep him punching out the holes in the ticker tape.

Once I got a visa from the Communist regime to cover the war from the other side. That was little better. Copy had to be sent through the one-armed telex operator at Hotel Kabul who doubled, somewhat alarmingly, as the taxi driver, his one black-gloved hand swinging back and forth from the gear-stick to the steering wheel.

These days it’s much easier. The major cities of Kabul, Herat, Kandahar and Jalalabad all have mobile phones and Internet, and some guest houses such as the Gandamak even boast Wi-Fi. But while logistics have been revolutionized, other aspects of reporting Afghanistan have become harder. Journalists have become targets. Afghanistan has not reached anywhere near Iraq’s level of violence and danger for journalists, but there have been a number of kidnappings and murders of correspondents. Some can be put down to banditry, but not all.

The new U.S.-funded highways between Kabul and Kandahar and Kabul and Jalalabad have slashed journey

'Have you ever used a pistol?'

*In an excerpt from her July 2, 2006 article in *The Sunday Times*, Christina Lamb writes about her experience of being caught in a fierce Taliban ambush while traveling with coalition troops in Afghanistan. Her story can be read at www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article681998.ece*

By Christina Lamb

Afghans are the most hospitable people on earth, offering everything when they have nothing. I was thinking it was unlike them not to offer tea to visitors, but Major Blair seemed quite happy.

"I think that went well—they seemed quite friendly," he said to me as we walked away.

Almost immediately a burst of gunfire rang out from the ridge to the left where the Fire Support Group was deployed.

"We've had a contact," came the message over the radio.

They had spotted a gathering of 12-14 men all dressed in black and armed.

Two of the support group's vehicles had peeled off to try to intercept them; but as they did so rocket-propelled grenades started to rain in on the support base—followed by small arms fire.

For a moment, we stood staring up at the ridge listening to the gunfire and explosions. Then we started walking again through a field, looking for the bridge.

Within seconds we heard the staccato crack of Kalashnikovs. I threw myself into a ditch as bullets whizzed overhead.

"Helmets on!" shouted someone. "Put your f***** helmets on!"

I followed the paratroopers, run-

ning for our lives across the fields. The ground had been ploughed weeks before and had baked hard into dry, treacherous ridges. We stumbled over the furrows, with bullets and loud explosions all around us. I wished I were wearing camouflage instead of the blue press flak jacket and helmet that made me so visible.

I did not see Justin [the photographer] fall as we ran. He said: "I lost my footing and managed to turn onto my back as I ploughed into the ground, my body armor taking the impact of the fall.

"Looking up, a rocket-propelled grenade flew over our heads about 10-feet above, bursting in the field near a group of paras, who had made the sprint in better time.

"I struggled back to my knees in time to see the first mortar round land exactly where we had been only half a minute earlier. The troops returned fire. A prolonged burst of rapid machine gun and rifle fire. Then, using white phosphorus grenades as cover, they moved left to take up firing positions behind the ridge.

"Again we were diving to the ground to avoid incoming fire, but this time it was to our left flank as well as the original direction. Feeling very exposed, we returned fire and ran back to a ridge along the field at right angles to our position.

"Once again we took incoming fire, this time from behind us. Their mortars seemed to be mercifully slow at retargeting, and they fell where we had just left."

All around me was shouting and screaming. The two platoons had been scattered by the ferocity of the ambush. In the deep ditches their radios were

not working. The soldiers were releasing canisters of red or green smoke to show each other their positions, even though this would reveal them to the Taliban, too.

The firing came again and again, with hardly any break in between. The 8-foot deep irrigation ditches that criss-crossed the fields had turned into trenches. In and out of them we climbed, slipping and falling in the muddy water as the paras tried to regroup, yelling instructions I did not understand, such as "Go firm!," which means stay still.

"When we shout 'rapid fire,' run!" yelled Corporal Matt D'Arcy as we crouched in yet another ditch. "Rapid fire!" he screamed and, ears ringing amid a clatter of heavy fire that I could not identify as ours or theirs, I forced myself to climb out of the trench.

One of the Afghan interpreters stayed praying and moaning in the ditch until Private Deerans, the handsome South African, grabbed him by the collar and kicked him out. I thought about my husband, Paulo, and our six-year-old son, Lourenço, back home in southwest London; of the World Cup birthday party Lourenço was due to have this afternoon, and how stupid it would be to die in this muddy Helmand field from a Taliban bullet.

In my belt purse were some of Lourenço's toy cars and pens he had given me for the "poor children of Afghanistan." I had taken them to the village but never got a chance to give them out. I had to survive, and the image of my son's face kept me running and jumping into yet another trench.... ■

Courtesy of The Sunday Times.

times, but they have become no safer, with roadblocks once more a feature. Some who man these roadblocks are Taliban who are looking for government sympathizers and shooting them; others are bandits or even police

demanding bribes. Some of us have started wearing burkas again when we travel on such roads.

Reporting about Afghanistan has also become more depressing. Back in the 1980's Afghanistan was a romantic

story—the Spanish civil war of my generation—a David and Goliath struggle by men from the mountains with their plastic sandals and old Lee-Enfields turning back one of the more powerful armies on earth. That first soured

in the early 1990's when the Russians had left and the muj all started fighting each other.

The narrative arc of the story had changed, but that hardly mattered, because the moment the last Soviet soldier stepped back across the Oxus River on February 15, 1989, Afghanistan dropped off the news agenda, anyway.

As a cub reporter, I was shocked. Overnight most of the diplomats, spies, aid agencies, and journalists packed up and left. As a freelance correspondent at Financial Times and Time magazine, I was determined to stay with the story, but it was getting harder and harder to find interested editors. One month later I was there for the battle for Jalalabad, the mujahideen's first attempt to capture a city from the Communist regime. Masterminded by Pakistan's military intelligence, it was a disastrous offensive. I watched thousands of women and children pour out of the city to escape the mujahideen's rockets only to be killed as the roads were bombed by the Afghan Air Force. Ten thousand people were killed in a few days, the biggest single death toll of the entire war. Yuri Vorontsov, then the Soviet ambassador in Kabul, later told me more ammunition was used in Jalalabad than in the Battle of Stalingrad.

Among the Arabs fighting with the muj in Jalalabad was Osama bin Laden. He'd been living in Peshawar at this time, but in those days no one had heard of him. (It always makes me laugh when I read journalists claiming they met him then.)

For a long while after that Afghanistan felt like a love affair that had gone badly wrong. During the years I was away, I returned many times to Pakistan and often met my Afghan friends living in exile. Over time the once dashing warriors became potbellied and balding, moaning of having thrown away their youths on a struggle that had lost its point. I, too, had changed, growing up I suppose, and becoming a mother. And I had learned the les-

son of Jalalabad: The real story in war is often not the "bang bang," but the people who are left to carry on with their often shattered lives, particularly the women.

Lack of interest in Afghanistan all changed, of course, on September 11, 2001. In the ensuing fight to oust the Taliban, it was once again easy to identify who were the good guys and who the bad. The Taliban, after all, were one of the world's most repressive regimes, harboring the man responsible for more than 3,000 deaths in terrorist attacks, and most of the world was on the other side.

Changes and Similarities

But more than five years after BBC world affairs editor John Simpson's infamous "liberation of Kabul"¹ on November 13, 2001, much of the goodwill towards Westerners has already dissipated. In large swathes of southern Afghanistan, propaganda from the resurgent Taliban, combined with some overenthusiastic NATO bombing, have convinced many to regard peacekeeping forces from the United States, Britain, Canada and elsewhere as the occupiers, there to destroy their livelihood, that is, their poppy fields. (Afghanistan is now responsible for 92 percent of world opium production.) It's not hard to sway minds in this direction. As I watched British commanders telling villagers, "We're here at the invitation of your government," those words were eerily reminiscent of what the Russians used to say.

One thing that has not changed in 20 years of reporting Afghanistan is the elusive nature of truth. Afghans are a captivating people, with their noble stance, generous hospitality and proud history, and a love of beauty that has even the most brutal warlord tying plastic flowers to his Kalashnikov. But to say Afghans are prone to exaggeration is like saying the French quite like wine. Any number of times I would arrive at a mujahideen camp in the late 1980's to be told that I had just missed

them winning a major battle or shooting down seven Soviet MiGs. Strangely the wreckage was never anywhere to be found. I should have remembered this lesson in June when the villagers of Zumbelay assured us there were no Taliban and then directed us straight into the ambush.

People often ask me if it's a problem being a female correspondent in Afghanistan. Strangely, it's not at all. Warlords and commanders generally seem to regard Western women journalists as some kind of asexual species, and we have a distinct advantage of being able to go and sit in the women's quarters, with access to half the population our male colleagues often miss.

The end of the Taliban and arrival in Kabul of more than 1,000 nongovernmental organizations, many of which have media training programs, has led to a proliferation of newspapers. At last count there were more than 250. But most Afghans still get their news through the radio. Whenever I go to rural villages, people always ask me, "BBC? BBC?" Long ago I gave up trying to explain that I worked for a newspaper.

One of the big changes I've noticed this time around is how media savvy the Taliban have become. This organization that was so reclusive when it was in power—with no official pictures of its leader allowed—now has spokesmen with satellite phones who hand out DVDs. They still use night letters pinned to mosques or schools to warn locals to cooperate, but these days they also have mobile phones. Mullah Omar even has a Web site.

Once I was angry that Afghanistan was no longer in the news. How easy it was to forget about this country after the Taliban were gone, just as it had been forgotten by journalists after the Russians left. By 2003, reporters were already referring to it as "the forgotten war." Now I feel sad that Afghanistan is back in the news. I was lucky to survive the ambush in Zumbelay. Four thousand Afghans were killed last year in the violence, and 191 coalition soldiers

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1654353.stm

lost their lives. Afghanistan was never going to become Sweden, but had the world really been committed to rebuilding it after 2001, and not been distracted by Iraq, then the return of Western journalists to report again on another war might never have been necessary. ■

Christina Lamb, a 1994 Nieman Fellow, was named Foreign Correspondent of the Year for 2006 in the BBC's What the Papers Say Awards. After her (London) Sunday Times report on the Zumbelay ambush was published in early July, Britain sent more troops and equipment to Af-

ghanistan. She is also the author of "The Sewing Circles of Herat: A Personal Voyage Through Afghanistan" (HarperCollins). Her next book, "Tea with Pinochet: Tales From Foreign Lands," will be published this summer by HarperPress.

The Sights, Sounds and Smells of Afghanistan

A reporter and photographer from a midsized newspaper in Arkansas spent a month in Afghanistan so their readers would know what was happening there.

By Bob Wigginton

Late in 2003, Habibia High School in Kabul was one of Afghanistan's better secondary learning institutions. Built largely with funding by the United States many years earlier, Habibia nonetheless offered a snapshot of the difficult road that stretched behind and ahead of the Afghan people.

The school, like so many buildings in the country's capital, had been bom-

barded and pillaged during the civil war that embroiled Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Some of those who were responsible for this destructiveness would become allies of American troops after September 11, 2001, but this earlier internal struggle for power made Afghans yearn for calm and order, no matter how harshly and brutally it was bestowed. For a time,

ironically, the Taliban fulfilled that yearning.

Jagged lines in the walls of the hallways and classrooms revealed where electrical wires had been ripped away. Teachers wrote lessons on pock-marked, bullet-riddled blackboards. Students hung blankets over doorways without doors, trying unsuccessfully to keep out the cold. They had to tra-



An instructor at Habibia High School in Kabul, Afghanistan writes an assignment on a bullet-riddled blackboard. The school, built largely with funding by the United States many years earlier, came under heavy bombardment during the civil-war fighting in the 1990's. Now more than 15,000 students attend classes there despite the damage to the building, which does not have electricity or running water. *Photo by Benjamin Krain/Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.*

verse a drab and dusty field to use a makeshift bathroom about 200 yards behind the school.

On a brief tour of the school, photographer Benjamin Krain and I were told we could not learn names or quote anyone. The Ministry of Education set these ground rules, with Ben acting as our negotiator; either we complied or, it was made clear to us, we would not be let inside. Working within the constraints, Ben photographed the extraordinarily difficult conditions under which learning was taking place in this Kabul school. His images belied the usual story line told about how Afghanistan was returning to a sense of normalcy, with education leading the way.

By the time we made this school visit, I wanted as little to do with most Afghan government officials as possible. I had realized that bargaining usually resulted only in hours and hours of wasted time, sometimes days. At the start of our month-long reporting journey, it was not unusual for us to arrive an hour ahead of schedule for an interview, wait two, even three hours to be granted an audience with an official, and then have our time with this person abruptly end after 15 or 20 minutes. Because interviews required an interpreter, five to 10 minutes of linguistic confusion inevitably occurred, leaving us often feeling frustrated and exhausted by what little had been accomplished.

At Habibia, a so-called minder stayed with us as we walked around the school. “You can’t use my name,” this man said, as we lunged up staircases where stairs were missing and rebar showed through jagged, crumbling concrete, “but things are not good here.” On our way out of the school, we ran into a group of students. One boy said students wanted to study and learn “but those rooms are so cold, our fingers freeze.” Just then the headmaster, wearing a white prayer cap and a salwar kameez, a traditional full-length shirt and trousers, came outside and watched and listened. This boy noticed him but kept on talking as his buddies gathered around him in an encouraging way. “A couple of your senators

were here a few months ago,” the boy was telling us, but by then Ben and I were being encouraged to get into our vehicle and leave. “They said they would help us.”

Afghan Coverage Fades Away

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette Executive Editor Griffin Smith and Managing Editor David Bailey asked Ben and me to go to Afghanistan in early September 2003. By then the Iraq War was about six months old, and the building Iraqi insurgency was crowding stories from Afghanistan off the front pages—not to mention the inside pages—of newspapers. With some notable exceptions, most news service stories regarding Afghanistan seemed not to delve into what was actually happening in the wake of the promises made by many nations to help the country rebuild.

While the Democrat-Gazette has a record of sending teams to distant places—most recently to Iraq—Smith and Bailey’s request came unexpectedly. Neither had an agenda, other than wanting us to examine how the purported reconstruction effort was going. They and the paper’s publisher, Walter E. Hussman, Jr. encouraged us to examine the pace of the purported reconstruction, believing that as our state’s “paper of record” not to do so would be a disservice to our readers. The cost of our trip paled against that objective, for the sad fact was that journalistic interest in such coverage was dissipating. Afghanistan was already being called “the forgotten war,” even though it was costing U.S. taxpayers about one billion dollars a month to pay for military, security, humanitarian and reconstruction efforts.

With these rebuilding efforts only in their second year—and after two decades of war that had devastated this dysfunctional country’s infrastructure—it would have been naive of us to expect to see evidence of enormous progress. Still, most of the stories coming out of Afghanistan never seemed to define clearly what reconstruction meant to the Afghan people. Instead, we found plenty of stories regurgitating how U.S. and Afghan officials were

aligning their efforts in a few key areas and using those to define “progress.”

Typical stories told of Afghans listening to music or flying kites again, activities banned under the Taliban as being contrary to religious devotion. Other stories spoke admiringly of a perceived Kabul renaissance, with car dealerships opening, new restaurants springing up, and theaters playing Bollywood (Indian) movies. Soon after Ben and I returned home, I watched a cable television reporter in Kabul, standing in front of a building under construction, describe in glowing terms how U.S. efforts were responsible for progress in Afghanistan; he used this building to make his point. The reporter failed to mention—and I can’t be sure whether he’d asked questions to find out—that this building had been under construction for about a decade.

Meanwhile, the United States and the United Nations were erecting multimillion-dollar complexes for their employees, who like many Afghan officials drove around in expensive sports utility vehicles. At the same time, Care International and the Center on International Cooperation reported that only about one percent of Afghanistan’s needs had been met. So for the typical Afghan, who lives on about one dollar a day, the “reconstruction” developments that were being reported meant nothing.

In going to Afghanistan—and taking a look at the reconstruction dollars and what they had accomplished for the Afghan people—I hoped our coverage would take readers far beyond the customary themes and anecdotes.

Arriving in Kabul

After a month of preparation—arranging interpreters and drivers and working with a travel agent to find a way into the country—we landed at Kabul’s international airport on October 16th. We had a month to do our jobs, but we encountered a problem immediately. The interpreter and driver we expected no longer were available. Fortunately, we had a backup interpreter and a driver who came with him. But this interpreter had com-

mitments and would be available to us only a few days each week. This early disappointment foreshadowed much about our time in this country—a lesson about how challenging reporting from such a place can be. During our first two weeks, we filled in gaps by hiring this interpreter's friend, but he had little experience and came without other references. We could hire him or remain idle three days each week. We hired him. (After two weeks, we were able to fill in the gaps with a more experienced interpreter.)

Finding the right interpreter is essential. This person not only facilitates conversation but also sets up interviews, provides valuable information on cultural sensibilities, and offers blunt advice on what places are safe for Westerners. Given these skills—and necessity—they earn considerably more than most Afghans; the rate at the time we were there was between \$50 and \$75 a day for the interpreter, with another \$50 for the driver. The cost depended on the day's destination and didn't include meals.

Coming to Afghanistan for the first time from the United States requires time to make both the physical and mental adjustment. Getting vaccinated against disease and infection is necessary, but it's virtually impossible to avoid illness. Contact with an infectious source left both Ben and me feverish for a day or two. Reading the country's thousands of years of history helps but, once on the ground, the distant past recedes as the present must be confronted.

Finding Stories to Tell

"The Americans do not consider Afghans as human beings on this globe," Akhtar Mohammad, a 37-year-old man, said to me in anger as Ben and I walked through a neighborhood in Kabul that was mistakenly bombed soon after the U.S. military strike against al-Qaeda and the Taliban began. We'd asked our lead interpreter, Najib, to bring us to this neighborhood called Khana, meaning

"cement house," after he told us about a family killed in the early bombings. As we stood before the rebuilt adobe-like house, its new residents didn't want to talk. But anger about what happened here visibly percolated in Mohammad, a man who walked by. A boy who was on the roof at the time of the bombing had his body cut in half, Mohammad told us. As he spoke, a crowd of neighbors gathered, still seething over the assault that they said killed a family of five, six, and maybe eight.

"When the 11th of September incident happened," Mohammad said, "most Muslims became worried about it, and in the [United] States people expressed their sympathy for [the victims]. But here, what happened here, you know ... there were innocent people here, and the Americans bombed them.... But nobody even showed up to say, 'We are sorry about this.'"

Dealing with this kind of understandable animosity was a constant struggle, whether we were in Kabul, Ghazni, Mazar-i-Sharif or other places in the country. Some people, it seemed obvious, just hated the sight of us. Najib explained their hatred one night as we were driving back to Kabul after a day spent in the Panjshir Valley. While we avoided the thieves and thugs along Old Bagram Road, he explained that after bombs started to fall, hundreds of people gathered near Kabul University to listen to a well-respected Afghan intellectual question the motive.

"Listen to me," he told them. "The Americans are very good people. They are nice. You know why—especially compared to the Russians—because the Russians were only throwing bombs on Afghans, nothing else, only bombs. But the Americans—they throw bombs with biscuits." He was referring to the MREs (meals ready to eat) that U.S. warplanes dropped throughout the country, even as other planes dropped bombs. Most Afghans didn't know how to eat the meals, we were told, so they did them no good, though some did come up with ways to sell them. On Chicken Street, one of

Kabul's notorious commercial districts, MREs were being bought and sold two years later.

Following the billions of dollars in aid that has been promised to Afghanistan—much of it in the years since Ben and I were there—remains a crucial story to tell, yet one that I rarely see getting the attention it deserves. In January of this year, President Bush asked for an additional \$10.6 billion, an amount just about equal to what the rest of the world pledged a year before, with most of it intended for military and security needs. Not forthrightly addressed in the pledges—or in reporting about them—is the fact that they aren't necessarily binding. Delays in getting the money to Afghanistan also have chipped away at Afghans' trust. Of the roughly \$8.5 billion to \$9.6 billion that the world community promised Afghanistan by late 2003, for instance, only about a third of it had actually reached the country, and little of it went to reconstruction efforts, which had been its perceived intent.

In the Democrat-Gazette's 16-page special section¹ with our words and color images from Afghanistan, we attempted to examine the reconstruction efforts, telling readers about the successes and failures we'd observed. This topic was explored in the context of Afghanistan's enormous raft of problems, including sanitation challenges, the removal of land mines, and the millions of refugees who had returned home, mostly from exile in Iran and Pakistan.

Kabul University, considered by some to be the Afghan equivalent of Harvard University, mirrored the lack of progress around the country. As Ben and I did our reporting there, we were told that some areas had not been fully cleared of unexploded ordnance. And surrounding Soviet-style, cookie-cutter dormitories were carcasses of bombed out buildings that functioned as the students' toilets. They had become dumping grounds of human waste. Using them, as I had to one day, was an exercise in agility and hope, the piles

¹ www.ardemgaz.com/afghanistan/

of droppings virtually indistinguishable from the ground itself.

Kabul didn't have much of a waste management program, with the United Nations estimating that the city generated about 900 tons of garbage each day, yet only about 290 tons were being collected. The remainder stayed in streets, alleyways, and outside the dorms at the university. At one point we found ourselves behind a large dorm amidst giant piles of garbage. And there were mounds of maggots. The stench lingered with me for days.

Actually, it's hard to avoid stench in Afghanistan, especially in one of Kabul's refugee camps, where people like 25-year-old Fahima struggled to survive. One day she sat in her small

hut, in despair, and told us how she'd just sold her 10-day-old daughter, Nagina, for \$200 to a stranger she met on the streets so she could buy food. Recently her husband was killed by a land mine and, with four other children to care for, she was destitute.

"What kind of mother sells her child?" she asked, trying to hide her shame by covering her face with a scarf. Later, she tried to shift the blame to another woman, who came into the hut and denied responsibility. All she did, the woman said, was stop Fahima from selling one of her boys.

"I said, 'If you want to give someone, give the daughter. The boy will work for you,'" the woman said in her defense.

A quarrel between the two women ensued; the children started crying. After a while, Fahima simply stopped and said what to me summed up our experience reporting in Afghanistan: "What I told you is true, and what she told you is true."

The statement sounded uncannily like those of U.S. and Afghan officials when we questioned them about the undeniable dearth of reconstruction. They said progress had been made. Then they admitted that it hadn't amounted to much. ■

Bob Wigginton is an assistant city editor at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

PHOTO ESSAY

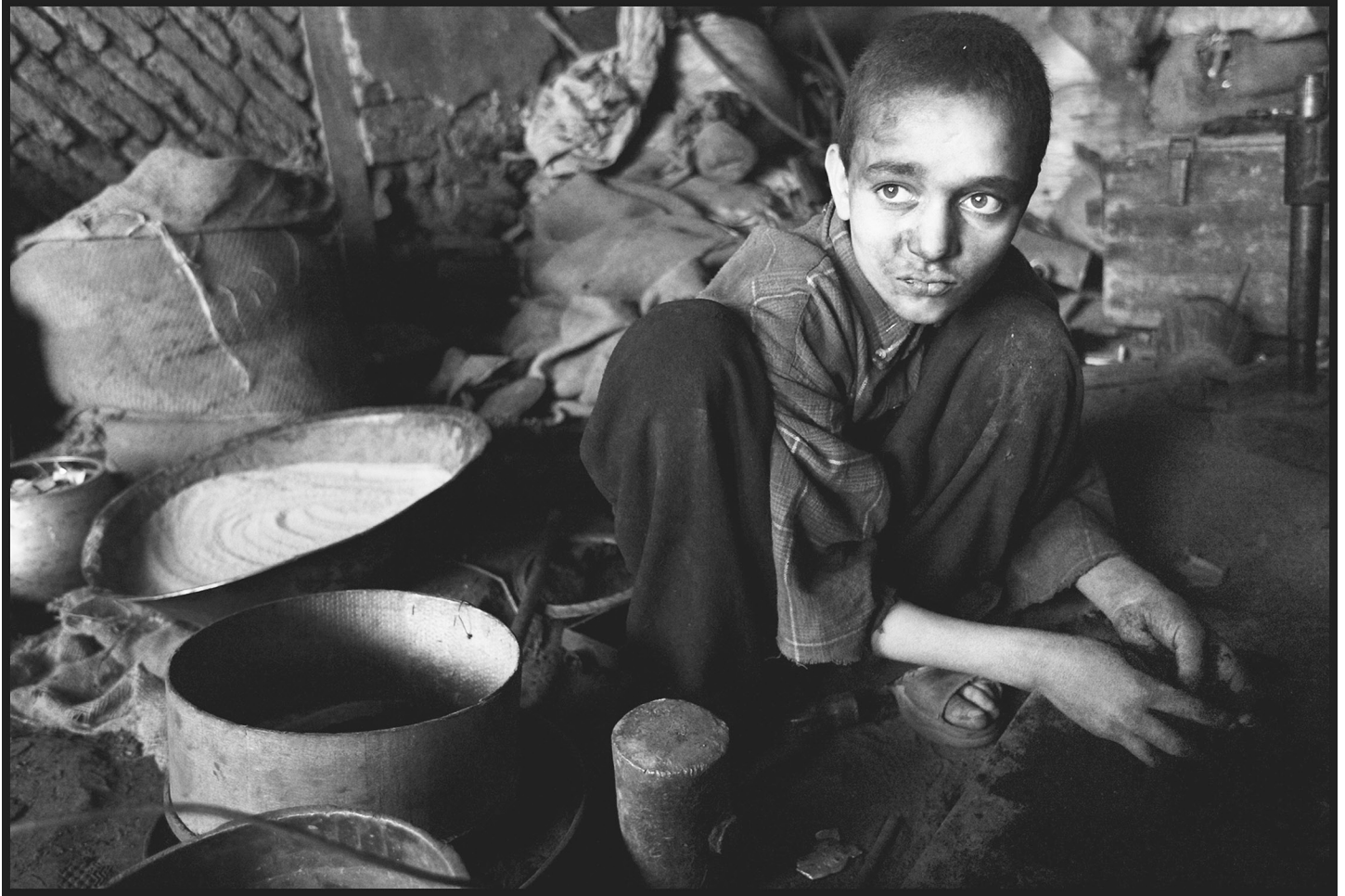
Reconstructing Afghanistan

By Benjamin Krain

Strife, revolution and invasion have ravaged Afghanistan and its people for centuries. Now a fledgling democracy holds the promise of progress and peace. But leadership outside the capital is fractured and fragile, and forces of the Taliban are regrouping in border provinces. Poverty, drought, famine and disease plague the country and impede progress. Massive challenges lie ahead, but Afghans are cautiously rebuilding their society, hoping to avoid a return to the power struggles of the past.
—Benjamin Krain/Arkansas Democrat-Gazette



Land mine victims are fitted for prosthetics at the Red Cross Orthopedic Center in Mazar-i-Sharif. Afghanistan is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world, killing or injuring at least 150 people each month. The existence of land mines as an unexploded ordnance has complicated reconstruction efforts. *Photo by Benjamin Krain/Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.*



A young boy works unpaid in a blacksmith shop in Kabul. The shopkeeper claims the boy is gaining valuable experience as an apprentice. Thousands of children toil in shops and factories throughout Afghanistan, earning little or no money. *Photo by Benjamin Krain/Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.*



Horse riders compete in a buzkashi game at the Military Sports Club in Kabul. Typically played in northern Afghanistan, the game is a remnant of an old Mongol event in which horsemen try to get control of the headless goat carcass and move it to the scoring area. To many Afghans, buzkashi is not just a game, it is a way of life. Teamwork and communication are essential.



Drug addicts smoke pure opium paste while one holds a baby in Kapisa Province, about 100 miles north of Kabul, where many farmers are growing opium-producing poppy plants. Afghanistan is the world's leading producer of poppy, which fuels the heroin drug market. Farmers are claiming they have no option other than to grow this money-producing crop.

*Photos by Benjamin Krain/
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.*



Hordes of people crowd the bazaars along the Kabul River. After years of drought, the river is now full of refuse and human waste, causing major health problems for many residents who wash food and clothes in the water.



A bombed-out bus window frames the war-ravaged Darul Aman Presidential Palace in Kabul. More than half of this capital city is rubble from 25 years of power struggles. ■

Photos by Benjamin Krain/Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

On a Perilous Reporting Journey to Southwestern Afghanistan

A Pakistani journalist is held by the Taliban, then faces a challenging trip back to the border with information rarely obtained by reporters.

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

Retaining one's independence as a journalist provides strength in confronting restrictions and in coping with difficult circumstances. It also means that a story, once reported, will provide readers with information they can trust. This is why I have always chosen to work as an independent journalist in the conflict zones of Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan. Never have I tried to embed myself with armies, nor with fighting militias. And always I try to dig out the facts on the ground and stay in touch with all sides in a conflict to act as an independent observer.

To work independently means finding my own route into a story. Often I travel on my own without any protection. Twice I have traveled into Afghanistan (including trips to Kabul, Jalalabad and Wardak) and dozens of times I've reported in Pakistani tribal areas (including North Waziristan, Chaman and Pashin) in the mountainous border region separating my country from Afghanistan, as many other journalists have done. What I wanted to do, however, was to travel deep into the area of southwestern Afghanistan, a region where journalists usually avoid going, especially after the Taliban's spring offensive in 2006.

Traveling to the Taliban

It was an accepted fact among non-Afghan journalists that if they traveled beyond Girishk in Helmand Province, they faced the possibility of being

abducted or killed. In this area there are no Afghan government troops or NATO forces. Believing there was an important story to be told from here, it was in Girishk that I began a reporting journey that would result in a six-part series of articles called "In the Land of the Taliban" that I wrote for Asia Times.¹ I traveled there with my interpreter, Qamar Yousufzai.

In the fall of 2006, I decided to cover the entire Taliban-controlled area up to Bagram, the city at the end of Helmand Province that is the Taliban's command and control. This was a place where no journalist—either Afghan or foreigner—had paid a visit. In doing this, I tried to go to all of the important battlefronts, including Musa Qala, Nauzad and Sangin. I talked with commanders and with village people I met along the way. With the Taliban field commanders, I talked about the Taliban's strategies for the spring of 2007, and with the people I asked them about the possible bloodshed that future battles might bring to them. Of course, everyday life in this region is not easy; food must come from the earth and survival in this merciless climate relies on makeshift shelter. Then there are threats of air strikes by NATO aircraft and visits from the Taliban who always suspect any non-native of being a spy. If such a charge is proven, beheading is the punishment.

Nevertheless, I accepted these challenges, not imagining at its start how truly hazardous my reporting trip

would be.

The district of Bagram is under the control of the Taliban. In the last week of October, Taliban leadership appointed a young man, Matiullah Agha, to be district administrator (olaswal). This meant he runs the district with the advice of a local council (Shura) of tribal elders and former mujahideen commanders, who fought against the former Soviet Union. When I arrived, I became the guest of a tribal elder in Bagram—Commander Khuda-i-Rahim—a war veteran who had lost his two arms and one leg and now moves with artificial limbs. He is greatly respected in this region, a rich man who owns huge poppy fields and is known by everyone as Haji Lala. Other well-regarded former commanders live here, however none has been able to influence much of what goes on since the Taliban took power.

On the morning of November 22nd, a meeting was scheduled with members of local Shura in one of the valleys of Bagram. When we came to the meeting's site, there were a few dozen men positioned on rooftops and mountaintops with mortars and machine guns and other artillery. Of course, this set-up of Taliban troops seemed to be for the benefit of our photographer and not a usual positioning. All of the armed men belonged to Moulvi Hamidullah, a local commander and member of the Shura.

After the briefing took place about Taliban rule in Bagram, Hamidullah

¹ www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/HL02Df04.html
www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/HL05Df01.html
www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/HL07Df03.html
www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/HL09Df05.html

used his satellite phone to call the district administrator. I overheard their conversation. Hamidullah was letting him know about a guest who speaks English. It is true that I'd briefly spoken English while we were taking video footage of Shura. (Only the next day did I learn that in talking in English, Hamidullah mistakenly portrayed me as a British man.) Many hours passed and, when he did not hear back from the district administrator, he called him again. And then Hamidullah gathered his men in a corner for a discussion.

Since Taliban use code words when they talk on satellite phones, the Taliban leaders in Bagram had the impression that Hamidullah arrested somebody who was British. This misinformation was also immediately transmitted to Taliban's command of Helmand Province. There seemed to be concern that soon NATO aircraft would come and bomb the place, so the men went into hiding.

Late that afternoon, a band of armed men—Taliban police—arrived. Our host took them to the side, and after an hour of conversation they came back to us. The (Taliban) police were apologizing repeatedly to Hamidullah. I was completely in the dark about what was going on. I sensed that the apology was related to their late arrival; only later did I learn that they had come to arrest me, but Hamidullah clarified that I was a guest who wanted to interview Matiullah Agha, the district administrator. In trying to save face, he tried to explain that what had been said earlier had been a miscommunication.

Arrest of a Journalist

Soon I was taken to the district headquarters of Bagram to meet with Matiullah Agha, a man of short, skinny stature with a dim complexion. His physique hardly bore any marks of physical strain, but his eyes were shaky. I interviewed him and took photographs of his veiled face. Then, during our meeting, he stood up suddenly and dialed a number on his satellite

phone and handed the phone to my colleague, Qamar. The person he had reached—who we later found out was secretary to the Taliban "governor" of Helmand—asked about my credentials: Where had I come from? Which publication did I represent? He then insisted that we need to produce a permission letter from Taliban headquarters in Pakistan that deals with the news media. Without such a letter, he argued, there were no grounds by which to believe that we are journalists. Therefore, he instructed by phone for

The person he had reached—who we later found out was secretary to the Taliban 'governor' of Helmand—asked about my credentials: Where had I come from? Which publication did I represent? He then insisted that we need to produce a permission letter from Taliban headquarters in Pakistan that deals with the news media.

the Taliban administrator to detain us unless it could be proven that I am a journalist.

Now a new discussion began between our host and Matiullah Agha, who insisted that he would arrest us. Our host asserted that to do so he'd have to go through him and his men. The 45-minute long debate in this dusky valley was enough to remind me of what chilly winter is all about. Our host, Haji Lala, refused to hand us over to the Taliban, and finally we returned to his home. However, the situation was not yet resolved.

Our host told his friend, Moulvi Hamidullah, a fellow member of the Shura, to pass on a message to the Taliban administrator. His message was a bold one: Even if Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, sends instructions from him to surrender his guest, he would not do so, and he would fight the

Taliban. In the evening, my interpreter and I were sent to a hiding place. During the night, we were to be provided with a vehicle that would take us away from Bagram, but this plan could not be put into effect because the Taliban placed their men around the area and sent a warning that if they saw anybody fleeing they would open fire.

After a lot of negotiation, it was finally agreed that the court would decide the matter. So on November 24th, we were presented in a local mosque at the district headquarters of Bagram. An elderly man with a white beard, a judge (Qazi) saw us, and a meaningful smile appeared on his face as he was told the story of a British alien turned Pakistani. Haji Lala made quite clear before the proceedings began that "from one corner to another corner of Bagram I do not see anybody who would dare to stand before me, and only because the elders of the area asked me to present my guests in court is why I am here."

In front of the judge, Olaswal Matiullah changed his version of what had happened and accused me of being British and coming to the area without permission. "We have a lot of respect to Haji Lala and his friends, but we were informed by some anonymous sources that they are spies of the Afghan government, and we need to investigate," he claimed. "If the elders of the area, whom we respect a lot, intervene in our functions, then what is the need of this administration? Remove us and take the power in their hands."

The judge observed we were Pakistanis and Muslims, not British, and said somebody had created doubt with misinformation about us being spies. The matter should be checked, he said, and in the meantime, as the accused, we could not leave Bagram. Instead, we would remain here as "guests" for one night. Olaswal protested when he heard the judge talk about our one-night detention and asked the judge to give him as much time as he required for the investigation. Qazi then altered

his decision and said that we “would be guests here until the investigation is over and would surrender all our belongings to the Taliban for their investigation.” Soon our cameras, cell phones, notebooks and diaries were taken away from us.

One concern we now had was that the Taliban carry a grudge against elders in the area whom they want to keep as subservient. We were now caught in the middle of this feud, and I had a strong feeling that this grudge would result in the Taliban administrator letting the investigation go on for a long time to make us sweat as much as he could.

The next day I asked Haji Lala for a way to communicate with my family; I wanted to let them know that I was not hurt. Haji Lala let me use his phone. In that phone call, I asked my family to leak word of my situation to Hameed Haroon, the chief executive officer and publisher of the Dawn Group of Newspapers in Pakistan and pass along the satellite phone number. Haroon called me within in few minutes, and then I told him where I was and what was happening to me. I asked him to coordinate things with the resident editor of Dawn Peshawar, Ismail Khan, so that he could communicate to the Taliban that I am a journalist.

Soon Ismail Khan was in contact with me, and he spoke to our hosts, too. Soon he spoke to Dr. Mohammad Hanif, the Taliban’s media spokesperson, and by eight o’clock on the evening of November 25th we were told we were free to go. We could collect our things the next morning and then travel to wherever we wanted to go.

Difficulties Continue

As news of our captivity leaked, my situation became headline news in the international press. Afghan villagers receive their news only by radio, and the Pashto-language radio services broadcast the story. This meant that everyone was looking to us throughout our 15-hour journey to the Pakistan

border, and it was too dangerous for us to travel at night.

The next night, when we were in Musa Qala, we heard a radio broadcast that was about our recent arrest and contained some shocking words. “The Star [the evening newspaper published by Dawn] disowns Syed Saleem Shahzad. Therefore it seems that he is not a journalist and in fact a spy.” I started my career in journalism with The Star and I never severed my association with that paper, yet I was

We were now confronted with a new situation; we’d been declared to be spies by a radio broadcast.

This meant we could be a potential target of any group who wanted to kidnap us for ransom or by corrupt Afghan policemen who might kill us or take our money and belongings, with the blame for these actions going to the Taliban.

not on assignment for The Star at this time. I’d been sent to Afghanistan by Asia Times, a publication located in Hong Kong, for which I am its accredited bureau chief by the government of Pakistan.

We were now confronted with a new situation: We’d been declared to be spies by a radio broadcast. This meant we could be a potential target of any group who wanted to kidnap us for ransom or by corrupt Afghan policemen who might kill us or take our money and belongings, with the blame for these actions going to the Taliban. So we planned a new strategy: We would travel separately and meet at the Pakistani border. This way, if one of us was endangered, the other one would inform those who could offer help.

By separate routes, each of us reached Pakistan unharmed. Only then did we come to learn that the reason behind the radio broadcast we’d heard was an Associated Press report by a stringer in Karachi. I could only speculate from what I knew of his background—he is a Pashtun with political right-wing leanings—about why he might have issued this false report about us. In part, I felt that he did so out of jealousy for our coverage of this story in Afghanistan.

In his report, he quoted a person named Faiza Ilyas, whom he identified as news editor at The Star. But this person was only a junior subeditor. And this report was published at a time when The Star was running daily headlines about my situation, and the Dawn group had issued an official statement asking for our release. This reporter also knew that I was affiliated with Asia Times and on assignment for that publication. But he called my home and said to my wife that if I was in the captivity of the Taliban, then why would I be allowed to call?

This was another case when the transmission of misinformation endangered our lives. It was upsetting for us and also for family and friends. But having returned from all of this unharmed makes me realize what a remarkable opportunity I had to share with readers an inside look at what is going on today in this off-limits region of Afghanistan. I certainly learned more about how the tribal system works, as I experienced firsthand some of the circumstances in which people in this region are finding themselves as Taliban leaders assume even greater control over their lives. ■

Syed Saleem Shahzad serves as the bureau chief in Pakistan for Asia Times Online and is the South Asia correspondent for Adnkronos International.

Rough Treatment for Two Journalists in Pakistan

On January 21st, The New York Times published a front page article written by Carlotta Gall. Its headline read, "At Border, Signs of Pakistani Role in Taliban Surge." What follows is an account that also appeared in that day's newspaper, describing the rough treatment Gall and photographer Akhtar Soomro received from Pakistani officials in the course of reporting this story and the ramifications for sources of the seizure of their notebooks, cell phones, and computers.

By Carlotta Gall

My photographer, Akhtar Soomro, and I were followed over several days of reporting in Quetta by plainclothes intelligence officials who were posted at our respective hotels. That is not unusual in Pakistan, where accredited journalists are free to travel and report, but their movements, phone calls, and interviews are often monitored.

On our fifth and last day in Quetta, December 19, four plainclothesmen detained Mr. Soomro at his hotel downtown and seized his computer and photo equipment.

They raided my hotel room that evening, using a keycard to open the door and then breaking through the chain that I had locked from the inside. They seized a computer, notebooks and a cell phone.

One agent punched me twice in the face and head and knocked me to the floor. I was left with bruises on my arms, temple and cheekbone, swelling on my eye, and a sprained knee.

One of the men told me that I was not permitted to visit Pashtunabad, a neighborhood in Quetta, and that it was forbidden to interview members of the Taliban.

The men did not reveal their identity but said we could apply to the Special Branch of the Interior Ministry for our belongings the next day.

After the intervention of the Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, Tariq Azim Khan, my belongings were returned several hours later. Mr. Soomro was released after more than five hours in detention.

Since then it has become clear that intelligence agents copied data from our computers, notebooks and cell phones and have tracked down contacts and acquaintances in Quetta.

All the people I interviewed were subsequently visited by intelligence agents, and local journalists who helped me were later questioned by Pakistan's intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence.

Mr. Soomro has been warned not to work for The New York Times or any other foreign news organization. ■

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Laughter and Memories Shared Amid Danger

An interpreter says that if the Taliban fighter 'found out I worked for foreigners'—here Qahir ran his finger across his neck—'no more questions, I'm slaughtered.'

In the summer and fall of 2006, NATO's mostly Canadian and American troops, along with the Afghan National Army, fought major battles with Taliban fighters who poured into the countryside outside Kandahar City. Five years after the fall of the Taliban regime, the Taliban did something entirely unexpected: They took a stand. Their fighters—commonly thought to have crossed the border from Pakistan—attempted to take back the land along the shallow Arghandab River amid the mulberry orchards, vineyards, vegetable fields, and villages from which the movement sprang. Not surprisingly, in these conventional battles NATO troops beat back the Taliban, killing many and sending others into hiding. Renée Montagne, host of NPR's "Morning Edition," and Senior Producer Jim Wildman traveled to Kandahar in the fall of 2006 as part of a month-long stay in Afghanistan to report on how the country was doing five years after the defeat of the Taliban.

By Renée Montagne

Kandahar in autumn is a place of clean blue skies, taming for now the jagged wild mountains below. The usual swirling brown dust is subdued, softening the edges of fields newly planted with poppy.

On this bright October day, I'm standing on the main street of a village that has been at the center of heavy fighting between the Taliban and NATO's Canadian and American

troops. Through our translator, Qahir, we've been talking to villagers, elders and police, for a profile of Panjwai Bazaar—which, with this fragile calm, is back in business.

As we talk, a low rumble catches our attention. At the far end of the bazaar, out of a cloud of dust, emerges a lightly armored vehicle at the head of a convoy. It's worth mentioning here that my producer, Jim, is tall, blonde and wearing a neatly ironed shirt and khakis; I'm in a traditional long punjabi dress, but the white veil resting on my head and shoulders doesn't conceal my American face. As the first armored vehicle passes, the Canadian gunner, in helmet, full body armor, and his automatic weapon at the ready, spots us, and—waves.

We wave back. Slowly, like some small town parade, each gunner waves as he passes us by, until the last man calls out, halfway between sarcasm and surprise, “*You* don't stand out”

We joke that, actually, the convoy seemed from another planet.

This exchange also brings home to us what our translator Qahir hasn't forgotten for a minute—that Jim and I could not be more visible. And we're here—for the second time in a week—because Qahir has made the decision that we can all get in and out safely.

Even though Afghan National Army soldiers are billeted in the local high school; even though the district police station is at the top of the bazaar; even though stretching down the street are stalls newly stocked with goods, as Panjwai Bazaar serves hundreds of refugees who've abandoned villages farther out where fierce fighting goes on; still, this is a dangerous place.

Just a block away the burned-out shells of a string of stalls are reminders of a suicide bombing weeks earlier that killed two dozen Afghans. Having lost the battles, the Taliban have turned to guerrilla tactics—attacking with rockets, improvised explosives, and suicide bombers.

Foreign journalists, especially, should not tarry long. And it's Qahir who abruptly makes the call when the crowd gathered around us grows too big, too fast: “That's it, let's go.”

More dangerous still is our 15-mile drive though the countryside as we come and go from Kandahar City. The Taliban's strict adherence to the “old” ways doesn't apply to their use of cell phones. Their fighters carry them and can easily alert their colleagues hiding up the road that a car carrying foreigners is headed their way. So Qahir presses the pedal to the floor on the trips we make to and from Panjwai and, as he put it, he watches “all my mirrors.”

We place a lot of trust in the judgment of this 23 year old, who said he liked working with us partly for the adventure. At the same time, he goes home to a young wife and their two babies who live in a mud-brick compound filled with family he helps support, so his daring is leavened with a strong sense of responsibility.

As it turned out, he drew the line at taking us to the village of Pashmul, where Taliban were known to be walking around. Instead, he offered to go himself and report back what he found. He told us that he'd talked his best friend, Qassim, into going with him.

How did he do that? I wondered aloud.

Qahir laughed “I told him I didn't want to die alone!”

During our time together, Qahir and Qassim regularly made fun of the



Boys and young men crowd a window of Qahir's truck as he translates for Renée Montagne in the village of Panjwai, just outside of Kandahar. Photo by Jim Wildman.

Taliban and of their lives under Taliban rule.¹ They told us of the day Qahir once spent in a jail because his beard was deemed to be “insufficiently long.” He was freed only when his Taliban jailer figured out Qahir was too young to grow a full beard. And there was the time Qahir called one of his friends and warned him in a deep voice, “I know you work for foreigners and you must stop or we'll kill you” His friend was still in a panic when they arrived that night to let him in on the joke.

So I was surprised when the two of them arrived back from Pashmul genuinely shaken.

As they drove into this Taliban stronghold, they realized that their cell phones could give them away. Hurriedly, they erased many valuable numbers, including local contacts, nongovernmental organizations, and journalists.

Qahir explained to us what would happen if the Taliban took his cell phone.

“How many relatives do you have?” the Taliban would ask,” Qahir explained. “Then he might hit redial, and ask whoever answered ‘Who does your friend work for?’ and that person might tell him. If he found out I worked for

¹ At www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6499726, there is a story by Jim Wildman about his and Montagne's work with translators. The page includes a link to a conversation Montagne had with Qassim and Qahir about why they risk their lives to help journalists tell the stories of Afghanistan.



Renée Montagne works on a script with Qahir, one of her translators, in the courtyard of a Kandahar guest house. She kept her head covered to conform with local customs. Nearby a small hand-held satellite unit was set up so she could broadcast reports in near-perfect quality. *Photo by Jim Wildman.*

foreigners”—here Qahir ran his finger across his neck—“no more questions, I’m slaughtered.” He paused, and then broke out in a big smile.

I have my theories as to why every one of our several translators in Afghanistan has possessed a keen wit, a ready laugh, and a way with telling a story. It is perhaps because they’re young. Or perhaps because they come from 3,000 years of history during which waves of invaders have honed into the culture a fine sense of observation and irony. Or perhaps these young men—born into 25 years of war and loss—knew few other stories, knew no other games.

This thought struck me one afternoon in Kabul, as our translator Najib led us up one of the hills that ring the city. We were searching for the exact spot where the first bombs had fallen in the American-led invasion in 2001. We needed this location to begin our

first piece on the fifth anniversary of that war.² Najib entertained us by imitating the sounds of the rockets from an earlier war: the deadly fight among the mujahideen for control over the capital, after the Soviets departed; it had been a four-year civil war that ended in 1996 with the arrival of the Taliban.

“Bum ... bum ... boooo bu-bu-bu-bum!”

That’s how the rockets of the vicious warlord Hekmatyar (once funded, now hunted, by the United States) sounded as they took off. Back in 1992, an adolescent Najib and his young friends memorized the distinct sounds of the bombs and rockets that rained down on the city, delivered by fighters led by men such as Ahmad Shah Massoud, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Abdul Rashid Dostum.

“Hekmatyar’s started with a weak sound, then the boom as they were coming,” Najib said, as he began the

long whistle of a tea kettle. “SSSSSSHHH Bum-mmm, BUM ... BOOM!”

Rockets once fell next to Najib’s house, killing several children. Other friends, at other times, were wounded. “We were scared sometimes, but when we got together we were having fun with the sounds, and ‘doing’ each warlord’s rockets to perfection.”

Five years earlier, I’d trekked up a different hill with our translator Zalmai, who’d studied geology, but was a poet at heart. We’d come to see the hilltop tomb of the Shah’s family, now crumbling and pockmarked. A graveyard stretched alongside the tomb. Faded ribbons waved from the wooden markers of neglected graves. Zalmai told

us of an expression that had come into vogue during the civil war—a time when hundreds of people were killed some weeks in Kabul, a story that rarely made the papers elsewhere.

A crowd, any crowd, came to be measured as “a graveyard of people.”

Now I wanted to know how Najib might use this expression.

“Say I’ve gone out to fetch my friends some hamburgers,” Najib replied (putting it in American terms, though there is an ice cream and hamburger hangout in Kabul). “And there are lots of people ahead of me in line. When I get back, I might say: Sorry it took so long, but there was a graveyard of people there.”

Then he added, “So while we eat our hamburgers, we might tell each other about some of the things that happened to us during the war.

“And laugh.” ■

² www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6353912 reveals links to the series of stories done by Renée Montagne and Jim Wildman during their one-month reporting trip to Afghanistan.

Uncovering Afghanistan

Cultural traditions have continued to constrain women's lives and voices even five years after the end of Taliban rule.

By Pamela Constable

Eventually, after the first greetings or the second glass of green tea, the questions would come. I would be in a mosque in Kabul or a villager's home in Khost, huddled on a carpet and taking notes as I struggled to keep my headscarf from slipping and my legs from falling asleep.

The queries from my hosts were always phrased politely. They were asked partly out of kindly concern, partly out of an effort to place a foreign visitor in the known cosmos, and partly out of astonished disbelief. They revealed as much about the questioners—and the gulf between our societies—as the answers did about me.

Where is your husband?

Where are your children?

Are you really traveling alone?

Does your father allow this?

Does your government?

The first few times I bristled defensively, but soon I learned to smile and explain vaguely that my family was in America and that many women from my country traveled alone for their work. I also learned to use these awkward exchanges as an opening to find out more about Afghan culture, especially the restrictions on women, which made my own adaptive discomforts seem like paltry inconveniences.

When the Taliban Ruled

When I first arrived in Kabul in 1998, the Taliban militia was in full control, and women were literally nowhere to be seen. By decree of the Islamic rulers, they were forbidden to attend school or college, to go to a market or hospital without a male relative as escort, or to work except at emergency occupations such as obstetrician or women's prison guard. If they stepped outside



A woman holds her sick child at a mobile U.S. Army health clinic in Nangarhar Province. Photo by Pamela Constable.

their homes at all, they had to don a head-to-toe burka that hid their eyes behind a grill of cotton mesh.

As a female visitor from the West, I represented everything the Taliban abhorred or feared. Except for a handful of UN workers who remained largely confined to their compounds, there were almost no foreign women in the country at all. But since the government wanted to show the world it had brought security, piety and justice to a lawless conflict zone, it admitted journalists like me for brief, controlled visits.

If we happened to be women, the authorities solved that problem by treating us as honorary men. We tried to look and act as sexless as possible,

and they, in turn, accorded us privileges normally reserved for men. For example, I was permitted to interview male officials, although some of the more pious Talibs refused to shake my hand or look me in the eye. I was also permitted to conduct "man on the street" surveys, though not to enter private homes or speak with women. Because I am not Muslim, the Taliban did not require that I wear a burka or cover my eyes. But after my first forays into the bazaars—where turbaned militiamen leered and muttered as I passed—I soon retreated beneath a shapeless getup of tunics, shirts and scarves I had scavenged from street vendors.

Once, as an experiment, I attempted



A Kuchi (nomad) woman holds a baby goat inside her tent in eastern Afghanistan. *Photo by Pamela Constable.*

to walk through a bazaar in Kandahar City wearing a full burka. The result was laughable, infuriating and unexpectedly liberating. I stumbled repeatedly, unable to see and tripping on the heavy folds of nylon, and yet I was relieved to realize that no one knew or cared who I was. For the first time in half a dozen tense visits to Taliban territory, I hardly drew a glance.

At the time, though, I could neither see nor speak to Afghan women, let alone learn what was in their hearts. The voices of half of Afghan society were silenced, making every brief chance encounter a precious source of information and impressions. I tried to make conversation with nurses and policewomen, passengers huddled in the back seats of taxis and widows baking bread in a UN project. A few words of halting English or Dari, a grimace or a tear before the veil came down, had to substitute for detailed interviews. Sometimes that was enough.

My own frustrations, trivial as they were, also helped me imagine the daily

travails of women living in a society whose male rulers were obsessed with protecting the “honor” of women, even at the expense of their health and hygiene. Since women rarely left home and took no part in public life, there were no ladies’ rooms to be found except in one or two deserted hotels. On long, hot road trips, crammed into taxis or trucks with male guides or soldiers, I learned to force myself to ask drivers to stop near abandoned ruins so I could relieve myself.

Afghan Women Emerge

It was not until the Taliban authorities were gone that I finally had a chance to enjoy meaningful conversations with Afghan women, to look into their eyes, and to discover first-hand some things about their lives under strict Islamic rule. With the Taliban gone, I was free to knock on any door, and many Afghans were eager to talk. In the first few months after the regime was ousted in late 2001, I interviewed

a teacher who had operated a secret girls’ school in her apartment, a villager whose wife had died in childbirth because he was not able to escort her to the hospital, and an engineer’s wife who had been beaten by the religious police for washing dishes in her own yard without wearing a head scarf.

But although Afghan women were clearly relieved to be rid of the Taliban’s oppressive presence, my Western colleagues and I were astonished to see how little this “liberation” affected their daily lives. We had expected them to toss away their stifling burkas, but many continued wearing them outdoors as if nothing had changed. In the villages, we learned, this was because family and tribal tradition demanded that women be hidden from male eyes. In the cities, it was because women still feared assault by marauding militiamen and were not certain what the new, post-Taliban rules allowed. To women who live in the West, a burka might be a dehumanizing shroud, but to them, it was a comforting cloak of invisibility.

Gradually, under the new, UN-backed government, girls in cities and large towns did begin returning to school and women to jobs. I visited tent-schools erected by UNICEF in villages across the country, where teenaged girls who had been forced to stop studying for years were beginning the third grade and reciting the alphabet alongside tiny classmates. Kabul University, reopened to young women for the first time in a decade, was soon flooded with applicants. In public buildings, women returned to dusty desks as clerks and teachers and secretaries.

Officially, the new Afghanistan embraced women’s rights and political participation, with a new constitution that enshrined equality between the sexes, voter registration for all adult citizens, and a substantial portion of seats set aside for women in the new Parliament. During the voter registration drive in 2004, I drove to a number of rural provinces where local elders and officials were devising ingenious ways to secure women’s participation

without exposing them to male contact. In one village in Khost Province, a high school student was stationed in a farmhouse, where she collected the thumbprints of the illiterate village women, wrote down their names and ages, and then took the new voter cards outside to her uncle, who carried them to a gas station where the men were registering.

For visitors like me, life in Afghanistan became more comfortable and relaxed with each year that Taliban rule receded. By 2004 I could travel anywhere, talk to anyone, and buy anything I wanted, from French wine to Japanese cell phones. I still took care to dress modestly and cover my head, but only out of deference to the culture. People still asked me awkward questions—How many children do you have? Why are you traveling alone?—but I had long since stopped minding the intrusion.

In many ways, however, the lot of women in Afghan society changed very little. The omnipresent blue burkas, billowing so brightly on the streets where women shopped or begged or waited for taxis, reflected the invisible strictures that controlled their lives behind closed doors, where family life was dominated by men, and even the most intimate and permanent decisions affecting a girl's or a woman's life were made by others.

During my years in Kabul, I became friends with a variety of Afghan woman, including teachers and doctors. We had long conversations about life and struggled to understand each other's cultures. All of them willingly submitted to arranged marriages and tried to make them work. Some suffered from abusive fathers or husbands, but they never considered complaining to the authorities because of the shame it would bring on their families. None of them felt strong enough to defy the bonds of duty or the power of gossip that ruled their world.

Outside cities and provincial capitals, it was still often difficult to interview Afghan women. Even though the religious police were no longer lurking about, village and family tradition

forbade women from interacting with unrelated or unknown males. Almost no rural women spoke English, and I always traveled with a male translator, so even if a family agreed to an interview with me, at times it had to be conducted literally on two sides of a curtain.

From other sources, including newly formed human rights organizations, stories of terrible abuse and injustice came to light. Young women were sent to prison for fleeing from husbands who beat them. Girls as young as seven were forcibly engaged to elderly men as blood compensation in tribal disputes. Female illiteracy and infant mortality remained appallingly high, at a par with the poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

At a private clinic, I interviewed a village woman who had delivered a stillborn baby after three days in labor at home because she had no way to get to a hospital. In a nonprofit shelter, I interviewed a young woman who had been married at 11, widowed at 12, and forced to work as a servant for her in-laws for the next eight years, until she could no longer stand the beatings and worked up the courage to run away.

The Taliban's Resurgence

Most worrisome of all was the resurgence of the Taliban militia, which began launching attacks in 2005 and soon grew into a serious threat in numerous provinces. Among its goals was to stop the emancipation of women, and its fighters burned schools and threatened teachers across the southern provinces. One of my stories in 2006 was about rural homeschools where girls were learning to read and write in secret—just as they had

to do during the Taliban's rule.

Yet Afghanistan was not the same cowed and isolated country it had been just five years before. Now it had the support of 40,000 foreign troops and hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid. Now it had an elected civilian government, a constitution that enshrined human rights, and a legislature that included dozens of women. Afghans did not want to overturn their religion or culture, but they did not want to return to the dark times either, now that they had glimpsed the possibilities of progress.

In one guarded village classroom, hastily converted from a front parlor after a nearby school had been attacked by insurgents, a girl of 10 shyly held up a colored drawing of a flower she had copied from the blackboard and offered it to me. The morning sun streamed in a window, and the little blossom seemed to glow in the light. ■

Pamela Constable is a staff writer for The Washington Post. She has reported frequently from Afghanistan since 1998, and she was the Post's Kabul bureau chief from 2002 to 2004. She is the author of "Fragments of Grace: My Search for Meaning in the Strife of South Asia," published in 2004 by Potomac Books.



Students sit in a classroom in a newly built girls' school in Parwan Province. *Photo by Pamela Constable.*

Foreign Reporting: Adding Layers to What Goes in the Notebook

Using the tools of digital media, a reporter and photojournalist create a narrative multimedia account of what’s happening in Afghanistan.

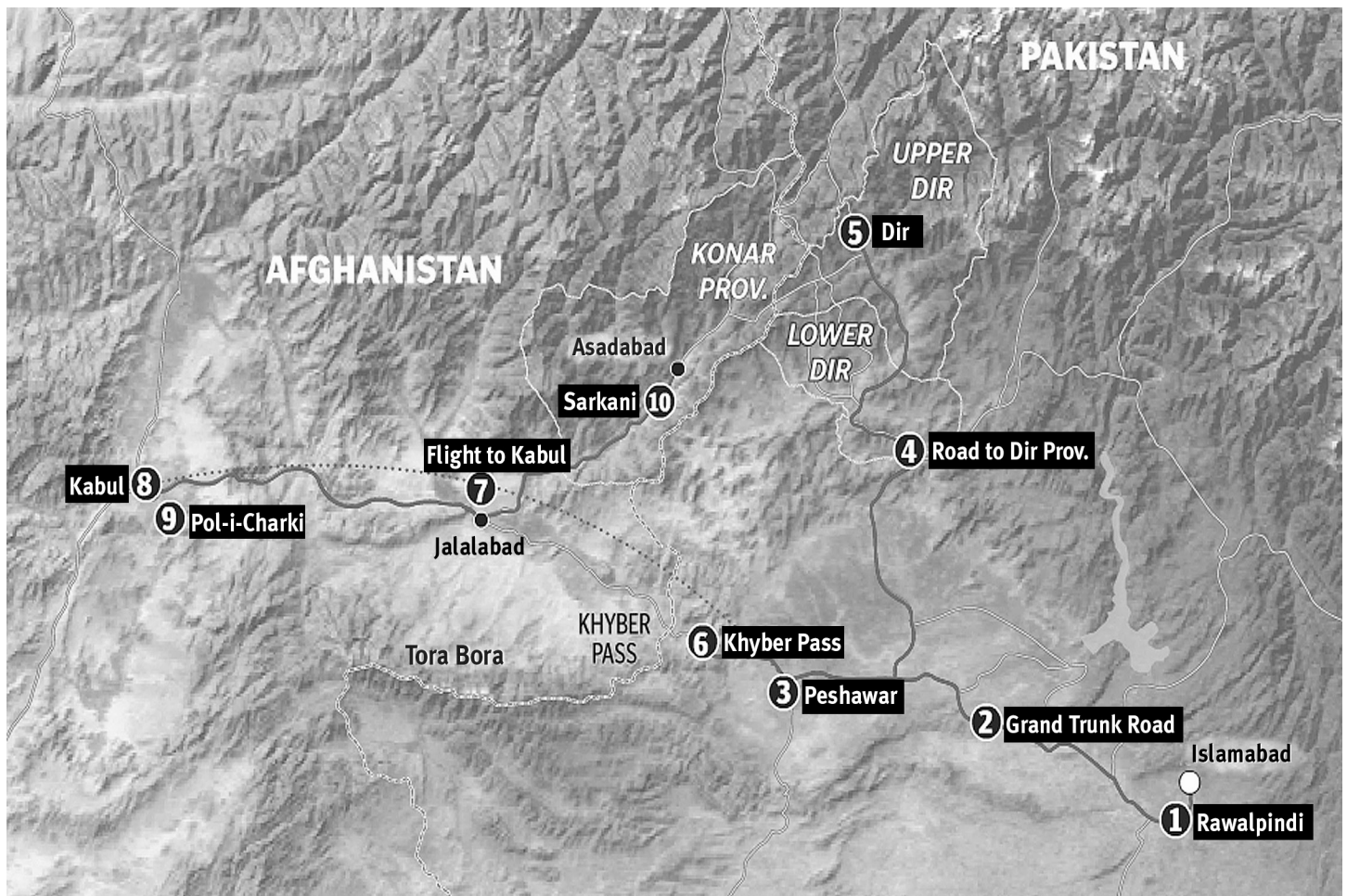
By Charles M. Sennott

Last summer, I went straight from the warm afterglow of a Nieman Fellowship to the searing heat of Pakistan and Afghanistan. My first assignment after “the year of living comfortably” would take me back to the rugged border of Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province and then into Afghanistan to document successes and

failures and challenges that lay ahead five years into what Washington had come to call “the long war.”

It had been five years since I reported in Afghanistan, covering the U.S.-led offensive against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. This reporting trip—timed to coincide with the fifth anniversary of

September 11th—was, as my editors saw it, a chance for me to report on the flawed and futile hunt for Osama bin Laden and the resurgence of the Taliban. It was also an opportunity to explain to readers how the war in Iraq was draining resources from the U.S.-led coalition’s struggle in Afghanistan, which was referred to with bitterness



In The Boston Globe’s multimedia version of Charles Sennott’s reporting, this interactive map serves to illustrate his journey and provide links to photo shows that he narrates. *Map courtesy of The Boston Globe.*

as “the forgotten war” by Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Michael Nye, a 29-year-old soldier I met during my time there.

To provide readers of *The Boston Globe* with closer connections to the story, I decided on a different approach to reporting. Working with Deputy Managing Editor for Projects Mark Morrow and a *Globe* Web site multimedia producer, Scott LaPierre, I crafted an interactive map that readers could use to trace my journey; by clicking on key points along the way, they would accompany me through the words of a daily Weblog I wrote, in which I recorded my impressions and commentary.

To make all of this happen, I packed a state-of-the-art digital sound recorder, microphone and headphones, along with my laptop, a satellite telephone, a Thuraya handheld satellite, a GPS device, a combat helmet, and a Kevlar vest. Gone are those days when a brick of notepads, a box of pens, and a Tandy TR-80 powered by four C batteries, along with those weird looking black, rubber couplers to connect to a phone line, fit snugly in the corner of a suitcase.

Now, in my impossibly heavy duffle bag, I carried what I’d need to capture natural sound, conduct interviews, and record my impressions. Our plan was to weave all of this together—with images—in a multimedia presentation when I returned; if the sound was good enough, we’d work with *The World*, a partnership of the BBC and Public Radio International, to produce a radio documentary. Gary Knight, one of the founders of the VII photo agency and a photojournalist whose work in conflict zones is well known and widely respected, accompanied me on some of this trip.

Multimedia reporting was new to Gary and me, so our growing pains were awkward. But our learning had to happen at an accelerated pace. For a longtime print reporter, getting accustomed to juggling digital equipment, monitoring record levels, and taking in my surroundings through headphones wasn’t easy. My first job



Boston *Globe* reporter Charles Sennott observes a local Afghan commander and U.S. Army major listening to tribal elders talk about how some of the village residents had been wrongly detained as Taliban sympathizers. Kunar Province, Afghanistan. *Photo by Gary Knight/Courtesy VII agency.*

after college was as a radio reporter for an NPR affiliate; immediately I noticed the remarkable light weight of the new digital equipment compared with the extinct Nagra reel-to-reel recorder I’d once shouldered. But even with this equipment in hand, during the day I primarily relied on my notepad and pen. When there was a richness of sound or a strong interview, I’d strategically break out the digital recorder.

Gary had challenges in adjusting, too, since he wasn’t just shooting a single story; it would be his visuals that would propel our narrative account forward once it was up on the *Globe*’s Web site. This meant he was photographing not only what he saw happening around us, but also he had to take pictures of me being a reporter at key moments.

There were times along the back roads of Afghanistan and Pakistan when I remembered how much I loved gathering sound and “hearing” a story. Now I was developing a vivid audio portrait, and my intense awareness of sound was strengthening my writing, too, as I listened closely to the echoing of the call to prayer; the thunder of outgoing artillery; the wind-swept

silence of the rugged peaks along the mountain border, and even the absurd swing and “thwack” of a golf ball at the Qargha Golf Club on the outskirts of Kabul at a surreal golf tournament known as the Kabul Classic played on a hardscrabble course where al-Qaeda once had a training camp. I recorded voices, too, ranging from the all-American twang of a self-described “jarhead” in the U.S. Marine Corps to an Afghan adolescent who admired Osama bin Laden and described him as “a great leader of Muslims.”

Layers of Reporting

In my Weblog, I recorded impressions of our journey. At times, I offered comparisons with my first reporting trip in Pakistan 10 years earlier when a nascent movement was gaining force in the region and those of us reporting the story started to use its name—the Taliban—in our stories. At the time, U.S. diplomats in Central Asia viewed the Taliban as a favorable alternative to the brutal warlords ravaging Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal. After September 11th, the United States set out to destroy the Taliban for provid-

ing sanctuary and support to bin Laden and al-Qaeda. In doing this, they were reemploying some of those same brutal warlords to get the job done. U.S.-led air strikes succeeded in toppling the Taliban regime in Kabul, but the operation ultimately failed to capture Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership and allowed many followers to escape.

Now, during the summer of 2006, the Taliban was in the process of reasserting itself as a force to be reckoned with in this region. Had I only been writing an article for the paper, the contextual information I could bring to the story—based on my reporting then and now—would not likely have been as accessible or as evident to readers as it was in this new format.

The Taliban had been born of the refugee camps and madrassahs, or religious schools, in Pakistan's storied North-West Frontier Province 10 years earlier. It seemed as fitting as it did disconcerting that the movement is being reborn in this same remote, lawless region. The arc of this story is striking, and it reminds any correspondent who has reported from this region over a period of years of the layers of history and tribal affiliations marbled into the impenetrable, jagged peaks of the border.

After about 10 days of reporting in Pakistan, I crossed into Afghanistan on a commercial flight from Peshawar to Kabul. Our entry to the country was quite different than the harrowing landing I'd experienced with other Western reporters five years earlier when a rusted U.N. cargo plane slammed down on a tarmac cobbled out of corrugated metal in Faizabad, Afghanistan on or about September 21, 2001. (The smudged ink of a Northern Alliance officer's pen, marking the date in my passport, makes it hard to tell.) Back then we were surrounded by a group of men with long beards dressed in rags. They stared in utter disbelief at us with our satellite phones and laptops, just as we must have looked at them with the same stunned expression. We were from different worlds.

This time the first person I met was an Afghan-American high-tech entrepreneur smartly dressed in a pinstripe



Soldiers from the Afghan National Army on “lookout” duty at Camp Joyce in Sarkani, Afghanistan. *Photo by Gary Knight/Courtesy VII agency.*

suit who was checking his e-mail with a wireless laptop as he waited at baggage claim. Contrasts such as this were stark. Recording the voices and sounds of this moment meant I could include them in the multimedia presentation and the radio pieces. They also made my writing for the newspaper series easier since the recordings gave me an audible memory.

As Gary and I journeyed through Afghanistan, we were mesmerized by the rugged and breathtaking majesty of the landscape. The place is unforgettable and intoxicating. Despite the danger, the land and the people have a pull as true as magnetic north. It is also an unfathomably complex culture, as impenetrable to Westerners as the terrain itself. In other words, we loved being there again.

Embedding With Afghan Forces

We wanted to be the first U.S. reporting team to embed with an Afghan National Army (ANA) unit. Neither of us had any interest in embedding with U.S. forces since we did not want to compromise our freedom to report what we saw and heard. Afghan and American officials laughed when we told them our idea of going into eastern Afghanistan with

the ANA. But we did it anyway.

We ended up traveling with the ANA Third “Kandak,” which is roughly the equivalent of a battalion. We traveled with them to a U.S. military FOB, or forward operating base, called Camp Joyce, that was connected to the 10th Mountain Division and an array of U.S. Army Reserve and National Guard units. A Special Forces unit was stationed there but mostly kept to itself. The ANA stayed in mud-brick hovels on the outer edges of the camp and were not allowed to eat in the mess hall. That's where we stayed, too.

Camp Joyce was in the village of Sarkani in the eastern province of Kunar. The troops here comprise the frontline of a futile and undermanned hunt for bin Laden. Intelligence officials in Washington, Rawalpindi and Kabul told us the trail was stone cold, with no good leads on the whereabouts of the most wanted man in the world for nearly two years.

Within a few hours of our arrival, Gary captured the essence of the situation beautifully in a photograph he took of a group of ANA soldiers. We were told they were on “look out,” but we found them stripped down to T-shirts and asleep on rusted cots arranged on a peak that looked out over the breathless and perilous beauty of the Hindu



Afghans watch as army soldiers prepare for a live fire exercise in Sarkani, Afghanistan.

Photo by Gary Knight/Courtesy VII agency.

Kush. It was a scene straight out of the old TV sitcom “F Troop.” The ANA is notoriously underpaid and plagued with desertion rates that run as high as 50 percent in some units.

One night, the FOB was hit with rocket-propelled grenades. Maybe we’d been around too much of this stuff, but the distant bangs on the outskirts of the camp hardly stirred Gary or me from sleep. But the ANA response was hard to sleep through. The soldiers opened fire into the predawn darkness with an old Russian 50-caliber machine gun. Phosphorus tipped bullets looked like 4th of July sparklers as they lit up the rocky hills.

The next morning, the ANA soldiers in concert with the U.S. Army troops who served as “mentors” continued firing. The whole exercise, it seemed, was choreographed as a response for our reporting benefit. We cringed. The ANA firing in the rocky hills echoed high and thin and the hollow sound, which I recorded, seemed to capture the futility of this “long war’s” search for bin Laden. They were firing at nothing.

Later in the morning, U.S. Army Major Fernando Rodriguez had his first cigarette and an idea. He decided rather than fire blindly into the hillside, several of his men and a platoon of

ANA soldiers would take a convoy up into the tiny village that sat on a ridge looking down on the camp. Since it was likely that the villagers either knew about or were complicit in the attacks, Rodriguez wanted to go directly to them. Gary and I went along for the ride and documented Rodriguez and the ANA local commander interacting with a group of village elders.

A Meeting of Minds

The villagers spoke of their grievances, though they did not admit that they carried out the attacks or knew who did. Clearly they were letting the United States and ANA know that they had little incentive to help prevent such attacks. A tribal elder, Zar Said, stood up to offer a prayer and then explained that he and other men had been wrongly detained as Taliban sympathizers—they were, he said, devout Muslims, unjustly detained and mistreated by U.S. military personnel at a holding cell at the Bagram Airbase. Said told them he was released, but other men from the village were still there.

This moment offered a sort of epiphany. Here, American soldiers confronted directly how abuse of detainees by U.S. military troops could reverberate in insurgent attacks on them.

I recorded these sounds while Gary focused on the villagers’ stony, distrustful faces. He captured the tribal elder praying, the ANA commander pleading for honesty, and Major Rodriguez listening intently to the tribal leaders and vowing to look into their claims. This encounter was a significant part of our report, and our ability to display it in these various dimensions made it a strong component of the Globe’s multimedia presentation. And these moments, with the sounds offering easy passage into the narrative storytelling, became the focus of the radio documentary we did for *The World*.

By combining the reporting for my newspaper story with the ambient sounds and pictures, Afghanistan’s story—with its complexities and nuances—could be conveyed to readers in more vivid and more powerful ways than can be captured on the printed page alone. With a story told from such a distant and foreign place, inviting people to immerse themselves in its many different dimensions made our journalistic account stronger. Pieces of what we brought home from this reporting trip have also been used in presentations I did at Harvard at the Kennedy School’s Carr Center for Human Rights Policy and as part of a guest lecture for Divinity School Professor Harvey Cox’s class, “Fundamentalisms.”

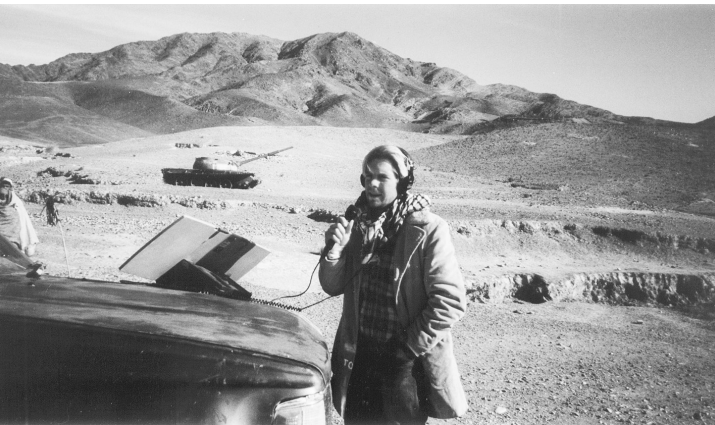
I will continue to experiment with digital journalism. Perhaps a decade from now, when I look back at what we created this first time out, it might seem as rusted and creaky as that old Russian cargo plane on which I flew into Afghanistan a decade ago. And we can only wonder whether it will be in Afghanistan that correspondents will be taking their new digital gear 10 years from now, with the same need to illuminate what is happening there. ■

Charles Sennott, a 2006 Nieman Fellow, is a foreign correspondent with The Boston Globe’s Special Projects Team and was among the first reporters on the ground in Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of September 11th.

Five Years Later Afghanistan Faces New Threats From an Old Foe

An NPR correspondent who reported on the war in 2001 now finds stories to tell about an enemy who once seemed to be defeated.

By Ivan Watson



Ivan Watson reported near the battle of Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan in December 2001. *Photo by Khoseraw Habibi*/© NPR.

I landed in northern Afghanistan on the morning after the first American bombs started falling on the Taliban. I flew in from neighboring Tajikistan on an old Soviet-made cargo plane crammed with journalists. It was October 8, 2001. My first images of the country were of an unpaved dirt runway, a donkey, and a mud hut. Add a rusty Kalashnikov to the picture, and that pretty much sums up Afghanistan at the start of the 21st century.

I arrived carrying a Nera satellite phone, a sleeping bag, and some clothes—better prepared than some of my colleagues, who didn't have sleeping bags. With almost no electricity in Afghanistan, I'd left my laptop behind, which meant for the duration of the war I'd write my reports in longhand.

Aside from a fortunate few correspondents in Kabul, the foreign press had little choice but to cover the American bombing campaign from two fronts. Many journalists camped out

with the Northern Alliance in the dusty town of Khoja Bawdeen, not far from the Tajik border. Others made their way down the Hindu Kush, to the Shomali Plain north of Kabul.

As the crow flies, these two fronts were only a few hundred miles apart. By land, it was a grueling three-day trip. Four-wheel drive vehicles lurched and slammed on stone and dirt tracks through the mountains or trav-

eled for miles in shallow riverbeds where Afghan drivers had to inch across bridges made of little more than a few wet logs. Occupants disembarked to watch from the river's edge. On this same journey, Wall Street Journal reporter Alan Cullison lost his laptop when his vehicle rolled down a riverbank; it was later, when he tried to replace the computer in Kabul, when he stumbled on what would become a well known hard-drive full of al-Qaeda documents.

To get to Shomali, I joined a friendly BBC camera crew. It took us two days to cross the snowy 14,000-foot heights of the Anjuman Pass. We nearly gave up on the first day, after a blizzard forced us to turn back, and spent the night in a stone hut at the foot of the mountain. Several days later, Keith Richburg of The Washington Post scaled the same pass with two other colleagues—on horseback. They nearly froze to death when they, too, were caught in a

snowstorm.

Everyone who crossed Anjuman knew there was no going back. Winter would soon block the escape route to Tajikistan. Some reporters joked that we'd be spending Christmas in Kabul. No one dreamed that the Taliban would collapse before Thanksgiving.

Reporting What I Saw

Having heard stories about the Afghans' mythical fighting prowess—and having now seen these tough people operate in freezing mountains dressed in little more than salwar kameez and sandals—it was hard for me to imagine that American air strikes would make much of an impact on the Taliban. In fact, complaints about American tactics were heard among Northern Alliance commanders. At roughly 4 p.m. each afternoon, it seemed, American warplanes would drop a few large bombs on Taliban positions along the front lines of the Shomali Plain. One day, as we stood on the roof of a mud hut watching two plumes of black smoke rise in the distance, a Northern Alliance fighter waxed nostalgic about Soviet carpet bombing, saying "Why can't you bomb like the Russians did?"

With the frontlines basically static, reporters were left to explore one of the most isolated, war-torn places in the world. It was tough to find a translator who spoke a smattering of badly accented English, and cars were even harder to find and much more expensive, since only warlords seemed to own them. And it was physically uncomfortable. Still, this was a remarkable journalistic experience for a relatively

unseasoned 25-year old reporter, as I was back then.

At the start of the assignment, the head of NPR's foreign desk, Loren Jenkins, gave me some excellent advice. "Only report what you see." Leave the reports about the size and frequency of air strikes in far-off cities like Jalalabad and Kandahar to the Pentagon correspondents. My job was to be the eyes and ears on the ground. I was to report only what was happening directly in front of me—even when I had little idea what was going on. And that was often the case, since none of the reporters had any direct contact with the American military in Afghanistan.

Our only exposure to the American military was with its war planes, but they flew so high they were usually out of sight. Some days I would set up my satellite phone on the roof of a farmhouse about a mile from the frontline and then call NPR. As I narrated live to tape, I tried to describe the scene: Afghan farmers working in their orchards and fields, oblivious to the ominous rumble of invisible jets flying high overhead. Then I'd describe the sudden flash and smoke of an air strike in the distance and, a few seconds later, I'd hold my microphone out to catch the sound of its rumbling explosion.

One day, the sleepy calm of the Afghan countryside was interrupted by the sound of a small white propeller plane—the first we'd seen here. It circled twice and then banked towards the eastern side of the Shomali Plain for a landing. I raced towards the plane in the truck I had, and I was the first journalist to greet several Western-looking men in civilian clothes as they unloaded boxes of gear from the aircraft. Confused, I walked over to them and asked, "Are you journalists?" They looked up at me, surprised, until several Afghan guards appeared and began roughly pulling me away. Several American newspaper reporters interviewed me that night. All we could report was that for the first time a small fixed-wing plane had landed in Northern Alliance territory carrying foreigners and that they might or might not have been U.S. military or intel-

ligence personnel. Later, we learned that small American Special Forces teams were on the ground in the area "painting" Taliban targets with lasers for the U.S. warplanes.

One daily challenge was finding electricity to charge my satellite phone, which was the only link I had with the outside world. When I asked about electricity in one remote frontline village, locals opened the nearby dam on a small pond. The water rushed

the chance to file it because that night the frontline of the war finally moved. Far to the north, the notorious Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, backed by U.S. warplanes and Special Forces soldiers on horseback, had stormed the city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

The next day, I traveled to the entrance to the Panjshir Valley, to the home of Yunus Qanuni, a top Northern Alliance official who is now speaker of the Afghan lower house of Parlia-



At the Salang Pass in Afghanistan, Ivan Watson interviews a shopkeeper at the entrance to the Salang Tunnel. *Photo by Ash Sweeting/©2006 NPR.*

through a small mill and generated just enough power to light a single light bulb in the village hospital—and charge my phone—until the water ran out 45 minutes later.

At Salang, another high mountain pass, an Afghan guide led me through the mile-and-a-half long Salang Tunnel, which had been dynamited by slain Afghan commander Ahmad Shah Massoud during a battle against the Taliban. Using a small keychain flashlight, the bearded guide raced down the freezing tunnel, around small mountains of wreckage and debris, carrying a backpack full of supplies for fighters who lived in a bombed-out power station at the other end of the tunnel.

I wrote that story, but never got

ment. He had been talking to other journalists throughout the day and was clearly delighted to confirm the news. Speaking to me and another reporter in Dari, Qanuni pointed at a map to show Dostum's progress and then explained that an attack would soon be launched from Shomali towards Kabul. "I hope during this week or two weeks' time we will arrive or reach at the gates of Kabul," Qanuni said—or at least that's how my struggling interpreter translated his words.

Little did we know, but the daily American air strikes were devastating the Taliban forces. Even veteran reporters with extensive previous experience in Afghanistan had not taken into account that this was not

the guerrilla war against the Soviets of the 1980's. This time the Taliban forces were entrenched in a more classic military struggle. This left them in the unenviable position of having to defend fixed frontlines against laser-guided bombs and missiles dropped from airplanes.

Retracing What Happened

On reporting trips I've made back to Afghanistan after the war, I've interviewed some who fought in it. "Why did you attack us from the sky?" Mullah Rocketi complained, during one recent conversation. He is a stocky former Taliban commander who five years ago had been posted along the Shomali front. Today, Rocketi—so named for his skill with rockets—holds a seat in the Afghan Parliament, but he is still bitter about his defeat. "It wasn't fair," he said.

Samad was a 21-year-old Taliban foot soldier deployed on the Shomali front, along with other Afghans, as well as some Pakistanis, Arabs, Turks and Chechens. (Samad is not his real name, but one we used in our interview.) "When we first learned that the Americans would attack the Taliban," he said, "we didn't care. We thought they would fight us on the ground." Samad, who is now a shopkeeper, estimates 35 of his friends were killed as they hid in trenches and huts during the weeks of American bombing.

On November 12, 2001, the Northern Alliance finally launched its offensive towards Kabul. From a frontline village, I watched these warriors disappear into the smoke and dust of battle, accompanied by the sound of explosions and crackle of gunfire.

"I did expect to die that day," said Hayatullah, who was part of the first wave of Northern Alliance fighters. He is now an officer in the Kabul police force. Hayatullah did not know it at the time, but the day before the assault, most of the Afghan Taliban fighters had quietly abandoned the frontlines, without informing their foreign comrades. "From our group, nobody remained here," said Samad. "But later on I found out the Arabs, they were not informed

and they remained behind."

The Northern Alliance forces initially faced fierce resistance, but then advanced steadily across a blighted landscape of burned orchards and uprooted vineyards, evidence of the Taliban's six-year campaign to pacify the local population. By nightfall, the opposition was at the gates of Kabul. Along with other journalists, I entered the Afghan capital the next morning on foot, following several hundred victorious Northern Alliance fighters who sang an anthem as they marched into town. Caught up in the moment, I was startled when something hard hit me in the head. It was a candy, my smiling translator told me, thrown by a celebrating resident.

Surprisingly, we saw very few bodies. On the road to Kabul, we'd passed a few burned Taliban corpses, and in Kabul's central Charinaw Park, I stared at a young Pakistani, who had been beaten to death on a basketball court. For the most part, though, the Taliban had abandoned the city without firing a shot. "My commander told me it was a tactical retreat, since we could not resist those bombs" Samad recalled. "[He said] we should go back to our villages. And when we see an opportunity we should start to fight again, against the Americans and the Northern Alliance."

New Strategies, New Threats

Five years later, it is a resurgent Taliban that is knocking at the gates of the Afghan capital. Its forces have returned to tactics the Afghans perfected during the Soviet occupation, as they rely on ambushes, land mines, and cross-border raids. They have also adopted strategies not used before in Afghanistan's long history of conflict—suicide bombers strike on a near weekly basis and militants distribute DVDs late at night that show the grisly beheading of captives, a propaganda tactic taken directly from the Sunni insurgents fighting far away in Iraq.

Five years after the overthrow of the Taliban, there have been some remarkable developments. Cross-country travel has been transformed, with some

major roads paved, and domestic flights now link major cities. In Kabul, confident Afghan women shop in bazaars dressed in headscarves, not burkas, while young men with slicked back hair and loud shirts prowl the city's new shopping malls and wedding halls with cell phones proudly in hand.

But outside Kabul, many Afghans say their lives have hardly changed since the Western money started flowing into their country. There is still no electricity, little running water and, with the exception of the booming opium-producing industry, few prospects for employment. The image of smiling Afghans, dressed up in their holiday finest, proudly voting in national elections has long since faded, replaced by anger at rampant corruption displayed within the government of Afghan president Hamid Karzai.

During the past two years, my reports from Afghanistan have reflected this growing disenchantment, along with the country's deteriorating security situation. Many southern and eastern provinces long ago became too dangerous for foreign journalists to travel to and work in.

On May 29, 2006, even downtown Kabul became a no-go zone. For an entire day, an angry mob tore through the Afghan capital, setting fire to businesses and foreign aid organizations. The riot was triggered after an out-of-control U.S. military truck slammed into rush hour traffic, killing and injuring several Afghans. After the accident, a crowd began hurling rocks at American soldiers who, some eyewitnesses say, opened fire on the civilians. The incident occurred on the same broad avenue where, five years earlier, Kabul residents once welcomed arriving Northern Alliance fighters and foreign reporters with showers of money, flowers and candy. ■

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Examining Closely Why an Important Story Is Not Widely Told

In an excerpt from his upcoming book, journalist Roy Gutman returns to a critical moment in Afghanistan's past to explore the news media's response.

In his forthcoming book, "How We Missed the Story," Roy Gutman, who is foreign editor for the McClatchy Newspapers, examines in detail what took place in Afghanistan in the years leading up to the September 11th attacks in the United States. In a chapter entitled "Silence Cannot Be the Strategy," set in the year 1998, he explores the tense relationship between Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader; he describes policy initiatives of the United Nations and the United States, and he delves into reasons why he believes the press failed to adequately report on these developments. The United States Institute of Peace Press will publish the book in 2007. What follows are edited excerpts from this chapter of his book.

By early 1998, the [Taliban] militia was ready to announce its plan to build a regular national army of two divisions that would replace the tribal and regional task forces. Air assets were to be reorganized in a corps at Khwaja Rawash air base. U.S. officials were aware of the army reorganization at the time, but bin Laden's deepening links with the Taliban leadership escaped notice. "I don't think we saw or understood his connection with Mullah Omar," the CIA station chief in Islamabad would later say. "I don't think we understood exactly this whole role of the reorganization until later." The main reason for overlooking the development was that "we weren't focusing on ... what was going on at the battlefield.... We were focusing on

where is bin Laden today."

For journalists on the ground, the first sign of significant change was a clampdown on frontline access. Through most of 1997, the handful of foreign reporters in Kabul was welcomed, even invited, to tour the frontlines. "We would chat with the Taliban, drink tea, and look at the front," recalled Agence France-Presse's Stefan Smith. Sometimes the information minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, would knock on their doors in the morning and invite them for a drive. In August

In August 1997, the acting deputy minister of information cautioned reporters to send reports that 'truly reflected the situation' and not to resort to analysis or witness reports that might give 'a false impression' of the situation, the UN reported. The atmosphere worsened in early 1998.

1997, the acting deputy minister of information cautioned reporters to send reports that "truly reflected the situation" and not to resort to analysis or witness reports that might give "a false impression" of the situation, the UN reported. The atmosphere worsened in early 1998. Checkpoints were set up to block them from the front unless the visits were organized in advance.

The apparent reason was that Arabs began to play a more important frontline role. "We regularly spoke

with travelers coming from villages north of Kabul, who told us about foreign fighters who had taken over large sections of the frontline," Smith said. In Kabul, they spotted Arabs from Yemen, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other countries as well as Muslims from Chechnya and Burma, even though the Taliban supposedly had asked them to stay out of sight. Three training camps in the Kabul area—in Shakardarah, about 12 miles to the north on the road to Charikar, a second in Paghman, and a third just south of the Darul Aman Palace to the southwest of Kabul—became a "no-go."

"But we knew what was going on there from a whole variety of sources—the military training of foreign fighters," Smith said. Khost became off-limits. In areas around Jalalabad, near the city reservoir, and at Tora Bora also became "no-go areas." Reporters were also discouraged from visiting Kandahar. And the warnings were unmistakable that writing about foreign fighters was not permitted. "The slightest mention even of a Pakistani would get you in enormous trouble," Smith recalled. "I had the general impression that I was on the verge of expulsion." By the summer of 1998, the tension was indescribable. The Taliban gave the impression "that they were starting to resent, if not hate, the few expatriates left in Kabul. Our lives were restricted. Our reporting was restricted. We started to need to have bits of paper to do anything," Smith said. [See accompanying box for details about restrictions on page 32.]

Strategizing to Cover the Afghanistan Story

Reporters' movements and words were closely watched by certain Taliban officials. Journalists had to figure out ways to get stories out about what was happening while at the same time not losing their ability to remain in the country. What happened to Agence France-Presse reporter Stefan Smith offers a glimpse at the trade-offs that many journalists relied on to do their work.

Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's information minister, summoned Stefan Smith on several occasions for "long explanations of what I meant by 'inde-

pendent sources' or 'eyewitnesses.'" Muttaqi would pick through his copy line by line. If Smith made the slightest mention of foreign fighters, he was told to be "very, very careful." He managed to cultivate friends in the Taliban's foreign ministry, who provided private pointers on "what we could not write and where we could not go." (The foreign ministry was run by the Taliban from Logar Province, and they were far more open than those from Kandahar.) People at the foreign ministry "bailed me out of serious problems on more than one occasion, mostly when I had gone to a frontline or Kabul hilltop

where I was not allowed." In early 1998, the foreign ministry friends told Smith to keep a low profile with regard to other key ministries—justice, defense, vice and virtue, and interior. "The foreign ministry even asked us not to request interviews with these ministries, so as 'not to advertise your presence here.'" The Taliban were not explicit with threats, but when he encountered an Arab, there would be "some hassle—guns in my face, and so on." Some Taliban started to refer to him as an infidel. As Smith noted, "that is never a good sign." ■ —R.G.

These pressures on the international press also indicated creeping Arabization. The Taliban developed a plan to move all foreigners—the UN staff, nongovernmental organizations and charities, and foreign reporters—into the Kabul Polytechnic, the university quarter largely destroyed during Masoud's battles with the Hazara. Reporters were told that the pressure for the move came from Kandahar, inspired by the system in Saudi Arabia, where all expatriates live in compounds. Although the scheme never went anywhere, "it reinforced the impression that we were not really welcome," Smith said. "The Taliban as I had known them from when they arrived in Kabul were no longer the same people. They stopped caring about what the rest of the world thought of them, which was a dangerous direction."

For Osama bin Laden, 1998 presented a window of opportunity to strengthen his ties with the Taliban as well as pursue his own agenda. He slowly raised his profile as he carefully laid the groundwork for a spectacular debut as world actor. His first move was to unite the different factions of Islamists who had drifted apart in the years since fighting the Soviet Union,

in particular his own al-Qaeda and Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and lead them in a new jihad, this time directed against the United States. He set out his political aim in a blood-curdling fatwa that twisted the facts and Islamic theology into his service. Claiming that the United States was "occupying" the Arabian Peninsula in the service of Israel and had killed one million Iraqis, it declared: "The judgment to kill Americans and their allies, both civilian and military, is an individual duty of every Muslim able to do so and in any country where it is possible We, in the name of God, call on every Muslim who believes in God and desires to be rewarded to follow God's order to kill Americans and plunder their wealth wherever and whenever they find it."

Dated February 12th, with the subtitle "a legal fatwa," and first published 10 days later in the London-based Arabic newspaper, Al-Quds Al-Arabi, it received almost no other media notice at the time

In the first half of 1998, bin Laden had organized his political allies, spelled out his political aims, laid the theological ground for the violence that would follow, and received the

endorsements from ulema in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. By late May 1998, training for the operation was well under way, and he decided to stage a series of news events at the al-Badr camp in Khost Province. In the first interview—actually more of a monologue—with Pakistan journalist Hamid Mir in mid-May, bin Laden stated that his goals were to expel the U.S. military presence from Saudi Arabia and to "liberate" the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem—a 35-acre complex including the al-Aqsa mosque that constitutes one of Islam's most sacred sites but that sits above the Wailing Wall, one of Judaism's most sacred sites—as well as Palestine. Sketching out a megalomaniac vision, bin Laden declared that jihad to liberate "all the holy places of Islam" was "obligatory upon every Muslim" and warned that anyone "refuting the call to join jihad anywhere in the world is an infidel."

Ten days later, he invited a group of mostly Pakistani journalists for a briefing, smuggling them into Afghanistan on a two-day trip, which involved a five-hour trek at night across the mountains, then hours in jeeps, an overnight in a safe house, then a circuitous route before reaching the

Khost camp. “Heavy guns boomed as bin Laden peeped out of his sturdy jeep with tinted windows, and rocket launchers were fired in the air to celebrate his arrival,” wrote veteran Afghanistan-watcher Rahimullah Yusufzai, who later discovered that most of the gunners were not bin Laden’s men, rather Afghans and Pakistanis staying in the nearby Zhawar camp.

Bin Laden’s message to the 13 Pakistanis and one Chinese journalist was that the ulema of Saudi Arabia and elsewhere had issued a fatwa to wage jihad “to expel the Jews and the Christians from the Arabian Peninsula.” The campaign would also topple the ruling Saudi dynasty, and the members of the royal family would be put on trial after they were overthrown. The result of his latest campaign will “be visible in the coming weeks.”

Two days later, he hosted John Miller of ABC News. Citing his fatwa, he told Miller that civilians would be the targets for his next operation. He foresaw an apocalyptic outcome. “We

predict a black day for America and the end of the United States as United States,” he said, and that the leadership of Saudi Arabia “will disintegrate.” Bin Laden “put a time cap on it, saying that whatever action will be taken against Americans in the Gulf, whatever violence awaits, will occur within the next few weeks,” Miller reported. Bin Laden had raised his profile, though he claimed he was operating within the Taliban guidelines. The rule was he had been “asked to avoid” military activities, but there was “no restriction” on political activities.

That wasn’t the understanding of Mullah Omar, who first learned of the press conference from BBC Radio. He telephoned Yusufzai, who had reported the story for the BBC: “Who was the organizer? How did he travel into Afghanistan without a visa?” The reporter explained the route, and Omar exploded: “How dare he hold a press conference without asking my permission!” He then dictated a statement to Yusufzai. “There will be one ruler

in Afghanistan, either I or Osama bin Laden I will see to it.” Bin Laden responded with a statement that he accepted Omar’s rule and leadership, that he accepted Taliban decisions, and promised to abide by the pledge. For several months, he did, more or less.

Neither of these media events received much U.S. media attention or public expression of concern by the White House, U.S. State Department, or Congress.... U.S. authorities and the American media in their one-dimensional focus failed to recognize that bin Laden, the international terrorist, was the same as bin Laden, the Taliban ally, and that the two roles reinforced each other. Bin Laden was not conducting his own military operations, just yet. The logic of his investment in the Taliban domestic war machine, combined with Mullah Omar’s sensitivity, dictated that the timing for his own major international military operation should coincide with that of the Taliban. ■

Military Barriers Impede a Newspaper’s Investigation

When the Los Angeles Times set out to tell how two Afghans held in U.S. military custody died, its efforts to report the story met resistance at every twist and turn.

By Craig Pyes

Last year, the Los Angeles Times decided to undertake something quite unusual: The newspaper would conduct a parallel investigation to the one being undertaken by the Army’s Criminal Investigation Command (CID) into how a small U.S. Special Forces detachment in Afghanistan could be tied to two detainee deaths and two apparent cover-ups in less than two weeks.

The Army’s investigations had been launched initially in September 2004 after the Times and the Crimes of War Project,¹ a Washington-based nonprofit educational organization, had revealed that a young Afghan soldier had died in the custody of the Special Forces team after allegations that he had been tortured. The Pentagon said it had no record of the death.

The Times’s disclosures remain one

of the rare instances since American troops went to Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 in which independent reporting has uncovered potential war crimes by U.S. servicemen that had apparently been covered up, not only from the public, but from the military itself. The Times’s 2004 story was published just two months after the Army’s inspector general had issued a detailed report on detainee abuse in Afghanistan and

¹ www.crimesofwar.org

Iraq. Its conclusion: that it had found “no incidents of abuse that had not been reported through command channels.”

And while the Times’s story led to the Army launching two criminal probes, human rights organizations at the same time were raising questions about the relatively low number of successful military prosecutions in criminal homicide and prisoner abuse cases and whether the military is capable of policing itself in times of war.

The CID spent more than two years investigating the allegations raised by the initial article that I reported and wrote with Mark Mazzetti, then with the Los Angeles Times. This January, military investigators concluded their probes—apparently having spent the better part of the time deconstructing the cases they’d initially assembled. CID’s recommendations to prosecutors cascaded from the most serious charges that could be brought (murder, in one case) to the weakest possible sanctions: recommendations for assault and dereliction charges that brought administrative letters of reprimand, or what a Special Forces officer called a “high-level slap on the wrist,” against two soldiers on the Special Forces team.

In previous investigations of prisoner abuse in Afghanistan, CID’s investigations have been called into question and their findings revised. We, too, would discover that the military examiners had made some significant errors, including their initial failure to identify the victims. They also grossly misidentified dates of crucial events and persistently failed to interview key people and locate supporting documents. Public accountability was scarce.

Dean Baquet, then the Times’s editor, was intrigued by the idea of conducting a parallel investigation. Though he knew the paper’s reporting budget was tight and success was far from certain, he paired me with Times reporter Kevin Sack and told

us to get to work on the story. While the September 2004 article uncovered the death and torture allegations, we knew next to nothing about the American soldiers involved, other than they were stationed in Gardez, a provincial capital south of Kabul. At the time of the incident, the 20th Special Forces Group, a National Guard outfit based in Birmingham, Alabama, was in charge of the Special Forces mission throughout Afghanistan.

Prior to CID getting involved, an agent remarked that Gardez had the

The U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command, a part of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, sent out hundreds of e-mails instructing its members to refer any inquiries that might come from us to their public affairs office and to alert their chain of command of the contacts.

reputation as “the worst facility” in the country. “The Special Forces guys there,” he added, “were a bunch of fucking cowboys.” He was uncertain about who was running the base because units are transferred in and out. “There are no records,” this agent said. “The reporting system is broke across the board.”

Obstacles to Reporting

Press investigations into detainee abuse have an inherent reporting problem. As a matter of policy, the military refuses to discuss detainee operations and individual cases. In this case, there were no court papers to be had, and it was unlikely that investigative files would leak from such a tightly guarded investigation that was being closely observed by those at CID headquarters and possibly by those above. In this case, too, not even the victims of the abuse—originally nine Afghan

soldiers—wanted to cooperate. They were mostly uncouth militiamen and thugs. (One was holding a young boy as a sex slave when apprehended, according to U.S. military reports.)

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), from which the initial information leaked about the case, also was not helpful. It turned out that UNAMA, too, had not reported the incident, even though the organization had been given overarching responsibilities under the December 2001 Bonn agreement for the protection of human rights in Afghanistan.

But an even greater obstacle was how we would report on Special Forces activities at remote firebases, where most of the prisoners sent from Afghanistan to the prison facility at Guantanamo were first captured and held. The bases are highly classified and have not only avoided scrutiny from journalists and the public, but are opaque to congressional staffers with security clearances, to the military’s own investigators and, sometimes, even to the Special Forces Command itself. The Red Cross does not have access to these outposts, and even the names of the soldiers are treated like state secrets. Several times, irate Green Berets responded to our inquiries with: “How did you get my name? It’s classified.”

When we went through official channels, the United States Army and all of its relevant subordinate commands declined requests for comment. But their posture was not always passive. The U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (USACAPOC), a part of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), sent out hundreds of e-mails instructing its members to refer any inquiries that might come from us to their public affairs office and to alert their chain of command of the contacts. The guidance began:

“Situation: Reporters Kevin Sack and Craig Pyes, LA Times, have been

gathering information from USACAPOC troops about missions undertaken by other SOF elements in Bamian and Gardez, Afghanistan

“Facts: Mr. Sack and Mr. Pyes have been asking questions along two lines: 1.) Detainees Abuses 2.) The ‘alleged’ misconduct of another Soldier at the above mentioned locations. Our Soldiers continue to engage regularly with these two reporters without approval from USACAPOC/USASOC Public Affairs channels.”

To fend off rear-guard fact-finding reporting like ours, the USACAPOC public affairs official offered to schedule “media engagement training” for soldiers and “family readiness groups” or to give personal guidance if we should call. She concluded this memo with the words “I look forward to blazing this path with all of you together as our great men and women of USACAPOC support our nation at war.”

Situation: The Public Affairs Office was basically a dead-letter box.

Facts: Both Mr. Sack and Mr. Pyes were dubious that going through the public affairs channel would greatly aid the war effort, although both reporters were grateful to the great men and women of USACAPOC for leaking the e-mail.

And so it went.

Yet despite the Army’s intransigence, we were able to review thousands of confidential documents, including the following:

- Internal correspondence of the Special Forces
- U.S. military intelligence reports
- Previously undisclosed rules on interrogation techniques approved for Afghanistan
- Highly sensitive internal reports from the International Committee of the Red Cross, UNAMA, and the prosecutor’s office of the Afghan military.

We also interviewed more than 100 people in the United States and in Afghanistan. Those we spoke with

included current and past members of the 20th Special Forces Group, USACAPOC, intelligence officers, and senior diplomats. And while we never expected that this story into allegations of torture and criminal homicide by U.S. soldiers would come packaged from the Army’s public affairs channel, we were still surprised by the active resistance we encountered along the way.

Dealing With Military Public Affairs

Donald H. Rumsfeld labored six years as defense secretary to build a lighter, faster military for high tech warfare. What he left behind is a public affairs apparatus—at the Pentagon level and at military bases and headquarters—that refuses to shed its siege mentality. Part of the problem is that the people who work in these positions don’t regard their job as responding to journalists’ questions. Their work is “to transmit the policy and message of the United States,” as a sign in the Public Affairs Office at Camp Eggers, Kabul, reminds its staff. Journalists often are perceived to have their own agendas.

In Afghanistan, among Special Forces who are in the field, “media engagement training” can be pretty basic. After Green Berets confiscated some videotape from CBS News in December 2002, the top Special Forces commander issued a directive to his men saying that they did not have authorization to kill journalists “for the sole purpose of recovering film or videotape” unless it was in self-defense.

Back at the Pentagon, one might expect a bit more of a sophisticated understanding of how press and public affairs operations interact. Near the tail end of our investigation, I contacted the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology to ask about the procedures used by Special Forces to report a detainee death at one of their bases. My questions could have been cleared by Army brass within 24 to 48 hours and answered definitively in 20 minutes without violating Department of Defense guidelines or weakening our national defense. Instead it took more than

two months of e-mails and telephone calls for the Army’s medical branch to give us an incomplete reply. Some of the information they did dispense was inaccurate.

We were trying to solve whether the commander of the Gardez Special Forces team, known as ODA 2021, had any justification for not reporting the death of an 18-year-old Afghan militiaman named Jamal Naseer, who died while being interrogated at his base in March 2003. The principal focus of our inquiry was to learn the general procedures that should be followed. We were not asking about the discreet facts in this particular case, other than whether the pathology institute had received a death certificate.

The circumstances of Naseer’s death were troubling. Of the nine Afghan soldiers arrested, the seven who continued to be detained and held told an official of the United Nations and Afghan military investigators that they had been continuously beaten for more than a week by the Americans using karate, cables and sticks, and that one member—the brother of the deceased—had a toenail pried off. They also claimed that during the interrogations, melted snow water was poured over them, and they were left outside in subfreezing weather and forced to assume stress positions.

Some of these allegations appeared to be backed up by notes and testimony from local doctors who had treated the men after they were released to Afghan police custody. The materials included a statement from the hospital employee who prepared Naseer’s body for burial. His corpse was described as being black and green and swollen. His mother’s words said “the entire body was full of injuries.”

However, as our reporting continued, we learned that there may have been another scenario presented to investigators. Right after the boy’s death, ODA 2021 held a meeting at which team members were told that the young militiaman died of complications from a urinary tract infection, an American present at the base told us. He went on to let us know that the purpose of the meeting was to make sure that

everyone was on the same page in case there was an investigation.

Attributing Naseer's death solely to natural causes cut against everything we'd learned in our reporting thus far. A prominent forensic pathologist confirmed that the descriptions of the body obtained by the Times indicated the cause of death was blunt force trauma, not organ failure. Although there was a hospital 10 minutes away, the team apparently did not summon a doctor as Naseer's condition deteriorated. Most important, the team commander concealed Naseer's death from his chain of command, who said they did not learn of it until revealed by the Times 18 months later. None of the other team members or their associates broke their silence, either, not even to inform the Red Cross.

Our reporting also had uncovered that within days of Naseer's death, an ODA 2021 team member had shot in the face and killed Wakil Mohammed, an unarmed woodcutter who had been rounded-up for questioning after a firefight in the nearby village of Wazi. The team commander concealed the circumstances of that death from his superiors, as well.

In 2004, when we had contacted the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, which keeps track of detainee deaths, a spokesman said they had no record of Jamal Naseer. Now, late in our second round of reporting two years later,² we were hearing intimations that CID might be considering the team's explanation as the cause for Naseer's death. We wondered if there might be a death certificate, which is something we were never able to confirm. Forensic evidence in the case was scant, because the family, for religious reasons, refused to allow the body to be disinterred.

So once again I contacted the pathology institute's Public Affairs Office. But now the institute refused to answer any question I asked on the grounds that there was an ongoing investigation. Among the questions refused were:

- "Does the pathology institute conduct forensic investigations of detainee deaths?"
- "Did they still regard the information they gave us previously to be accurate?"
- "And what is the procedure for reporting deaths through the medical chain of command?"

Seeking Information About Naseer's Death

For journalists, the military's investigative and judicial components—such as the Staff Judge Advocate, the Criminal Investigation Command, and the Office of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner—can offer more neutral guidance that can serve to reduce public skepticism about closed-door decision-making. But in this case—and this pattern seems increasingly common throughout the Bush administration—the Pentagon was refusing to disclose any information as a way to avoid providing the analytic framework necessary to assess the issue.

When I complained to the pathology institute that it was practicing excessive secrecy, the public affairs officer denied it vigorously. When I kicked my questions up to the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs and identified myself as a reporter for the Los Angeles Times, the voice on the phone refused to reveal either the name or the telephone number of the person who handles media affairs. Someone would call me back.

Indeed, I was called back promptly by a contractor, a former colonel, who responded to my questions about medical reporting procedures in Afghanistan in March 2003 by reading me Rumsfeld's guidance from 2005. He did not identify the document and said I couldn't quote him, which I found out later had to do with him being a contractor. He would not name the company he worked for, but insisted that his response was authoritative. In fact, it turned out to be wrong

because procedures had changed. This happened several times as other public affairs personnel replied to my questions by citing a set of rules that was not in force during the period I was examining.

Eventually I was granted an interview with the Army's Medical Examiner, sent the correct operating procedures for reporting deaths, received confirmation that the pathology institute still had no record of Naseer's death, and was given officious and opaque responses to some of my questions. But to do so took two months. And it required me to leapfrog the public affairs channel and call medical branch people at their homes and to threaten, cajole and plead with them for information that should have been given out crisply and professionally.

In January, CID closed its investigation into the two deaths and abuse allegations after more than two years of inquiry. They found insufficient probable cause to bring charges for either of the two deaths, even though a year earlier they had recommended murder charges against a Special Forces soldier in the killing at Wazi. Two soldiers were given noncriminal administrative letters of reprimand for "slapping" prisoners at the Gardez facility and for failing to report the death of Jamal Naseer.

During the entire course of the CID investigation, the commander of ODA 2021 at the time of both deaths continued to work full-time at the 20th Group headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama and redeployed last winter to East Africa. ■

Craig Pyes is the senior correspondent at the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) and is a long-time contributor to the Los Angeles Times. Will Evans, who is with (www.muckraker.org), contributed reporting to this article.

² Pyes' reporting is found in "In Cowboy and Indian Country: A Special Forces Unit in Afghanistan," Parts I and II at www.crimesofwar.org/onnews/news-gardez1.html

PHOTO ESSAYS BY FOUR AĪNA PHOTOGRAPHERS

Afghans Learn How to Tell Visual Stories

Founded by a photojournalist, a school and photo agency offer Afghans the opportunity to show their country through their eyes.

By Travis Beard

To see Afghanistan through the eyes of Afghan people is Aina Photo's greatest ambition. Aina Photo is the first Afghan photojournalism school and agency. Based in Kabul, it offers to the Afghan community the opportunity to tell their stories and share moments from their daily lives after 24 years of conflict and political instability.

This ambitious project, which began in 2002, attracted and benefited from the support of photojournalist partners and nongovernmental organizations (NGO). As its founder, Manoocher Deghati, an international photojournalist whose images have appeared in *Time* magazine and *Agence France-Presse*, established the first school of photojournalism in Afghanistan. Its support came primarily from the NGO, Aina Cultural and Media Centre. With its humanitarian mission, this NGO has strived since its creation in 2001 to develop an environment out of which independent media can emerge and cultural projects can bloom at a time when democracy has a fragile foothold in this country. This center enables Afghans who are interested in pursuing work in media or in artistic and cultural areas to have access to new technologies and teachers.

To date Aina Photo has graduated more than 50 students; there are 35 students now enrolled in basic and advanced photojournalism classes. Students are selected for each eight-week course in photojournalism based on

their experience with journalism and photography, as well as for the enthusiasm they demonstrate for wanting to play a role in improving the news media industry in Afghanistan. In determining the members of each course, we also want there to be diversity in their ethnic background, as well as in the provinces and news organizations from which they come. We also try to achieve a balance in the gender of the participants.

In December 2006, we began the fifth photojournalism course Aina has offered—with classes meeting three hours a day, five days a week, including field trips, exams and photo assignments. The students are taught camera operation and Photoshop techniques, and they learn how to edit images to create stories. They also learn about the code of ethics in today's news media. (There is also a separate, more advanced, eight-week course offered.)

As their teacher, I've brought other characteristics to the curricula, and these are based on my experiences as a professional photojournalist. I talk with them about how to network with editors and various ways in which their photographs can be presented. We talk, too, about assessing risks in their work and ways to deal with authorities who might want to control what they do.

The students' enthusiasm for learning is exhilarating. Often they stay behind for hours after the class is over to practice their Photoshop skills. And the level of complexity I am finding

in the proposals for their three-week photojournalism assignments is quite remarkable. Not only are the issues they want to cover current and important, but also the planning and reasoning they display in laying out their project idea is elaborate and well thought through. The only difficult thing about the class has been the language (since I teach in English), and that is why the center has set up an English and a Dari (a national language of Afghanistan) photojournalism class.

After students complete the beginning and advanced classes—what amounts to their apprenticeship—some of them become core members of Aina Photo. Their photographs are published in Afghan publications; our more successful photographers have had their work published in *Digital Journalist*,¹ *Peace Reporter*,² and *EI8HT* magazine.³ Today Aina Photo has a wide network of Afghan photographers spread throughout many of Afghanistan's provinces. ■

Travis Beard is chief editor of Aina Photo. He has worked as a photojournalist for the past nine years, as a freelancer and then with Picture Tank, a Paris-based agency. He blogs about his experience with the Afghan students at <http://argusphotography.blogspot.com/>. His photography can be found at <http://travis.beard.book.picturertank.com/> and www.argusphotography.com

¹ www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0502/aina_intro.html

² www.peacereporter.net/dettaglio_articolo.php?idart=2381

³ www.foto8.com/ei8ht/previews/index.html

Fardin Waezi

I learned photography in my father's studio in Kabul. Under Taliban rule I was arrested five times for "photograph related crimes" and for cutting my beard. I taught the first course at Aina Photo, teaching students how to use the box camera. I want to show my country's beauty, and I want to reflect Afghan society through pictures. Now 25, I work in the Aina Photo department as manager of facilities and also do freelance jobs for the Aina Photo agency.

Two workers at a brick-making factory between Kabul and Bagram push the camouflage curtain from an army tank into a ditch to make the fire burn more quickly.



*Words and photo by Fardin Waezi/
Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.*

A young beggar girl counts the day's earnings on the street in front of the Ministry of Information and Culture in Kabul, while her younger sister uses her sandals as a pillow.



Rescue workers and soldiers search for the remains of victims in an Afghan plane crash on Shapiri Ghar Mountain, 20 miles east of Kabul. The Kam Air Boeing 737 crashed on February 3, 2005 killing all 104 people on board.



Photos by Fardin Waezi/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.

A World Wrestling Entertainment show is performed for soldiers in Kabul.



An International Security Assistance Force soldier sits in the back of a helicopter with a gun ready. He is patrolling along the Bamian River searching for insurgent activity. October 2006.



Photos by Fardin Waezil/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.

Gulbuddin Elham

I was forced to postpone my studies at Kabul University's school of journalism during the Taliban era. Now I am 30 years old, and I have three children. I chose the career in photography because I believe that photos are a record of history, and I want to be part of that. I now work full-time as a freelance photographer for Aina Photo, shooting everything from ministers to tanks.

A national solidarity program runs a project that loans money to women who are poor. The money comes from The World Bank, and the women pay back the loans by working in different jobs, including in a dress shop where they sew burkas.



Words and photo by Gulbuddin Elham/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.

The national sport of Afghanistan is buzkashi. It involves a group of men on horses trying to pick up a headless goat. Once they have the goat they must try to drop it inside the circle in the center of the field.



After the Taliban regime, the government provided money to enable some women to train as video journalists. Despite such efforts, women still have limited freedom in the Afghan media industry.



Photos by Gulbuddin Elham/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.



These farmers are harvesting his wheat in the springtime, choosing an alternative to the more common Afghan crop of poppies. Kunduz is one of the poorer provinces bordering the Pakistan border, where the Taliban has a strong presence.



After the Soviets left Afghanistan, a large amount of military equipment was left behind. This Russian tank fired a defective missile, destroying its cannon, which turned to rusted metal in the harsh climate. There is a new project to collect the estimated two million tons of metal for recycling.

Photos by Gulbuddin Elham/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.

Najibullah Musafar

When I joined Aina Photo, I was its oldest member (at 40), and I probably still am. I was the only person to successfully film a documentary on the Taliban among the Hazara minority located in central Afghanistan. I spent seven months in prison for “photograph related crimes.” Had the Taliban discovered my film, I would have certainly been sentenced to death. I am now working as deputy assistant editor and photographer for two weekly Afghan magazines, Kallid and Morsell. Kallid focuses on current affairs, while Morsell is a magazine that explores women’s issues in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Gullbibibi is a carpet weaver for her family’s business, a passion that she has only been able to pursue since the fall of the Taliban. Her husband died in the war with the Soviet Union. The freedom to photograph women has come about since the fall of the Taliban. Afghanistan 2004.



Words and photo by Najibullah Musafar/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.

These women are in line to have the only doctor in the area examine them for illnesses related to the extreme cold weather. Many of the Hazara women lost their husbands to the war. Bamian, Afghanistan. 2004.



Young boys, who work on the street selling phone cards, look at the first Afghan direct presidential election poster being displayed on a street pole. October 2004.



Photos by Najibullah Musaffer/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.

In a separate place from the men in the Dasht-i-Barchi polling station in Kabul, an Afghan woman votes in the first direct presidential election on October 9, 2004.

To prevent multiple voting, an employee of UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan)—the woman on the left—stains the voter's thumb with ink and makes a hole in the voting cards. Kabul, Afghanistan.



A Kuchi (nomad) man watches as members of the International Security Assistance Force distribute vaccines meant to stop a virus spreading through the tribe's flock.

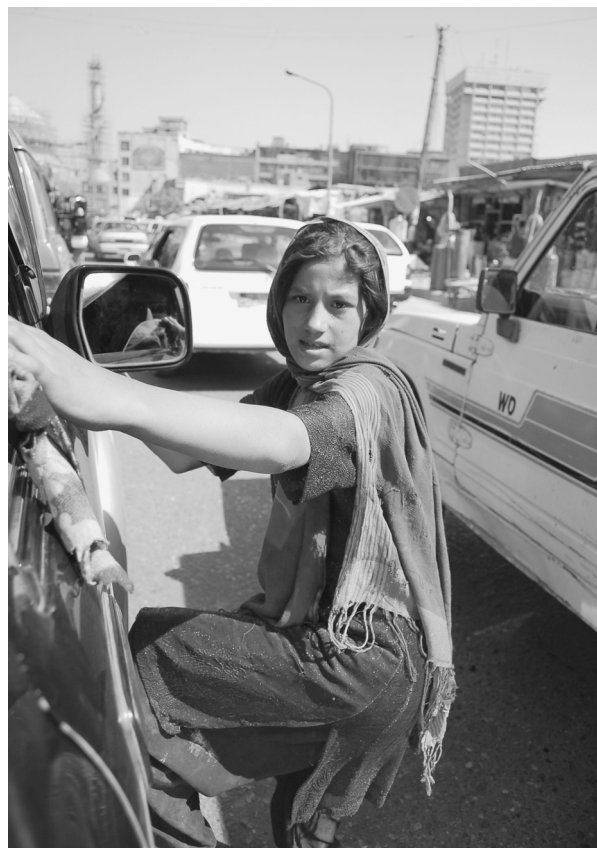


Photos by Najibullah Musafar/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.

Safya Saify

I started a photography career in my university course of social science, where I focused on projects about women's issues. The World Bank then offered me a scholarship to study technical aspects of photography. Now I had the thirst for photography, so I joined Cardon University where I studied it full-time. Then I was selected to join the one-year course in photojournalism at Aina Photo. Now I work there as a freelance photographer and started the first net-café for women in Kabul University.

This 12-year-old girl cleans car windows to make money for her family, who can't afford to send her to school. She earns about 300 afghanis each day (\$6 U.S.).



During the holy month of Ramadan, a 30-year-old woman begs in Kabul to buy food for her children. 2005.

Words and photos by Safya Saify/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.

Small gangs of boys beg for money on the streets as part of a group run by adults.

The boys are given sleeping pills in the day and left to sleep while people throw money in their hats.

At the end of the day the “boss” comes along and collects the money. The children

become addicted to pharmaceutical drugs and are dependent on the bosses to survive.



An Afghan student dresses in traditional Pashtun dress and makeup. After the fall of the Taliban, women are able to express their gender more freely than before.

The Afghan Women’s Garden was founded by the Ministry of Women to provide a safe and private place for women to practice sports. They have facilities for sports such as volleyball, basketball, football, tae kwon do and karate. ■



Photos by Safya Saify/Courtesy of Aina Photo/Afghanistan.

AVIAN FLU, A PANDEMIC, & the Role of Journalists

From November 30 until December 2, 2006, discussion at the Nieman Foundation revolved around news coverage of a potential health crisis—the emergence of the next influenza pandemic. Presented by the Nieman Foundation and organized by Stefanie Friedhoff, this conference was sponsored by the Dart Foundation and cosponsored by the National Center for Critical Incident Analysis and the Association of Health Care

Journalists. “The Next Big Health Crisis—And How to Cover It” brought journalists together with scientists, public health officials, medical experts, academic researchers, law enforcement officers, public policy experts, and Homeland Security officials to talk about how best to prepare for the possible arrival of pandemic flu. In the opening panel, a specialist in infectious disease—introduced as “the king of preparedness for pandemic

flu”—teamed up with several journalists to share information on what we might expect when a widespread, dangerous strain of flu creates a societal disaster.

With publication of this panel’s presentation—and subsequent ones—the words on the pages of Nieman Reports are edited excerpts from a lengthy transcript of the conference.

We are grateful to The Associated Press for their generosity in providing nearly all of the photographs, which offer a visual understanding of these issues. ■



A man wears a rooster head to publicize bird flu prevention on the streets of Xi’an in China’s Shaanxi Province. March 2006. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press/EyePress.*

Preparing for Pandemic Flu

Stephen Prior, Executive Director, National Center for Critical Incident Analysis

We're dealing with an extremely complex environment—it's a complex geopolitical environment and a complex environment from the scientific standpoint. And it is also very complex in terms of communication. So we have uncertainty and complexity. And when we have uncertainty and complexity in dealing with a crisis, the last component that comes into play is trust—trust with the public, trust with our colleagues, and trust with our families. Trust will be the paramount currency on which we decide what happens. If we're trusted—and if the information is trusted—then we run the risk of getting it right. And that will be wonderful.

Michael Osterholm, Director, Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy and Member of the National Science Advisory Board on Biosecurity

Wake up: It's already tomorrow.

Pandemic influenza is not a matter of if it is going to happen. It's not a question. There have been 10 pandemics in the past 300 years; pandemics date back to Hippocrates, and there will be pandemics in the future. The question is when, where and what will cause it. A pandemic is very different than an earthquake, hurricane or tsunami in that it will be worldwide. There won't be 47 states coming to the aide of three Gulf states, as happened in Hurricane Katrina, or one country coming to the aide of another country in the sense that we typically think of pandemics. And that's okay. We just have to begin to think about how we are going to prepare for it and what does that mean.

The other piece we've focused on so much is the 258 World Health Organization (WHO) reported cases with 154 deaths, 54 countries having avian cases, and 10 countries with both human and avian cases. Without sounding crass, that's not the problem. In a public health world, 258 cases of anything occurring over a few years is not a big issue. It's what it represents and the future potential that we have to look

at. This is not about distinct events that so often the news media are able to cover with comfort. This is about a movement, a long-term issue. If I had a nickel for every time reporters tell me that their editors asked today why should I be covering this, I could probably retire. One thing we have to address is pandemic fatigue that reflects where we're at today with this story.

I have yet to see a single media organization in the world that has anything beyond what I'd call a very cursory plan for how to respond; the vast majority hasn't thought about it at all. I haven't found one company that has bought a sufficient number of respirators that could be used every day by another person throughout the entire duration. Not having that is like buying a 40-foot rope for somebody drowning 60 feet out. This is very critical given that the news media will play a very important role during this time.

Given our just-in-time economy, the overlay with pandemic influenza is going to be huge, and yet there has been virtually no coverage of this circumstance. Today, for example, 80 percent of all the pharmaceutical products used in the United States originate in other countries. In a pandemic situation, overnight we'll lose not just flu drugs but also most of the drugs we count on every day. We've looked at these supply chains and the ability to maintain them. It's going to collapse, and there are many other supply chain issues. This is not scare tactics. I worry desperately that one day we're going to wake up to the next pandemic, and the world is going to be surprised, and I wonder what the journalistic world is going to think they missed. Imagine if we'd had three years notice that Hurricane Katrina would happen on the day it did. What would have been done in that three-year period from the time they were notified to the day it happened? We're notifying you now: It is going to happen.

Brian Toolan, National Editor, The Associated Press

The Associated Press's [AP] experience rivals any other news organization in covering

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—Michael Osterholm

widespread health crises. And we've taken preparations to keep our journalists safe as they cover these events. So we ask ourselves now whether we are poised to provide essential coverage—to make our coverage as deep and specific as it can be—and keep our journalists safe and healthy during a pandemic. And my answer is maybe.

When the avian flu broke out in Vietnam, we did not rush immediately to the farms where hundreds of thousands of chickens were dying, but we covered the story more than adequately. When we had the right kind of equipment and supplies to provide some safeguard for our reporters, we did cover that part of the story. Our experience on that story resulted in some guidelines: Caution is our first option; reporting by phone, when possible, is an option. We're prepared for large numbers of our staff to be telecommuting. And we've stockpiled protective gear that many of you would recognize—N95 masks, boots, gloves, sanitary wipes, smocks and disposable boots, and placed this equipment in a dozen domestic bureaus in large cities, with a geographical spread that was intentional. The same equipment exists in almost all of our foreign bureaus—certainly in Asia, but also in Europe and the Middle East, and AP's bureaus, especially foreign ones, have large supplies of Tamiflu. We have 10 medical and science reporters, domestically and around the world on which we depend heavily. In the case of a huge outbreak, we'll establish a universal flu coverage desk in New York that will coordinate all of the coverage.

What we don't know about pandemic flu is what concerns us all. One of our Asian editors called SARS and the avian influenza "warm-ups" for what a pandemic would require. He said we've gotten a pale sense of the pressures and the performance expectations, but we really haven't been truly tested. We would have to recalculate the risk of coverage in the case of a pandemic. Can the AP, or any organization, afford to have 40 percent of its staff out sick or home tending with illnesses of their family members? Would the loss of such manpower and our dependency on technology stretch technology to its limits? Where will the next pandemic arrive? We know globalization is going to be a conveyance for it, the wings of the disease. Will governments be open about what they are confronting and their



Dustin Duvall, (left) is hugged by his mother, Elizabeth Duvall, after they were reunited outside the remains of their neighborhood in East Biloxi, Mississippi. August 29, 2005. *Photo by Patrick Schneider/Courtesy of The Sun Herald.*

capabilities of meeting the challenges of a pandemic? China's obfuscation at the beginning of SARS was about its only dependable trait. If we don't get honest feedback from companies, from organizations, from nations, from agencies like WHO, then journalism's efforts are going to be compromised and populations are going to be dangerously ill-informed.

Stan Tiner, Executive Editor, The Sun Herald, Biloxi, Mississippi

Learning from Hurricane Katrina: Plan, plan, plan.

Our little eight-page newspaper we published on the day of Katrina was tangible proof that a community institution was actually working. It was evidence to the community that the center was holding, while in those early days other institutions they depended on were not delivering on expectations; some were not delivering at all. When a disaster such as Katrina or a massive health threat is upon us, we are likely to be overwhelmed. Opportunities for success and survival are connected to a good plan thought out well in advance, one that is strategic and involves communication and engagement with every person in your organization. The Sun Herald's emergency action is updated from time to time, and

When the avian flu broke out in Vietnam, we did not rush immediately to the farms where hundreds of thousands of chickens were dying, but we covered the story more than adequately.

—Brian Toolan

it's the working document from which we were able to publish a newspaper on the day after Katrina. Its elements cover everything from a possible bomb threat to anthrax, and on our radar screen is pandemic flu. The Sun Herald already sponsored a forum with the University of Southern Mississippi at which our state epidemiologist spoke to members of the community. We found an extraordinary level of engagement with leaders from a number of industries, such as banking and the medical field, who were extremely well informed and developing pretty comprehensive plans.

During Katrina our building sprang many leaks, but our best journalism was

produced in that soggy newsroom.

No employee of The Sun Herald died that day, but 60 of them lost their homes. Reporters and editors discovered slabs where their homes once stood; they came back into the newsroom where we hugged and cried together and went about our important job of bearing witness to the biggest story of our lives. The scale and scope of Katrina was greater than any plan could have anticipated, but for the most part the plan, like the

building, held together. We also were nimble and adaptable to the conditions. Newspaper people are clever, and they responded to the enormous challenge with heroic efforts. And the empathy created by shared pain and circumstance gave our journalism unusual insight into the story as it unfolded day by day.

Because there were literally thousands of big stories all around us, we learned to practice journalistic triage, investigating the

massive information field, producing and publishing those stories that we deemed most necessary to serve the people of South Mississippi with the news that would help them survive the initial shock of the storm. Because of the horrible and complete nature of the losses suffered, we could have gone on for months reporting nothing but stories about the loss of life and architectural and cultural and personal treasures. We were mindful, though, of the emotional trauma that was evident in almost all Katrina survivors. So we deliberately sought out stories of the many acts of heroism and selflessness shown across South Mississippi.

Early on we had a choice of two incredible stories and wonderful images that would have made our front page any day. One was about the recovery of bodies in Biloxi, where a photographer had captured a stunning image of firefighters tenderly carrying out the bodies of victims in clear plastic across a mountain of debris. The photo was backlit, creating a gossamer glow over the entire scene. It was a photo that all of us would love to have on the front page, but instead we ran a lead photo of a mother and son, uniting after a couple of days of separation and worry. [See page 51.] The picture captured the moment of that first hug against a backdrop of utter and complete destruction. The headline proclaimed hope amid ruin. It was part of a plan to help our people recover in body and spirit on the road back from Katrina.

In these matters, constant planning and constant communication are essential. And the power of a news organization to tell its unique story would be important when faced with pandemic flu. The credibility and moral authority of a local newspaper or television station should not be overlooked as we try to create a plan to prepare for this awful threat.

Questions and Answers

John Pope, Medical/Health Reporter, The Times-Picayune, New Orleans: One thing I've been grappling with is preparing our readers. I'm having trouble establishing where to draw the line between preparing people for something that could be really horrible and yet not scaring them to pieces. Two years ago, when there was a flu shot shortage, people were going nuts; they were afraid



Biloxi firefighters remove a body from the Point Cadet area of East Biloxi on August 30, 2005, the morning after Hurricane Katrina demolished the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Photo by Patrick Schneider/Courtesy of The Sun Herald.

that their aging mothers were going to die if they couldn't get a flu vaccine. So I'm having a problem with this.

Osterholm: It's going to be tough. But that is not a reason not to basically lay the truth out there and begin to think about what we will do. There's enough data to say there'll be more pandemics. What we don't know is how bad they will be. If you look at SARS, it was really a minor event in the global picture. But if you were in Toronto and saw what SARS did or in Singapore or in Hong Kong, it was dramatic. To the rest of the world, it almost didn't exist, but how many people worldwide realized that the three largest manufacturers of respiratory protection devices literally ran out of respirators in the week when SARS was winding down? They had nothing more to ship, because there's no reserve capacity. Had SARS spread to five or 10 more countries and lasted another six months, and nobody had respirators at all, do you think health care workers would have come to work? That's what's going to happen in a pandemic. So that's what we need you to be asking. Talk with your mortuary science people; ask them what they are going to do for caskets, for funerals, things like that. How are stores going to get food? Those are stories you can do now; you can reasonably ask such questions.

I don't believe every time there's another case of H5N1 infection in Asia that it's a news story. What I find troubling is that most of the media is covering the science of H5N1 right now by press release. So many drug companies are releasing their new latest finding on a vaccine, which is really a nonstory to many of us, but it makes front-page news like we've found the magic bullet. That's the kind of coverage reporters don't need to be doing; they need to be doing the kind of coverage that examines local preparedness and the big picture issues. With the vaccine, I've never seen one journalist raise the question of who out of the 300 million people in this country would get those three million doses of vaccine that might be available. To me, this is a fundamental question, and the kind of topic about which we could find the news media doing much more coverage.

Prior: Those who receive news are incredibly unforgiving, and I think this drives a lot of

news decisions. When a well-intentioned preparatory plan for something that is very possible to occur doesn't happen, does the news audience react with relief and glee and celebration and say, "Yes, we took the protective measures and never had to use them"? No. The public reacts with anger and asks, "Why did you scare me?" News organizations are put in an incredible bind by their audience on whom they depend for revenue and who are not dying to hear about this stuff. And when journalists do tell them about it, it's not like they want the whole story. They want pieces of it. They don't want to be scared too much.

Harro Albrecht, Medical Writer/Reporter, Die Zeit, Germany: The United States and probably most of the world is not well enough prepared because there are not enough ventilators and, with just-in-time delivery, everything will go down. How do we cover this message? As journalists, we demand to know about solutions, but this seems an impossible job to do. So it's hard to cover a situation in which there seems to be absolutely no solution.

Osterholm: That is a very important point, but if we had answers and solutions we wouldn't need to do preparedness planning. It's like the Kubler-Ross stages of death and dying. Denial is the first stage, and part of the problem is we are in a major state of denial. What we need to do is break through that, but you can't break through so much that you leave everybody with despair. But right now the vast majority of the world does not have a clue what very well could be on its doorstep tomorrow. So part of it is you're trying to move that. Going to local officials is critical. Not that there aren't national or international issues, but how is your local community going to take care of thousands of extra people over eight to 10 weeks? Begin to ask leaders who will do it when it happens, because they will do it. So that's where you have to start asking the questions. And when you stimulate discussion is when somebody comes up with creative ideas. But you have got to first challenge the system to even begin to think that people exist in these roles. That's a critical piece. ■

It's like the Kubler-Ross stages of death and dying. Denial is the first stage, and part of the problem is we are in a major state of denial. What we need to do is break through that, but you can't break through so much that you leave everybody with despair.

—Michael Osterholm

Understanding the Threat: A Focus on the Science

Two infectious disease specialists describe and discuss what the scientific community knows about the avian flu virus H5N1 and how pandemic influenza might emerge.

Michael Osterholm, Director, Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy and member of the National Science Advisory Board on Biosecurity

Understanding influenza: From the virus to the pandemic.

It's not enough for Americans to be worried about influenza in the United States. It's critical that Americans worry about influenza in every country, because we're so dependent on the rest of the world. All that crosses our borders each day in the global

just-in-time economy is growing exponentially. And today one out of every nine people who's ever lived is on the face of the earth. If similar to previous pandemics, the numbers will obviously be very large, relative to that world population.

Influenza A viruses are extremely diverse and evolve rapidly. [But] I know less about influenza today than I did 10 years ago, and the more information we get, in many instances, the more questions we have. Influenza pandemics emerge sporadically with variable

characteristics. There is no such thing as *the* influenza pandemic; pandemics differ and are varied, but with one commonality: They're caused by the influenza virus. Influenza causes disease in domestic animals like poultry, horses and swine, and new strains continually emerge. The host range is extensive in birds and mammals. The last count I saw there were 121 differ-

ent species of birds or mammals that have been infected with H5N1, so just that one strain can be very extensive.

Dealing with other infectious diseases, whether it's mumps, measles, rubella, so many other agents, they are basically glaciers in genetic change compared to the influenza A virus, which is a hurricane in its truest sense. And one of the problems we have today when we talk about H5N1 is there isn't such a thing as *an* H5N1 virus. There are multitudes of H5N1 viruses, and they're doing different things. They're causing different problems in different areas. Some may actually be more likely to be the next pandemic strain if, in fact, it's going to be at all. There may be specificities for animals vs. humans. Their interrelationship with humans and genetic aspects of humans is all there. This is the part I must tell you I understand less about, and I think many of my colleagues understand less about today, than we did a few years ago. And we're learning a lot, but each week it's almost a new learning experience.

Now to understand pandemic influenza, it occurs when a novel influence of strain emerges from the avian population that has the following features. One, it can be readily transmitted between humans. It's about the birds now, but it's not about the birds once it becomes a human-to-human transmitted agent. That's when we worry about us transmitting to and by ourselves. It will be genetically unique, and clearly we lack immunity to this. Studies have demonstrated over and over again a lack of H5N1 infection in recent history in humans. It is critical for us to understand that we look at influenza through a microscope when we need a telescope. We only have 70-some years of virologic data to really be able to talk about influenza when we know influenza goes back to antiquity.

Today we have this incredible genetic roulette table out there, with billions and billions of poultry to feed the billions and billions of people that we didn't have before. There are more domestic poultry today

Viruses Causing Past Pandemics

1889–1891	H3N8
1918–1919	H1N1
1957–1958	H2N2
1968–1969	H3N2

From "Avian Influenza: Assessing the Pandemic Threat." © 2005 by the World Health Organization.

than we probably have had collectively in the past 1,000 years and so therefore we have this new reservoir. Maybe in a past life this virus would not have been effective enough to basically develop genetic changes, given a limited population. Today it has this unlimited roulette table to play and play and play again, and that is what we're concerned about.

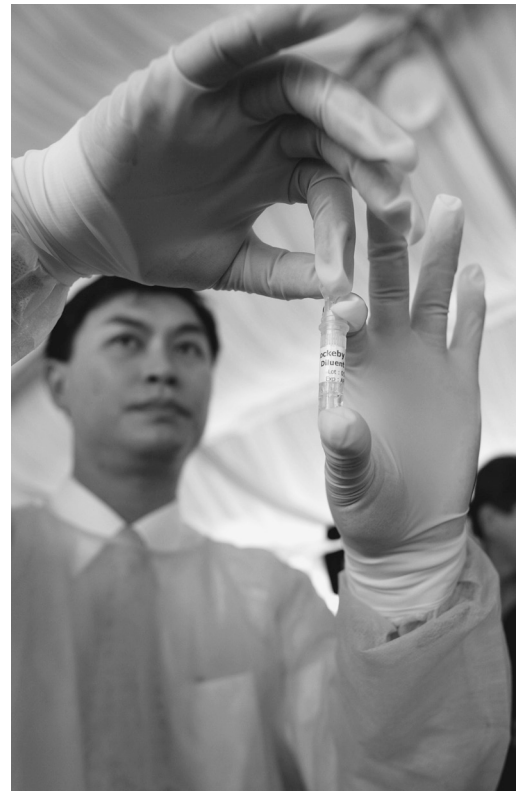
Pandemic influenza is different from avian influenza. If we learn nothing at this meeting, then understand we're not talking about avian influenza as the problem. We're talking about it as the intermediate problem. The problem is pandemic influenza. Now that doesn't mean avian influenza isn't critical, but please distinguish between the two because we keep hearing bird flu, bird flu, bird flu without understanding what we're really talking about is human pandemic influenza as the ultimate outcome of what we're concerned about. [And] influenza pandemics are recurring events. We know that. The world may be on the brink of another pandemic, which was said in very honest and very stark language by the World Health Organization (WHO). All countries will be affected. Widespread illness will occur. Medical supplies will be inadequate. A large number of deaths will occur. Economic and social disruption will be great. Every country must be prepared, and WHO will alert the world if the pandemic threat increases. [See the October 14, 2005 WHO document: "Ten things you need to know about pandemic influenza."¹]

Waves of the pandemic: In the 1889-1891 pandemic, it was the third wave, some 12 months into the pandemic that was by far the most severe. In 1918, it was the second wave, some five months into the pandemic that was the most severe. In 1957 and 1968, it was the first wave. From a public policy standpoint, if you have a limited stockpile of anything, which wave do you blow your wad on? Because there won't be the ability to restock in a way that we'd normally think, "OK, we'll get ready for the next season or the next season." That's a critical public policy issue that really hasn't been discussed. The global just-in-time economy presents a unique state of vulnerability to a pandemic. Governments everywhere will have limited resources to respond for 12 to 18 months. Every village, every town, every

city, every county, every state, every region, every country will be in the soup about the same time. Resources won't be moving in large numbers, particularly if people want to protect what resources they have for their turn, if the pandemic happens to be slightly off by a couple of weeks in their area. We're going to be on our own. And that's huge. I personally believe that in many instances the developing world is going to do a lot better during pandemic flu than the developed world because they're already used to dealing with subsistence living. They already are hand to mouth. It's going to be the haves that don't realize that when we don't have all these things, things will start to crash.

Hope and despair are not strategies. Yet it's easy to go either way—to hope it's not going to happen and just deny it. And despair, yes. It's clear when you hear this message you could just throw up your hands and say there's nothing I can do about it. What we have to find is that point in between, and the message is there: We'll get through it. Like every pandemic in our history, we'll get through it. The question is how we get through it.

I'd urge all of you to read John Barry's book, "The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History," in which he has done an amazing job of detailing what 1918-19 was like and why we might have some real important lessons to learn from it. [See excerpts from Barry's book regarding press coverage during the 1918 pandemic on pages 60 and 63.] H5N1 has many similarities to the 1918 pandemic's H1N1 virus if you look at the genetic studies and at how it kills in animal models. Today there is evidence that this clinical response may have some very similar pathways, but genetically you look at what it does, and it is very different. Does this mean it's going



Dr. Tan Sze-Wee, managing director of Rockeby Biomed Corporation Ltd., holds part of the Avian Flu Rapid Test Kit the company developed. The Singapore-based company claims to be the first in the world to market such a test kit in which results can be returned in 10 minutes. November 2005. Photo by Darren Soh/Courtesy of The Associated Press.

¹ www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic10things/en/index.html

to happen? No. But it has this ongoing genetic roulette table from which to achieve human-to-human transmission capability with billions of birds out there every day.

In terms of when will it happen? This is an important bottom-line message: No one can predict if, when or where H5N1 virus will shift from an avian strain with incidental human infections to a genetically competent human-to-human transmitted agent. It might never do it. We don't know. But it surely could do it. And there are obviously many warning signs that it may do it, and Asia is going to remain a genetic roulette wheel for H5N1 mutations. I wouldn't want

to seven million deaths. If it's a 1918-like pandemic, then there would be 180 to 360 million deaths. In comparison, HIV/AIDS has killed about 25 million people in the past quarter century. When it comes to hospitalization, this kind of a pandemic will obviously swamp the health care system. I believe there is no health care facility in this country that will do an adequate job, or even a beginning job, caring for those who are affected by this pandemic influenza strain. [See Osterholm's article in *Foreign Affairs*, "Unprepared for a Pandemic."²] One of the major untold stories is what's going to happen to our pharmaceutical drug supply. How many people are going to die from diabetes? If, in fact, we have an international interruption, will the insulin be coming in? Will such people get the drugs they need?

It's very fair to say that there will be certain tipping points in any pandemic, even if it's a moderate pandemic. As we learned in Katrina and in the tsunami, if the dead are treated disrespectfully, without a timely and respectful response, the population's anger increases and its belief in the system goes down. That's going to be a critical piece. We have a just-in-time delivery system for caskets today and for crematorium space. How are we going to plan at our local levels? That won't be a federal issue, won't even necessarily be a state issue. It's going to be a local issue. And the food system today is a just-in-time delivery system. We have very little understanding of that. Literally within days we will see major interruptions of food if we have interruption in travel. With issues of quarantine and border crossings, we need to get statements out now that they're inappropriate responses. They're not going to help. And in fact the collateral damage from doing those things, of interrupting trade and travel, might be a major part of the pandemic we never even thought about or intended. That's important to get that out now: They're not going to work.

To do nothing is unacceptable. To promise protection is unethical. This is the issue we're going to have, and it's going to be our credibility in getting that message out. Governments are going to have limited resources to respond. Count on that now. That's not a failure of government. That's



Chinese Pigeon Association workers inoculate birds with a bird flu vaccine at an event to vaccinate more than 40,000 pigeons in Shenzhen in southern China's Guangdong Province. October 2005. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.*

to bet my family's life on H5N1 not becoming the next pandemic influenza strain. That's the only way I know how to express it. So if you want a scientific answer for what's going to happen, I can't give it to you. This is the only answer I can give you.

In terms of looking at what might happen, if we look at the next pandemic, most estimate that 30 to 60 percent of the world's population will become infected—60 percent is the very high end based on previous pandemics, and 30 percent is kind of what people see as a low end. If it's a 1968-like pandemic, then there will be two

² www.foreignaffairs.org/20070301faessay86204/michael-t-osterholm/unprepared-for-a-pandemic.html

just what the reality will be. Up to 20 to 30 percent of workers will be out at any time due to illness or other ill family members. We see that now with crises that happen, but under the worst-case scenario we're going to survive. Pandemic response will be largely local, so we need to put much more emphasis on local considerations and concerns. Family preparedness is a key issue. The messages have been very fragmented. What can families do if they have the resources? What can families do who don't have the resources now? I can't overemphasize the importance of community leadership, whether it is political, health care, public health, security, first response, business, or even religious. Now is the time to understand the leadership qualities we'll need, like a Winston Churchill or Franklin Delano Roosevelt who says we're in this for the long haul. It's going to get worse before it gets better, but hang with us, we're going to get through it.

In conclusion, as a scientist it's not a matter of if, just when and where. It's just that simple. What we don't know is what it will be like. At minimum, assume we'll have no vaccine for the first six months and then supplies will be trim and limited for the duration. Even if a 1918 scenario does unfold, 98 out of every 100 of us are going to get through this at the other end. The point is how do we get society through it with all of the collateral damage issues. How do we minimize the pain and suffering? What are the messages? Community planning is not an option; it must happen, and we need more emphasis on community planning today.

Marc Lipsitch, Professor of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health

Questions to ask when covering the next infectious disease crisis.

It's possible to report on the kind of topics that we're talking about here, at a very high degree of sophistication, without being a graduate-trained scientist. There's tremendous uncertainty about a lot of the topics here, and there's therefore a lot of disagreement among scientists, mainly on the topics about which we're uncertain. So there's a reason to have multiple sources, good and really knowledgeable sources, to make some sense of where consensus lies.

Have curiosity and skepticism, of course, and a desire to fit pieces of information that are coming out at a rapid clip—some 20 to 30 reports each day—into a coherent story. You can't do everything, so the question is which pieces of apparent news (or possible news) fit into a bigger picture and how. One thing that distinguishes a good scientist is a person who doesn't write paper after paper on unrelated observations but understands why and how these observations are relevant to a larger picture. In my small experience with journalism, that offers a pretty good description of the best journalists as well.

There is a lot of information coming out, and the last thing you want to do is contribute to confusion, panic or complacency. One of those three is hard to avoid in any given case; in good news, bad news or mixed news, there can be confusion, complacency and panic. The other aspect is prioritization. With so much news and information and limited space to talk about flu, it's more important to talk perhaps about the mortuary directors once in a while than to write about each press release. Prioritizing news stories will help to make space for the important ones.

What I want to focus more on now is the notion that information very appropriately is managed and for several different reasons—for scientific completeness, for reasons of scientific caution, and for reasons of political or economic caution. When we learn something about a new disease, especially something as publicly important as H5N1, there are at least three different very distinct uses of that information. And the tone with which the information is conveyed might reflect these varying uses. The information is important for scientists to advance the science; it's important for public health workers, who also base their work on the science, to make a response, and this may often be done well before the scientific certainty that scientists like is possible. Finally, there is the work of public health communication. I want to be clear here that the facts and the scientific basis for each of these is the same, and the uncertainty is the same. But scientists have the luxury and also the duty of reserving judgment and not making strong statements until they know, or think they know, what's going on. Communicators and responders have to act whether or not they can be cer-

A reporter should be able to get someone to explain the results on the back of an envelope or in a 20-minute phone conversation once they've done their big computer simulation.

—Marc Lipsitch

tain. They use the same data, but they use it in a different way.

Public health responders, if they waited until it was certain human-to-human transmission, would have missed their opportunity. So as early responders, particularly for the WHO, which is trying to contain the early spread, there has to be a different standard of evidence, a sort of guilty until proven innocent standard. Action has to be taken before the evidence is in to convict human-to-human transmission. The reasons are obvious: There are delays in getting samples to labs and delays in getting results. And waiting until those delays pass loses time. Beyond that, once the tests are done, there is still some uncertainty.

So the consequence is that if first responders want to have some hope of containing human-to-human transmission, they will have to respond to false alarms. They will have to respond to cases where there is limited or no human-to-human transmission. Unfortunately, perhaps, this same group of people that is supposed to be responding intentionally to false alarms also has the duty of trying to maintain public understanding and public calm.

Human-to-human transmission obviously would trigger changes in the pandemic phase, and the start of pandemic response plans can trigger all sorts of damage, economic and otherwise. Moreover, WHO, less than in the past, is still restricted in its ability to report health information from a country, sometimes formally restricted, and also dependent on the goodwill and cooperation of ministries of health and host governments. So announcements to the public must be cautious and must emphasize the possibility that things are better than they seem, given at the same time that actions must reflect the possibility that they're worse than they seem. Understanding those dynamics helps us to interpret some of the actions and statements.

One question we need to ask is, "What is news in this kind of coverage?" In reporting on press releases from drug companies and health authorities, the real question to ask is how the latest finding changes our understanding about an outbreak or about the situation in a given country or the global situation. Are the claims emphasizing the best or the worst case? How uncertain are we? Or, in other words, how strongly does the evidence support our best guess, because

to a greater or lesser degree, all science in an outbreak is framed in uncertainty.

The time frame is enormously important. With almost every response measure, such as a drug or a vaccine or a mask, it is going to be in limited supply. How much will be available when the pandemic starts? How fast, if at all, can production be scaled up? Is planning for the scale-up taking into account the fact that the pandemic itself will be disruptive? Or is that based on current levels of production? With most response measures, you need to understand whether the measure depends on knowing who's infectious and whether that's practical for a given infection. In SARS, it turned out to be practical, but no one knew at the time, how much transmission was happening from asymptomatic or presymptomatic people. So fortunately the answer was yes, it was practical. But we didn't know for sure about that at the time. How strongly can we extrapolate? When we're planning, we have to extrapolate our knowledge of how a particular measure, such as an antiviral drug, worked in the past. What is the basis on which we can expect it to work equally well or better or worse in the next case? In terms of prioritization, and this has not been widely discussed and it's certainly not been carefully planned out, who's going to get the limited supplies? Is there a scientific basis? And is there an ethical basis for this decision?

What mathematical models to date have done is to model how transmission of the virus might be blocked, examining how changes in contact patterns or changes in the course of the infection—if antivirals could make such changes—would alter the epidemic. These models try to reduce the uncertainty in this area. A reporter should be able to get someone to explain the results on the back of an envelope or in a 20-minute phone conversation once they've done their big computer simulation. And there are people who had to make serious decisions based on quantitative predictions. Their view is that underneath it all it might be complicated, but the phenomena are not counterintuitive. Everything modeled is something in our experience, and the models are simply a way of quantifying it and putting it together. ■

Understanding the Risk: What Frightens Rarely Kills

To communicate with people about risk, journalists need to better understand how and why people respond in the ways they do to messages they receive about danger. An expert in risk communication explains the connection between risks that kill people and those that upset them, and he describes how best to approach audiences based on their beliefs about the risks they face.

**Peter Sandman, Risk Communication Consultant,
Princeton, New Jersey**

Fear of fear and panic of panic: Is it okay to scare people about influenza?

The risks that kill people and the risks that upset people are completely different. If you know this is deadly, then that tells you almost nothing about whether it's upsetting. If you know a risk is upsetting, that tells you almost nothing about whether it's deadly. So essentially these two variables are unrelated, and it doesn't matter what your measure of harm is, across a wide range of hazards; the correlation between how much harm that hazard does and how upset people get about it is this absurdly low 0.2 correlation.

The key intellectual question in risk perception is, "Why is the correlation so low?" The key practical question in risk communication is, "How do we get it higher?" Half of the problem in getting the correlation higher is figuring out how to get people to get more upset when the risk is serious; half of the problem is figuring out how to get people less upset when the risk is trivial.

A long time ago, trying to make sense out of this universal very low correlation, I came up with new terminology to describe it. I said, "Let's take the concept of risk and divide it in half. Let's consider the technical side of risk—whether it's likely to kill you, hurt you, or damage the ecosystem—let's call that 'hazard.'" And then I said, "Let's take the other half of risk—the culture half of risk rather than the scientific half—that is whether it's likely to upset you, anger you,

or frighten you; let's call that 'outrage.'" And I came up with the formula: Risk is equal to hazard plus outrage.

When experts look at a risk, they focus on the hazard and ignore the outrage. Therefore, they systematically overestimate the risk when the hazard is high and the outrage is low, and they systematically underestimate the risk when the hazard is low and the outrage is high, because all they're doing is looking at the hazard. Experts focus on the hazard and ignore the outrage; the public makes exactly the opposite mistake. The public focuses on the outrage and ignores the hazard. The public, therefore, overestimates the risk when the outrage is high and the hazard is low, and underestimates the risk when the outrage is low and the hazard is high. The only real relationship between hazard and outrage is that they're both called "risk" by different groups of people.

When we look at the high correlation between outrage and hazard perception, the question we're asking is this: Do people get upset because they think something is dangerous, or do people think something is dangerous because they're upset? That's a very important question, because if you want to manage a system, you have to know what the cause is and the effect is so that you won't be in the embarrassing position of trying to influence the cause by manipulating the effect. It's a cycle—with arrows going in both directions—but the arrow for perceived hazard to outrage is very weak, and the arrow from outrage to perceived hazard is very strong. For the most part, people don't get upset because they think something is dangerous. It is much truer that people think something is dangerous because they're upset. It is similarly untrue that people are calm because they think something is safe; it's much truer that people think something is safe because they are calm. Outrage is the engine of hazard perception. Hazard perception is not the engine of outrage. Managing hazard perception is about managing outrage. You don't manage the hazard perception in

For the most part, people don't get upset because they think something is dangerous. It is much truer that people think something is dangerous because they're upset.

—Peter Sandman

Press Lessons From the 1918 Pandemic Flu

In his book, "The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History," John M. Barry explains in great detail what happened to people and public institutions, including the press, during the 1918 pandemic flu. The dearth of solid and accurate reporting by the press about the extent of the public health danger of the flu occurred because of broader circumstances of that time. American troops were fighting in Europe in World War I and maintaining morale was seen as critical to that effort. It was punishable by 20 years in jail to "utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the government of the United States." Even a U.S. Congressman was imprisoned under this act. Also, in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson had established the Committee on Public Information with the purpose of influencing American public opinion through a vigorous propaganda campaign. One architect of this campaign said, "Truth and falsehood are arbitrary terms The force of an idea lies in its inspirational value. It matters little if it is true or false." It was within this political context that the press was functioning when pandemic flu reached the United States. The press's uncritical approach to providing the public with the truth of what was happening was certainly affected by the constraints under which public officials and news reporters felt they were operating. Barry notes that today, however, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is trying to institutionalize in its pandemic planning the need for candor if another pandemic flu strikes.

The following excerpts are taken from Barry's book.

Distortions Result in an Absence of Trust

Newspapers reported on the disease with the same mixture of truth and half-truth, truth and distortion, truth and lies with which they reported everything else. And no national official ever publicly acknowledged the danger of influenza.

But in the medical community, deep concern had arisen Many serious pathologists in Germany and Switzerland considered the possibility of plague. The director of the laboratory at Bellevue Hospital wondered in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* if "the world is facing" not a pandemic of an extraordinarily lethal influenza but instead a mild version of plague, noting "The similarity of the two diseases is enforced by the clinical features, which are remarkably alike in many respects, and by the pathology of certain tissues other than the lungs."

What pathologists said in medical journals physicians muttered to each other, while laymen and women watched a husband or wife turning almost black. And a great chill settled over the land, a chill of fear

As terrifying as the disease was, the press made it more so. They terrified by making little of it, for what officials and the press said bore no relationship to what people saw and touched and smelled and endured. People could not trust what they read. Uncertainty follows distrust, fear follows

order to manage the outrage; you manage the outrage in order to manage the hazard perception.

Precaution Advocacy

Is it possible to motivate precautions without increasing outrage? Yes, it is. It's not easy, but you can do it. The most powerful way to get people to take precautions is to

mobilize and increase outrage.

Let me talk for a minute about some of the technical specs for precaution advocacy. Low outrage equals apathy: people are not interested, they're not concerned, they're not upset, they're not angry, they're not frightened. They're apathetic. One thing that's true, as a result of people being apathetic, is you're going to have to keep your message short. Many people have short

uncertainty, and, under conditions such as these, terror follows fear.

When influenza struck in Massachusetts, the nearby Providence Journal reported, "All the hospital beds at the forts at Boston Harbor are occupied by influenza patients There are 3,500 cases at Camp Devens." Yet the paper asserted, "Such reports may actually be reassuring rather than alarming. The soldier or sailor goes to bed if he is told to, just as he goes on sentry duty. He may not think he is sick, and he may be right about it, but the military doctor is not to be argued with, and at this time the autocrat is not permitting the young men under his charge to take any chance."

As the virus infested the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, The Associated Press reported, "To dispel alarm caused throughout the country by exaggerated stories ... Captain W.A. Moffat, commandant, gave out the statement today that while there are about 4,500 cases of the disease among the 45,000 blue jackets at the station, the situation in general is much improved. The death rate has been only one and one half percent, which is below the death rate in the east."

That report was meant to reassure. It is unlikely that it did so, even though it omitted the fact that quarantines were being imposed upon the training station, the adjoining Great Lakes Aviation Camp, and the nearby Fort Sheridan army cantonment, which, combined, amounted to the largest military concentration in the country. And military authorities of course assured both civilians nearby as well as the country at large that "the epidemic is on the wane."

Over and over in hundreds of newspapers, day after day, repeated in one form or another, people read Rupert Blue's reassur-

ance as well: "There is no cause for alarm if precautions are observed."

They read the words of Colonel Philip Doane, the officer in charge of health at the country's shipyards, who told The Associated Press, "The so-called Spanish influenza is nothing more or less than old fashioned grippe."

Those words, too, ran in hundreds of newspapers. But people could smell death in them. Then they came to know that death....

'Don't Get Scared!'

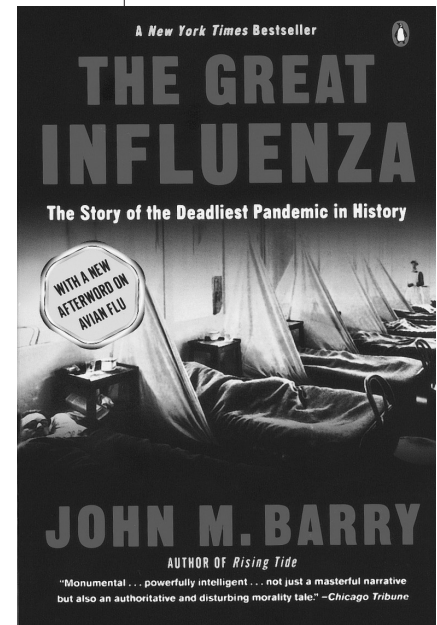
So people watched the virus approach, and feared, feeling as impotent as it moved toward them as if it were an inexorable oncoming cloud of poison gas. It was a thousand miles away, five hundred miles away, fifty miles away, twenty miles away....

Wherever one was in the country, it crept closer—it was in the next town, the next neighborhood, the next block, the next room. In Tucson the Arizona Daily Star warned readers not to catch "Spanish hysteria!" "Don't worry!" was the official and final piece of advice on how to avoid the disease from the Arizona Board of Health.

Don't get scared! said the newspapers everywhere. *Don't get scared!* they said in Denver, in Seattle, in Detroit; in Burlington, Vermont, and Burlington, Iowa, and Burlington, North Carolina; in Greenville, Rhode Island, and Greenville, South Carolina, and Greenville, Mississippi. And every time the newspapers said, *Don't get scared!* they frightened. ■

attention spans. Another thing is you're going to have to work really hard to make your message interesting, because apathetic people are easily bored. If you're a source, you've got to try to make it interesting to the reporter. If you're a reporter, you've got to try to make it interesting to the editor. If you're an editor, you've got to try to make it interesting for the reader or viewer. Those are all very daunting tasks because apathetic

people are not easily interested, and they're certainly not interested for long. It is also important to stay on message. If you've only got an eight-second sound bite, it's got to be interesting, because people are going to tune out pretty easily. Craft your message very carefully. Pick your words very carefully and then stick to them. Keep it short, make it interesting, stay on message, and that's all public relations 101.



Outrage Management

Now when we are looking at risks that are high in outrage and low in hazard, people are very likely to get upset and not very likely to get hurt. This calls for “outrage management.” Now your goal is to decrease the outrage. It’s the flip side of precaution advocacy. If the paradigm there is, “Watch out!,” here it is, “Calm down.” But what happens to outraged people when you say, “Calm down”? Where does the outrage go? It goes up, right? So you don’t actually say, “Calm down,” but that is your goal. Instead of an eight-second sound bite, you have an eight-hour meeting. It’s a very different situation; no need to keep it short. Should you make it interesting? Of course you should not. Your goal is to make this issue as boring as you can possibly make it. The problem is not insufficient interest. They’re already interested; in fact, they’re obsessed. In outrage management, you very much want to diminish their interest. You can’t afford to be boring, but your goal is to make the issue boring; to make the issue lower in outrage.

Outrage management is done largely with the ears; precaution advocacy is done exclusively with the mouth. But outrage management involves a lot of listening, and a very weird thing happens if you’re a good listener. One thing that happens is people get calmer when they get listened to. I’m not saying the outrage disappears. It’s not magic, but they get calmer. The other thing that happens is they start wanting to hear from you.

The relationship between information and emotion is that strong emotion provokes biased information-seeking. The stronger your emotions, the more you will learn; but it’s not neutral learning. You’re learning in order to validate what you’re already feeling. People who don’t have strong emotions usually learn very little; people with strong emotions learn a lot, but it’s biased. Those are your choices.

Journalist: If I write a really factually sound article, if you’re afraid are you just going to dismiss it?

Sandman: If you write a factually sound article I will harvest it for things that support my attitude.

If there is a pandemic, particularly if there is a 1918-like rather than a 1968-like pandemic, we’ll all be doing crisis communication. That’s obvious.

—Peter Sandman

John Pope, Medical/Health Reporter, The Times-Picayune, New Orleans: Can’t you sometimes dial down the terror? I’ve found that just by the words I’ve used in four years of writing about West Nile. If I used the word “outbreak” instead of “epidemic,” it sort of cooled the temperature a bit. People think an epidemic is biblical while an outbreak is just a couple of cases around the block.

Sandman: Yes. You’re sending signals, and precisely because people don’t have a technical vocabulary, the signals matter significantly more than the words and numbers. The classic example is if you say a pandemic could kill as many as two to seven million, people will kind of shrug off the two to seven, but they’ll focus on the “as many as” as evidence that it’s a bad number. They’ll say, “Oh, shit. It could kill as many as two to seven million people!” If, on the other hand, you said it would only kill two to seven million people, people use “only” as their signal and say, “Oh, no biggie. It’s only two to seven million people.” So the number matters less than the signals you put around the number; those tell people whether you’re trying to freak them out or you’re trying to help them.

Crisis Communication and Pandemic Journalism

Crisis communication is when people are upset and they’re right to be upset. That’s a third paradigm, along with precaution advocacy and outrage management. With the first one, the message is “Watch out!” And with the second, it’s “Calm down.” Here the goal of the message is, “We’ll get through this together.” And this presents yet a third skill set. The things you do when you’re doing crisis communication are very different from the things you do with precaution advocacy and outrage management.

Where is pandemic communication on this map? It depends where you are in the pandemic and where you are in the world. Now, for the most part, for those of us who think pandemic flu is a serious issue, we are doing precaution advocacy. Those who think it isn’t serious are doing outrage management. If there is a pandemic, particularly if there is a 1918-like rather than a 1968-like pandemic, we’ll all be doing crisis communication. That’s obvious.

The Terror of Disease

John M. Barry concludes his book, "The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History," with the following haunting words. See previous box on page 60 for an explanation of the broader context in which events he describes here happened.

There was terror afoot in 1918. The randomness of death, its speed, and its tendency to kill off the healthiest brought the terror home.

The media and public officials helped create that terror—not by exaggerating the disease but by minimizing it, in their attempt to reassure the public.

Terror rises in the dark of the mind, an unknown beast tracking us in the jungle. All good horror movies build upon the fear of the unknown, the uncertain threat that we cannot see, do not know, and from which we can find no safe haven. In every horror movie, once the monster appears, terror condenses into the concrete and diminishes. Fear remains. But the edge of panic created by the unknown dissipates.

In 1918 the lies of officials and of the press prevented the terror from becoming

concrete. The public could trust nothing and so they knew nothing. And this terror prevented one woman from caring for her sister, prevented volunteers from bringing food to families too ill to feed themselves and who then starved to death, prevented trained nurses from responding to the most urgent calls for their services. The fear, not the disease, threatened to break the society apart. As Victor Vaughan—a man who did not overstate to make a point—warned, "Civilization could have disappeared within a few more weeks."

So the final lesson of 1918, a simple one yet the one most difficult to execute, is that those who occupy positions of authority must lessen the panic that can alienate the members of a society. A society that takes as its motto "every man for himself" is no longer a civilized society.

Those in authority must retain the public's trust. The way to do that is to distort nothing, to put the best face on nothing, to try to manipulate no one. Lincoln said that first, and best.

A leader must make whatever horror exists concrete. Only then will people be able to break it apart. ■

None of this is what pandemic journalism is about. Reporters are not trying to increase the outrage, they are not trying to decrease the outrage; they are covering the outrage.

Reporters do vary their coverage in ways that are absolutely predictable. Because it's hard to interest your readers in something that could kill them but doesn't upset them, that coverage is dutiful and boring and very low on volume. It is very little investigated, and it is extraordinarily credulous. Any official source can tell you anything, and you'll cover it. You write it off the press release. As the risk gets more serious, or as the reporter gets more worried, even though the editor hasn't and the audience hasn't become worried, the coverage changes. I can look at a news story and tell if the reporter has gotten Tamiflu.

The coverage changes in very predictable ways. Now it's a crisis, so the coverage gets more extensive. Interestingly enough, the

coverage becomes overreassuring. I suspect part of what's going on is the reporter is genuinely worried and is trying to reassure him or herself by reassuring the reader. I think it's a psychological phenomenon; there may be an economic phenomenon. Terrified people are not good advertising audiences. It's not good for business to terrify your audiences. But I don't think reporters really care about business very much. So I think the main thing that's going on is the reporter's individual psychology. In any case, it is extremely noticeable that sources continue to imagine the reporters are sensationalizing, but reporters stop sensationalizing when they start thinking it's serious. Instead they become very overreassuring.

The Three Mile Island coverage was profoundly reassuring. Reassuring paragraphs outnumbered alarming paragraphs four to one, because reporters were scared and scared reporters write reassuring stories.

So there are very different visions of what the good story is, but if it's a high outrage low hazard story, reporters are going to cover the outrage more than the hazard. —Peter Sandman

Scared reporters also rely much more on official sources. At Three Mile Island, the antinuclear activists had enormous trouble—this was their moment, you know. My God, they'd been proved right and nobody wanted to quote them. The same thing is happening now with flu, with respect to those reporters who are starting to take it seriously. They are starting to get very solemn and very official. We all think that reporters listen too much to crazies, but as soon as you get worried, as soon as it becomes crisis communication, you listen a little to crazies.

When the issue is not serious but people are upset, reporters have fun. High outrage low hazard stories are fun to write, they get a lot of attention; the editor likes them, the reader likes them. Nothing is really at stake, and what we call sensationalism and you call good journalism is most characteristic of this kind of coverage. Your use of sources becomes completely different. You're still an objective reporter, but you do several things. You cover the outrage instead of the hazard. You cover people saying, "I'm scared shitless!" instead of people saying what the hazard is. Secondly, to the extent that you cover the hazard, you cover opinions about the hazard instead of data about the hazard.

We've done studies in which we wrote 50 paragraph articles with all kinds of stuff and gave them to different kinds of people, and we said, "This article is too long, get rid of half the paragraphs. Don't just cut from the bottom; pick the paragraphs to get rid of." Reporters invariably get rid of nearly all the science. Editors invariably get rid of all the science. The public gets rid of most of the science, and the scientists get rid of anything that smacks of humanity. So there are very different visions of what the good story is, but if it's a high outrage low hazard story, reporters are going to cover the outrage more than the hazard. Reporters are going to cover opinion about the outrage more than data about the outrage, and reporters are going to cover certain opinions more than others.

Let me draw a range that moves from completely safe to incredibly dangerous, starting at one and going to nine. Reporters do not care whether the real risk is two or five or nine. They judge that they're not qualified to tell, and they judge that it's not their business to try to tell. What especially

the general assignment reporter does is go on a scavenger hunt. Reporters sort of ignore one and two and sort of ignore eight and nine as being "too weird." They're also not very interested in four, five and six, because they're boring. It is hard to get a good story out of "Further research is needed." Most journalism is about three and seven. If it's a minor story, often three or seven get their own news release. Normally the story is launched by seven because risky is more newsworthy than safe. So somebody says it's risky, and you cover it; the next day, somebody says, "No, it isn't!" Then you cover that, too.

If it's a bigger story, you get three and seven into a story in alternating paragraphs and, once again, seven is going to get more attention than three because risky is more interesting than safe. But seven and three will all get more attention than two or five or eight. Those will all sort of fall by the wayside, and you get a nice little ping-pong match between three and seven, which seven always wins because the scary side always wins in the ping-pong match.

In choice of sources, government is the preferred source because government is the swing vote. You go to government first. If government says seven, you go find industry to say three. If government says three, you go find an activist to say seven. And then you've got your story. Don't really worry if the truth is in two or five or not. If you cared where the truth was, you'd be writing editorials. Well, that's a gross oversimplification.

Like all professionals, journalists are profoundly ambivalent about their own norms. Any time anybody stands up in front of a roomful of journalists and says, "You ought to care. You ought to make people realize how serious obesity is!" reporters can be counted on to say, "That's not my job, that's your job. I just cover it." But if somebody stands up and says, "That's not your job, that's my job, you just cover it," reporters tend to say, "Well, wait a minute. I'm a person too."

As a participant in another panel discussion about how disaster communication affects the public, Sandman illuminated other facets of his research about risk communication.

There are three points I want to make:

1. We need to overcome our fear of fear and be willing to frighten people. If we want to warn people, we've got to be willing to frighten them. When bad things happen, the bad things will frighten them. Once we have a pandemic, we won't have to frighten them, the pandemic will take care of that, but if we want precautions, rather than people muddling through as best they can and not having taken precautions, then we have to frighten them before events do.
2. The problem isn't panic; the problem is denial. I want to talk some about how to prevent denial, which is essentially a communication task in which the media can be very helpful.
3. When you frighten people, it's temporary; you can't sustain fear. There is an adjustment reaction phenomenon and then people revert to the new normal.

When people are initially aware of a risk, they overreact. They have a temporary short-term overreaction. People pause what they're doing, become hypervigilant, check out the environment more carefully than they normally would and—this is perhaps the most important characteristic of the adjustment reaction—they take precautions that may be excessive, may be inappropriate, and are certainly premature. For example, a person might go get Tamiflu, even though the government thinks that they shouldn't. If this way of reacting lasts a long time, it's no longer an adjustment reaction, it's an adjustment disorder and you need clinical help. If it lasts a short time, you're perfectly normal and you're going through a reaction.

The knee-jerk reaction of overreacting early to a potential crisis is extremely useful. Like other knee-jerk reflexes, it protects us. Perhaps the most important thing to say about the adjustment reaction is that people who have gone through it come out the other side calmer and better able to cope. People become able to cope with a crisis by going through an adjustment reaction, either in midcrisis, in which case they're late in coping, or they do that in advance of the crisis, in which case they are ready to cope.

It is inevitable that people will have this reaction: What we want is for them to have it early rather than late, and the way to accomplish that is to guide the adjust-

ment reaction, rather than trashing it, as it seems officials often do and journalists sometimes do.

Denial is why panic is rare. We are equipped with a circuit breaker and, when we're about to panic, we go into denial instead. Denial is not useful in that people in denial don't take precautions, but it's preferable to panic. People who are panicking do themselves harm; those who are in denial don't accomplish much, but at least they don't make things any worse. So denial is nature's way of protecting us from the horrible effects of panic and, whereas panic is rare, denial is extremely common. We need conscious effort on the part of the sources and—insofar as journalists are willing to make conscious efforts—we need a conscious effort on the part of journalists to protect people from denial by seducing them out of denial.

I want to identify what the research literature suggests are the five principle bulwarks against denial:

- The first is to legitimize fear. People go into denial because they don't feel entitled to be afraid. The more entitled people feel to be afraid, the less likely they are to go into denial. This is why the message, "Don't be afraid," is a very destructive message in serious circumstances, a very harmful message. Much superior is the message, "Well, of course, you're afraid, I'm afraid too. We're all afraid. We'll get through this together."
- The second bulwark against denial is things to do. It's not that if you have things to do you are less afraid; it's that if you have things to do you are better able to bear your fear. So you can tolerate higher levels of fear if you're busy. The military understands this very well, and it tries to keep soldiers busy so that they can tolerate their fear.
- A third bulwark against denial is things to decide; this is even better than things to do because instead of only enlisting our ability to act, you enlist our ability to choose. Wherever possible, offer people menus of things to do so they have opportunities to decide what they want to do and what they don't want to do. This makes them less likely to go with the denial, because it makes them more able to bear their fear.
- Bulwark No. 4 is love. Anyone who has

... if we want precautions, rather than people muddling through as best they can and not having taken precautions, then we have to frighten them before events do.

—Peter Sandman

had the experience of loving knows that we are much better able to bear fear on behalf of those we love than on our own behalf. The military knows well that soldiers don't fight for their country, they fight for their buddies, so that's a bulwark against denial. Again it's not that loving makes you less afraid, it's that loving makes you more able to bear your fear and less likely to trip that circuit breaker into denial.

- The fifth bulwark is one that's much more controversial—hate. Having somebody you hate or maybe a virus you hate can enable you to bear your fear and hang in there without tripping the circuit breaker into denial.

We have to overcome our fear of fear. We have to understand that fear is a solution, not the problem. It simply makes no sense to say, "I want you to take precautions, but I don't want you to be afraid." An important point to remind you of is that fear is a competition. When you make people afraid, you don't make them more fearful people (except very momentarily during the adjustment reaction), but what you do is get a larger slice of their fearfulness pie. When I try to scare people about a pandemic, I'm not trying to turn them into more frightened people; I'm trying to sap the fear that will otherwise be allocated to other fears they already have. The research is very clear:

This is the law of conservation and outrage. The level of fear a person has is the level of fear he or she has, and it changes glacially. Most of us are more fearful than we were as teenagers, so it does change a little bit, but a person's level of fear is mostly stable. In talking about the pandemic flu, we are not going to produce more frightened people, but we will get more of their fear for our issues. My sense is that in understanding this people feel a little bit less fearful of frightened people.

Later, in response to a question, Sandman spoke about the arrival of the H5N1 avian virus in the United States.

I look forward to H5N1 reaching our shores in birds because it will be a teachable moment. And the first thing we're going to have to teach people is no, this isn't the start of the crisis; this is a reminder of the crisis we've been looking at all along. A flu pandemic is still likely to hit us from the developing world and not from a bird in this country. By the time the pandemic flu gets to this country, it will have already made that transition [from a bird virus to a human virus], and it will be transported in people. We're going to have to teach this to people. We've taught them the wrong stuff and now we'll have to teach them the right stuff. We can do it; we're going to have to do it. ■

Preparing for the Crisis

Whether it involves education, law enforcement or public health, preparation for pandemic flu should be underway in every community. Speakers addressed tasks and topics that should be examined by reporters, who could use them to investigate how well their region's planning is proceeding.

Betty Kirby, Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Administration and Community Leadership, Central Michigan University

Beyond teaching 'Cough and Cover': Getting schools ready for a pandemic.

Last May the U.S. Department of Education released its pandemic plan for K-12 schools. It was two pages in length and was meant to go along with the disaster plans that schools have.¹ I was somewhat disappointed when I saw the checklist with four areas for schools to take care of: planning and coordination, continuity of student learning and core operations, infection control policies, and communications planning. Schools were asked to check off whether they had completed these tasks already, or were in progress or, as I suspect in most cases, not started. What we should be thinking about and talking about is the

¹ www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/schoolchecklist.html

interruption of school and what happens to children, parents and teachers. We should be talking to people who experienced Hurricane Katrina to find out what that was like for children who were not in school for a long period of time and who switched to different schools and whose families were reorganized. We should be talking, too, about maybe preparing our students with some conflict resolution curriculum, because it seems to me that they may very well be dealing with those types of issues in their home, and that might be more valuable than geometry.

In Oakland County, Michigan, one of my state's more densely populated counties, a two-day symposium was held to examine the four areas of this checklist with team teaching done by health and educational leaders. They created a 90-page booklet called "Pandemic Action Kit for Schools."² I was very impressed with this resource, and it can serve as a model program. But one has to remember this is a very wealthy county with the financial and human capital to pull this off. It is definitely the exception and not the rule when we are talking about what is attainable for the majority of health departments and schools. And in Michigan alone there are 552 school districts with more than 4,000 schools and almost two million students who will be affected.

When I talked with an elementary principal I know and asked what his school was doing, he told me not much, and he was very happy to tell me why. He said there are so many immediate needs that have to be attended to, and dealing with a possible pandemic is way off on the horizon. The state of Michigan, for example, mandated lockdown drills in our schools, so he was preparing for the first one, which has taken a lot of time. With all of the mandates of No Child Left Behind and other school initiatives, he told me there hasn't been any breathing room for the schools to take on this pandemic planning. As he put it, if the federal government really thought that this was important, maybe they would say, let's pause. Let's take a break and let the schools get their house in order and take the time to establish plans and discuss with their staff what they need to have happen. But that's not happening yet.

How many children use the federal school

breakfast program? Where do these poor children live? They live everywhere. They live in our rural areas. They live in our urban areas. What percent of hungry Americans are children? Take a look: 36.4 percent are children. So the schools have an important place in terms of providing nutrition. And when we get down to the heart of the matter, when we're talking about preparation for pandemic flu, it's the children. We need to take a look at who is there for them 180 days plus of the year. Kids know that they can go to their teachers. They trust them, and if teachers aren't prepared, they're not going to be able to help. Schools should be serving on the frontline. They're one of the best ways to get information out to the community. They can help us maintain public confidence.

For many students, school is the family. It provides safety, security and stability. For some students, home is a dangerous and a volatile place, and we're worried about kids who are going to have to go home for that amount of time. Finally, I think it is insulting to educators that we have not put them in a more prominent role in preparing for this. Teachers have the potential to serve as the models for resiliency and the harboring of hope for our children. In the beginning they will be there to quell their fears, and in the end they will be there to pick up the pieces.

**John Thompson, Deputy Executive Director,
National Sheriffs' Association**

Enforcing quarantine, transporting the ill, grounding travelers: Training police to provide community disease control.

We have to think and get prepared locally. Let me give you a scenario. A community is hit with pandemic flu and loses 30 to 50 percent of its law enforcement officers.



A man gets a shot during the mass vaccination clinic exercise in Fairbanks, Alaska. October 2006.
Photo by Christine Lynch, Department of Health & Social Services/Courtesy of The Associated Press.

² www.oakgov.com/health/assets/Documents/CHPIS/action_kit_schools.pdf

Don't expect the next community to send anybody, because the pandemic doesn't know towns and borders. Do you think the flu is going to stop at the river? That loss of officers is already going to cripple us, but guess what? We also have a 30 to 50 to maybe even 80 to 100 percent increase in demand. Why? Because a Channel 9 News reporter is down the street trying to cover a quarantine situation, and everybody jumps him and he calls the police. Or we need to quarantine 15 or 20 people. Or we need to transport people. The pandemic is going to cause more response for the police.

Now, what about our bad boys on the street, the gangs? Don't you think they're going to get empowered? What happens when you have a catastrophe? Look at Katrina, multiply it 100 times, and then take away half of the resources that we dumped into New Orleans, and that's what you're going to have. The gangs are going to come out. They're going to feel powerful because there is no one to stop them. People do what they have to do to feed their families, and that's the bottom line, and I don't think there's any limit to that. I really don't. So we have to think of those things.

So the normal person, not the bad guy, in a time of crisis is going to go into survival mode, and that creates a problem. Think about it: What would cause you to go into survival mode? And if you went into survival mode, what would you do? Sit in your room and die, or would you go out and survive? Most of us would go out and survive. That's what human nature is about. So you can see what the problems are going to be. I've been to several pandemic symposiums, and I've heard about what the police are going to do and what public safety officials are going to do. And it's always about where we are going to stockpile this or where we are getting medicine and things like that. Well, the problem is not going to really be that—two or three weeks and we're going to recover and be good to go. We're not going to recover if the community is going out of control, because when you get well you're not going to be able to go outside. We need to think of those things.

Let me tell you a bit about what the National Sheriffs' Association has been doing. We have several training courses we've been doing for three years. One is jail evacuation. What are we going to do with 2,000 prisoners in a prison if pandemic flu breaks out?

Well, if we can duct tape the jail up so it can't get in, we're all right. But if it gets in, what do you think that sheriff is going to do with 2,000 prisoners? The news media are going to have a field day because if the sheriff lets those prisoners out, he's not getting reelected after they rape, rob and pillage. If the sheriff leaves them there to die, do you think he's going to get reelected? Is he going to move 2,000 prisoners out of the jail in 30 minutes? Absolutely not, but when we teach this course we say to sheriffs that they must have a plan, even if your plan is for not being able to do anything. You've got to have some type of plan. You've got to think about it. Don't wait until it happens and then start thinking about it, and that's what we need to do now.

Journalists have the power to make people think about such things. Every time you write a story or put something on TV, that is very powerful. It does affect us, and we're guided by it. So use it. Bridge those gaps—how many people here have a one-on-one relationship with your local law enforcement executive? When I was a chief of police for 15 years I was on TV more than any other police chief and even the sheriff. They said to me, "Why do you do it?" and I told them because I trust the news media and I talk to them. We converse and work together. The other police chiefs all wanted the media in the town when the good stuff happened. So bridge those gaps. It's not just law enforcement that has to—you have to put your hand out. If we all work together, we can overcome this.

Michael Loehr, Preparedness Section Manager, Public Health, Seattle & King County (Washington State)

Preparing for the next public health catastrophe: Convincing the public that community containment is a good thing.

Public health has incredible responsibilities. We are depended upon now by the cops and firefighters who didn't know our names September 10, 2001. They wouldn't allow us in their buildings. Now I promise you they don't have a meeting or an exercise without us in the room. They are absolutely well aware of what our responsibilities are. Whether we can produce is another story. Our ability to succeed is highly dependent on our ability to gain and maintain the trust

of the public, and nothing shows that more than a pandemic. How many solutions do we have to offer? And how do we keep that public trust and confidence during such an event? This is where the crux of our pandemic preparedness efforts ought to be.

Though we know that we need to incorporate public health into preparedness plans, we need to spin that around to say that we need to incorporate preparedness into public health practice, and I promise you at the local level in this country this is not the case. Grant funding for such programs has been in place since 2002, so for about four years now millions of dollars have come to states and have been passed down to local governments to help get us prepared for anthrax and bioterrorism, and then this evolved into all hazards and pandemic flu. If you talk to local health departments and ask them how important do they think preparedness is, they'll start talking about money first. So let's put the money aside. How important do you think preparedness is relative to what your responsibilities are? For most of them, it's not going to be at the top. For some of them, it's not even going to be on the list. They will talk about dealing with chronic diseases and maternal and child health. They go back to environmental health. They go back to core public health. That's what they got in the business for. But preparedness is a critical issue. In my opinion, for local public health organizations, preparedness has to be incorporated as part of what we're doing. It cannot be an add-on program, and I am not talking about the federal government totally funding everything. It has to be an ethic of change at the local level. [A Web site has been created to provide public access to information on pandemic flu preparedness for Seattle & King County, a planning process that has been underway for two years, with major initiatives still underway.³]

I see three key issues or themes that we face in getting prepared:

1. We have to get ready very, very quickly. Our responders who rely on us—the police, fire, public works, and elected leaders—expect us to be prepared. Our partners rely on us to be ready as the emerging threats keep coming at us.
2. Public health needs to become prepared across a very broad spectrum. Most of the homeland security money that comes in, at least to our state, certainly to our county, goes to equipment for first responders. Firefighters and police buying this, buying that. I'm not saying it's the wrong way to spend money, but that is absolutely not going to help health departments. Equipment doesn't necessarily prepare us. We have to be ready



Health workers wear masks and protective gowns as they carry a man acting as a patient during an anti-avian flu drill at a hospital in Hong Kong, September 2006. *Photo by Vincent Yu/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

to do things like implement disease surveillance programs in an expanded way, arrange for isolation and quarantine, dispense medicine—antibiotics or antivirals to a large number of people or give vaccines in a very short period of time. Risk communications and public education are two different things, both important. Massive patient care. We are part of the larger health care system from EMS, to clinicians, to hospitals, to the morgue, and everything in between, so how do we assist that when there is a huge surge in demand? Business continuity. Environmental health response. Lab services. Mass vitality response. You

³ www.metrokc.gov/health/pandemicflu/

can't be good at one or two. You have to be good at all of them. How do we attack that broad front? Ours is a department of 2,000 people. Most local health departments have probably fewer than 50 people. How do you even begin? So that's a huge challenge.

- Effectiveness of public health preparedness is tied to the quality and extent of our partnerships on key planning issues. The most important thing is the planning and coordination. It's the meetings and discussions and the understanding that this is how it's really going to work. The key is the consistent partnerships that we maintain.



A worker at a Washington State Department of Health laboratory in Seattle holds a box of DNA strands. They were sent to the lab by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They are used to help highlight the presence of the H5N1 bird flu strain in the flu virus to find out if it is in general samples of common flu viruses that are subjected to ongoing testing at the lab. So far, no cases of the virus have been found in North America. February 2006. *Photo by Ted S. Warren/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

Let me quickly go through some of the specific preparedness issues we've been working on: social distancing; closing schools and daycare centers, and closing libraries, where people drop their kids off when there's a snowstorm. Libraries have become the biggest daycare centers in town, but you've got to close libraries as well. The difficulty is that in doing this planning, no standards are available. I'm not blaming anybody, but no standards exist for knowing which measures to implement, when to implement them, and what the thresholds are. How do you coordinate it? It's a huge challenge at the local level to figure out. How do we actually do something that's never been done before? And the school lunch program—if we are closing schools Monday morning, the first question that needs to be asked and answered is how the children are being fed. While disasters are local, all preparedness is not necessarily local. At the local level, I don't have control over the school lunch program. The federal government does. I can only hope the feds get that program worked out, because my whole plan goes down the toilet if they don't.

Then there is health care sustainability. The way we see it in Seattle public health is part of the larger health care system. It's already a fractured, competitive system day-to-day, a system that is overly stressed. During an emergency, things have to be done differently; we have to be able to operate as a single, unified system under central authority. This is totally revolutionary in the health care system, but it's something that in Seattle we're working towards, and it's necessary. Centralized decisions need to be made about triaging and rationing care, more than it's rationed on a daily basis. If people call 911, they are not necessarily going to get a paramedic. They might get a nurse's line where you are taught how to care for a sick child at home because there are no beds available in the hospital.

Keeping business going is a critical issue for us. No pandemic flu plan can be functional unless our department has a business continuity plan in place so we can keep our most critical functions operating. A year ago, we had to look at the definition of business continuity, which isn't something that public health departments in this country have likely had to do before.

Finally, public education—I'm almost asking for your advice on this. How do we inform and educate the public and at the same time maintain their confidence about closing schools for three months? If we close schools for seven days in our state, teachers no longer get paid. So it's one thing compounds another, but we still need to do it. We still need to say we've got nothing good to offer you, but we need you to trust us and to work with us on this. How do we educate and inform the public that they are not going to get a paramedic? They're just not coming. During a pandemic, when people go into grocery stores and because they have no money they take food from the store, that's not a call that warrants the cops' response. They're going if someone has a gun. Those places are where the cops are going. I can assure you. So how do we again maintain the public's confidence? And finally, how do we educate folks to rely on themselves for their health care? It's just not done today. ■

Reacting to the Crisis: From Public Trust to Panic

Much has been learned about how people react and respond to disasters. From these experiences emerge lessons that can guide journalists in understanding better what they can expect to happen if pandemic flu occurs.

Dori Reissman, Commander, United States Public Health Service, and Senior Medical Advisor, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

What behavioral and social sciences can tell us about human behavior in a pandemic.

I challenge you, as journalists, to figure out how you can help us to manage fear in the public. I hope you haven't reached this point at which you either want to stick your head in the sand or run around and say the sky is falling. I hear the word "panic" all the time, and most of the time people don't panic. Panic really is about a loss of social order, a loss of internal order. Most of the time people are running around doing what they believe is self-protective. It's not panic, but it might not be social order. So let's be careful with our language and what we evoke because people have an image. When you say "panic," it evokes a feeling of being out of control. Is that what we want to evoke? Or do we want to give the message of how we can reel it in?

When we're thinking of behavioral health and emotional readiness, we don't have a ready-made framework of measures and countermeasures that are understood. That created some of the problems that we had in trying to disseminate this message. When we reach out to the different audiences, we find public trust is a big issue. If you don't have the trust, people aren't going to follow what you say to do.

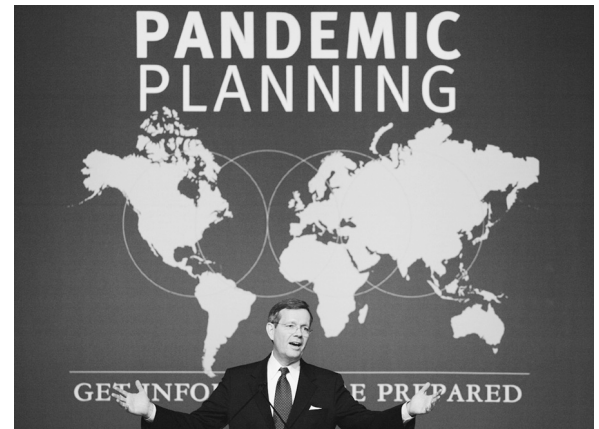
The idea behind the public trust is if somebody is concerned about something and you don't address those concerns, they really can't hear your message. In government we focus on what is the right message. Can we recreate or procreate messages that

are perfect to what we anticipate the issues to be? That's called push technology. We push out that message. But what if that message is out of sync to where the concerns are? What if the message has no receiver? Think about this as a football analogy, and how do you get the receiver to catch the ball if you haven't shown them how to do it?

And then what are the behaviors that you want to increase and what are the other behaviors you want to decrease in order to reduce risk? It's shaping behavior; it's not the government walking in and trying to control people. Instead, it's a sense of how people take personal accountability for their own safety in the context of the community's safety. The other part of the slippery slope is about people not coping well and making poor choices. There's a social and emotional deterioration, and with that comes dysfunction, and with that comes also a cascade of economic problems.

Human resource is the critical infrastructure. Yet we don't deal with what we house in our minds. We don't harden that. We harden our facilities, yet we really need to pay attention to this. I don't know how to obtain that kind of attention, but I know that you, as journalists, are a vector of it. You have a lot of impact, so I want to continue to challenge you.

How do we, in a noncrisis event, get the public used to and ready for critical messaging at critical times? How do we set that expectation and demonstrate it through the minor crisis that might be leading up to a more major crisis? That's where we will get a track record. In terms of trying to get people to reduce risky behavior, we aren't very good about following directions. We



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt addresses a summit of state and local officials in Los Angeles to discuss California's preparations for pandemic flu. March 2006. *Photo by Damian Dovarganes/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

Calming happens when you want to lower the state of arousal so people can function, concentrate and take concrete steps towards what they need to do to protect themselves.

—Dori Reissman

don't listen to our mothers. We don't listen to our doctors. So why should we listen to the government?

We've had different sets of experts get together and say what the empirical areas are that have evidence to support that good things will happen if you do them. That's what I'm going to call psychological first aid, and it has certain underpinnings—safety, calming, connection, efficacy and hope. Safety is about removing people from a threat. Calming happens when you want to lower the state of arousal so people can function, concentrate and take concrete steps towards what they need to do to protect themselves. People's basic need to connect with others and not be isolated needs to be attended to. Efficacy occurs when someone is capable of taking action on their own; when they do so as a member of a group, that's collective efficacy. The idea that the world is predicable and we will get through it, that's hope.

If journalists could take these five ideas and infuse them in their messages, I'd be very happy. Absent this, we don't have a leadership set up to handle grief. How do we manage massive grief and loss? How do we do ceremonies when you can't attend them? How do we support people who have lost a lot when you can't touch them? Continuity of operations goes way beyond business. It's continuity of life as we know it.

Sandro Galea, Associate Professor, Center for Social Epidemiology and Population Health, University of Michigan

A model of human behavior after disasters: Evidence from a systematic study of disasters during the past 50 years.

I want to offer you a framework for how to think about hazards and about what it is that shapes the consequences of these hazards and makes them into disasters.

There is no question that the first reaction to a disaster is fear and initial anxiety. People are afraid. They seek information. They do what is necessary to figure out how to save themselves. Information-seeking behavior is probably the primary modifier of what happens after these events. With the right information provided, there is a tremendous effort—usually guided by what we call pro-social behavior—to help others. That's called group preservation

and represents stage two.

Stage three involves internalizing. We understand the psychological consequences much better than we do the behaviors, and many psychological consequences fall in place during this stage. With disasters, we talk a lot about emotional responses, about change in normal activities. We talk a little bit less about the notion of seeking redress and addressing vulnerabilities and strengths. After self-preservation and group preservation, this leads into efforts to try to figure out who is to blame and to do something about it by addressing the vulnerabilities and strengths that we have that resulted in that hazard becoming a disaster.

A perfect example of this is what happened at Columbine High School with the shootings there. It offered a very clear example of all four stages, including an emotional response, a change in normal activities—a change in everything they were doing in the school. Seeking redress by addressing vulnerabilities and strengths in terms of exactly what was happening in the school that resulted in this thing happening. A lot of blame was placed on everybody, ranging from violent games to the principal. And a lot of thinking went on about why this hazard—which in this case could be argued was the ready availability of handguns to these teenagers—became such a disaster.

Stage four is externalizing. This is the stage that unfortunately in this country we've become all too familiar with at this point, which is action against perpetrators, against those who are considered responsible. It's part of seeking redress. It's an effort for justice seeking. After the Oklahoma City bombing, President Clinton led the charge to seek redress. There was an epidemic of blame that followed, and then the task of addressing vulnerabilities began that, in theory, should have started preparing the country for other terrorist attacks. But one could argue that it was less effective.

Stage five is where we get the renormalization and adaptation. The group adapts to the threat. The normalizing of these new behaviors is seen as a direct response to the perceived threat.

With this synthesis of what populations go through after these hazards hit, I am hopeful it will help organize your thinking and help guide both your reporting and your questioning about these events. ■

Communicating News of an Outbreak

For those who will bear the responsibility of communicating to journalists during an outbreak of pandemic flu, the preparation comes in the daily exchanges they are having already with reporters and in working internally to establish guidelines for how best to get information out to the public in ways that are trustworthy and timely. Speaking out of their experiences at two leading health organizations—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization, respectively—communications specialists Glen Nowak and Dick Thompson shared insights from their work.

Glen Nowak, Chief of Media Relations, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

It's not as easy as it sounds: The challenges of risk communication in real life, real time.

One challenge we face is that the news media are often viewed by scientists and physicians as if journalists should have the same standard as they do for what you allow into your stories, and you should primarily rely on views that have been established or accepted by most scientists. There is also a belief that you should be providing all the nuances and caveats that would be found in a journal article, and you should use as much space and time as it takes to get the information out there properly. As we all know, at least those of us in communications, that isn't a realistic expectation.

It is often assumed—and we do this at our level—that the news media should primarily serve as an educator of the public and of policymakers. That means you should be doing more to give us high visibility and provide frequent replays of the same messages. Every year at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) I'm often told, "You know, we could use about three months of steady, 'get-your-flu-shot' stories." And we often have to say, "Well, perhaps at the beginning of the season we can hold a press release and announce the kickoff of the season."

You can get some play for that, but it won't continue unless there's some new developments and some new angle, some new idea, some new research, something new. At the end of the day, the first three letters of news are n-e-w. At CDC our consistent advice is that if they want to do those other things, they need to think about purchasing the time and space or using other venues. So we spend some time educating some scientists and physicians that the news media are not the only way to get the message out, and it's a challenge but one of the things we deal with.

Another challenge arises out of a strong belief among scientists and physicians and probably policymakers that we can at some level "FYI" the news media. People will come to me and say, "I've got a really important piece of information, and I think we should get it out there," and then we will ask, "So what should people do with that information? How should they change their behavior? What's our health recommendation as a result of the information?" and they will say, "I don't know. But it's really important to get this out there. We need to call a press conference." The act of calling a press conference elevates the information—it may be the most efficient way for us to get this information out to multiple numbers of reporters—but that act is incongruous with the moment when the first thing out of your mouth is, "This really isn't that important." Journalists rightly call us into question, "If it wasn't important, why did you call the press conference?" So we often struggle with this at the CDC when we have information to share, but we may not be ready in terms of understanding it completely.

Another challenge emerges when we deal with political leaders. A lot of appointments at Health and Human Services, and sometimes the CDC, are political ones. These people come in with a backload of experience in political communications; often what you'd do in political communications is the opposite of what you would do in health and risk communications. Good

Previous Outbreaks of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Worldwide

1959	Scotland	H5N1
1963	England	H7N3
1966	Ontario (Canada)	H5N9
1976	Victoria (Australia)	H7N7
1979	Germany	H7N7
1979	England	H7N7
1983–1985	Pennsylvania (USA)*	H5N2
1983	Ireland	H5N8
1985	Victoria (Australia)	H7N7
1991	England	H5N1
1992	Victoria (Australia)	H7N3
1994	Queensland (Australia)	H7N3
1994–1995	Mexico*	H5N2
1994	Pakistan*	H7N3
1997	New S. Wales (Australia)	H7N4
1997	Hong Kong SAR*	H5N1
1997	Italy	H5N2
1999–2000	Italy*	H7N1
2002	Hong Kong SAR	H5N1
2002	Chile	H7N3
2003	Netherlands*	H7N7
2004	Pakistan	H7N3
2004	Texas (USA)	H5N2
2004	British Col. (Canada)*	H7N3
2004	South Africa	H5N2

* Outbreaks with significant spread to numerous farms, resulting in great economic losses.

From "Avian Influenza: Assessing the Pandemic Threat." © 2005 by the World Health Organization.

health and risk communications means sharing dilemmas, disclosing information, and being transparent. When people come in from political campaigns, this approach is the antithesis of what they typically do in a campaign. It is very scary for them when we say, "Let's be transparent." It's the exact opposite of what they've been doing during the campaign.

The other thing I've been struck by is that the public and our medical experts have ways of viewing the world, and that can be

a communications challenge. Sometimes we recognize those differences and struggle with how to incorporate them into our message strategies; other times the differences can be very subtle, yet important, and we don't recognize them. The other day I was involved in a discussion at a meeting about antivirals. When we spoke about the use of antivirals as a "treatment," the public had a mental model that a person got antivirals and stopped the progression of the disease and, therefore, was not going to get really severe complications. The physicians' mental model was different; they saw antivirals as an effective way to treat some of the symptoms, but they were not a cure. So there was a lot of confusion as the physicians were trying to say, "Look, it's not a cure," and people in the audience were saying, "But you said it's a treatment. Treatments are cures." Sometimes we don't recognize these differences and, as a result, they can cause us problems in communications.

It's not easy to base decisions, actions, communications or even recommendations on science since the science is often lacking and often changing. With the avian influenza, it's a rapid and dynamic environment in which we are working, and sometimes I think we don't fully appreciate how dynamic it really is.

Dick Thompson, Team Leader, WHO Pandemic and Outbreak Communication

The toughest audience: reporters.

Shortly after I arrived at WHO after for many years working as a medical and health reporter at Time, SARS broke out. We were overwhelmed with calls, and we had to speak constantly about something that was a new disease, and the virus was moving all around the world very quickly. It was up to us to decide how we were going to speak about this, and so I looked around WHO to see what risk communication resources were there. There were none, which really surprised me, so we were pretty much left on our own, and what we did was to rely on our instincts as reporters. If I were a reporter covering this story, what would I want from me? What I'd want first was to hear from me. Just to be accessible is really important and hard to do when there are all sorts of calls coming in. But I'd also want to have some kind of faith that what I

was hearing was the truth; if I ever detected that you were spinning me or lying in any way—if you were covering up or protecting your organization—I'd automatically devalue what I heard.

So I applied these rules—from my instinctive behavior as a reporter—and somehow we stumbled through it, and I think we did OK. There were a few missteps, but after that, we were asked to put it on more solid footing. There would certainly be other risk communication challenges in the future, and WHO needed to know what to do and what to say. So we built risk communications and called it “outbreak communication,” because we're focusing on a special type of public health event. There are a lot of special things about outbreaks, but most important is that they're unfolding events. Nobody really knows where they're going and, especially in the beginning, there's high outrage and high concern in the absence of knowing what the hazard is.

We came up with five principles, and we took these to a group of outbreak response managers at a meeting in Singapore in September 2004. The 85 response managers at this meeting had addressed all sorts of outbreaks from Ebola to cholera, worked in different cultures and economic systems and levels of development. All of them endorsed our five principles. We published a report called “Outbreak Communication,” a book that is one of the best things I've been involved with, even after 23 years in journalism. It speaks to best practices for communicating with the public during an outbreak.¹ By 2006, we were able to get all of the critical information from that report onto a pocket-sized card.

How will we communicate when confronted with an outbreak situation? Here are the principles we use:

1. Trust is the most important thing. As a communicator, this is the currency I work in. Every communication we make is really a pandemic communication, because we're either building trust or it's costing us.
2. Be as transparent as possible. This is very, very difficult, especially for people who work within a culture that's generally used to working behind closed doors

and coming out with peer review publications. It's very difficult for them to allow the public in to see what they are doing, but once we do that, it increases the trust and confidence people have in us.

3. Announce early, even when there's incomplete information. This is another thing that's a very difficult aspect of this; a lot of times officials will want to wait and use the reason that they don't have all the information they want. They use that to delay and delay and delay. Finally, journalists pick up the information and report it, and then they have to respond that, yes, they've known about it for three weeks, and they lose a lot of trust.
4. Listen to the public and then plan for the extreme demands of outbreak communication. On the back of this little card, we've got hints for interviews. There are special hints for outbreak interviews, such as to clearly say what you don't know. This again is hard, especially for physicians. To say what they don't know is something that doesn't come naturally to these professionals. Also there is a need to share dilemmas and to leave room for the unexpected in your comments. In an outbreak, we urge people not to make definitive statements about anything because even as an outbreak is drawing to a close that can be the most dangerous time, because people relax their guard, somebody slips through, and you have another outbreak.
5. Finally, never overreassure or mislead.

What these principles tell us is that our instinct in the beginning—to act as a good source—was right. But we needed to gather this evidence, and we needed to have the endorsement of the experts so that we could say, “Be a good source.” That's pretty much what we do as we run workshops around the world in outbreak communication, trying to train people from ministries of health in outbreak communications. Sometimes it's very effective. In Egypt, for example, we found that the Ministry of Health reports transparently and quickly about all human H5N1 cases. We've done surveys of trust and confidence, and what we find is that there's a baseline level for information that people

Every communication we make is really a pandemic communication, because we're either building trust or it's costing us.

—Dick Thompson

¹ www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/WHO_CDS_2005_32/en/index.html

trust from the government. It's a little higher for the Ministry of Health, and it's higher still when they talk about avian influenza, which is very good. But I've also worked in countries where, after an outbreak communication lecture, the officials have gone into a meeting about how to bury bodies in the middle of the night so they don't get people concerned about how bad the outbreak is.

We're making some progress. What helps shape our message is that we began talking about the "I don't know." For example, we don't talk about the availability of vaccine because we think that's misleading. So I hope it's working.

Once we finished our work with the outbreak guidelines, I finally was able to read

"The Great Influenza" by John M. Barry. In the last two pages of the book, I was really hit hard by what he had to say, because he talked about the public terror that existed in 1918. He said it existed because public officials lied about what was going on, and it became apparent to people who were at risk that they were being lied to, and it was that broken trust that really led to what he calls the terror of 1918. He concluded his book with a plea that "Those in authority must retain the public's trust. The way to do that is to distort nothing, to put the best face on nothing, and to try to manipulate no one." And I hope that's what we're doing with our guidelines. [See box on page 63 for Barry's concluding words.] ■

Interaction of Journalists and Sources

What transpired between journalists and sources during past disasters and crises—such as the 2001 anthrax attacks—can illuminate challenges confronting the press as it seeks reliable information from experts. Some lessons are shared by a journalist who retraced what happened and points to what can be learned from what didn't work well before.

Bruce Shapiro, Executive Director, Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and Contributing Editor, The Nation

I want to start with a perhaps heretical suggestion: The "news media"—Capital T, capital N, capital M, the great monolith called the news media—doesn't exist. All of you who are journalists know this. We are a fractious, combative, disorganized tribe of newsgatherers. And when we're talking about a great crisis, we really need to break this down into three components.

There are journalists—people who are witnesses, mediators of information, skeptics, questioners and storytellers—making constant choices about information, credibility of sources, and shape of narrative at a time of crisis. Institutional media also exists, and it consists of news organizations as workplaces, as trusted vehicles for com-

munication, and conveners of discussion among leaders. And finally, the media is also news consumers. Those from New Orleans or Biloxi, Mississippi know that their consumers in the great time of crisis represented by Hurricane Katrina saw their news organizations as part of their mechanism for survival and as, indeed, part of themselves. We know this casually day-to-day. Write something that annoys readers, viewers or listeners and they write back. They respond because people have a proprietary investment in their trusted media. But in times of crisis, the identity of news consumers with their trusted media is just as important as the role of reporters and just as important as the role of the institutional media.

It's very important to remember these components. Remember also that neither reporters nor news consumers are empty vessels into which either experts or the media can pour knowledge. People greet the news with critical experience. They greet it with desires for altruism and with desires for a rational response to information.

Patricia Thomas, Knight Chair in Health and Medical Journalism, Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Georgia

Remember also that neither reporters nor news consumers are empty vessels into which either experts or the media can pour knowledge.

—Bruce Shapiro

What anthrax teaches in a changed world.

I want to take you back to the anthrax attacks of 2001 and an analysis I was asked by The Century Foundation to do of how the news was managed and reported during the time of those attacks.¹ During seven weeks and in seven states, there were 22 cases of anthrax and five deaths, and 32,000 people put on antibiotics for 10 days and another 10,000 put on antibiotics for 60 days. It was the third most closely followed story of 2001, topped only by the attacks of September 11th and the war in Afghanistan. During the final three months of 2001, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) received 12,000 print mentions and a lot of broadcast time. Based on what I learned, I'm also here to tell you that I'm a lot less confident than the health organization communicators who spoke here seem to be that reporters are going to get what they need from government experts when the proverbial substance hits the proverbial spinning blade.

What I learned in doing this report was that reporters faced an evolving set of challenges that began before they even realized there were any challenges. What they didn't know was that on September 11th the rules of engagement between government spokespersons and reporters changed because the Federal Emergency Response Plan was set in motion that day. That meant that communications were officially centralized at the level of the cabinet secretary; so from that moment on Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson was in charge of relations with the press, and he had a little trouble with how anthrax is transmitted.

In the wake of 9/11, the CDC told me they got 358 bioterrorism-related media inquiries during late September and early October. They forwarded those messages to Thompson's press operation in Washington where there was no record of whatever happened to them. Reporters whom I interviewed in 2002 said no one ever called them back. So reporters wrote stories by leaning on other sources. They used people who had been in previous administrations,



Chris Oronzio, then manager of in-plant support at the United States Postal Service North Metro Processing and Distribution Center in Duluth, Georgia explains how the new Biohazard Detection System will detect anthrax in the mail. September 2004. *Photo by Craig Moore/Gwinnett Daily Post/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

scientists who had served on Institute of Medicine panels, and other expert bodies. They did the best they could.

Government response involving anthrax was hobbled in two different ways. The Bush administration insisted that it would be desirable and possible to speak with one voice during the crisis, pretty much ignoring the impossibility of pulling this off given how traumatized, exercised and hypersensitive the citizenry was about their health and that of their children as mail was coming into their homes. Fortunately, with the passage of time, we are now more likely to hear public information officers talk about a "many voice-one message" approach.

There are also inherent limitations in the CDC's communications setup. The central communications office there has always had a split mission. [See Glen Nowak's words on page 73.] It's half a health education enterprise with a lot of PhD's who specialize in the packaging of health messages and behavior change campaigns, things we approve of like quitting smoking and eating a healthier diet. The other half of that team is the science and media relations. In

¹ www.tcf.org/list.asp?type=PB&pubid=221; www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/03-1NRspring/11-14V57N1.pdf

late 2001 there were 10 people who were qualified and authorized to speak to reporters. But, of course, that authority had been shipped off to Washington, and the leadership at the time didn't come from a news background and wasn't really comfortable talking with the press, either.



Cecil Arnim, Jr., a veterinarian in Uvalde, Texas, holds a container of anthrax vaccine. November 2001. *Photo by Eric Gay/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

Official information during the height of the anthrax crisis was pretty scarce. The CDC press office was understaffed on an ordinary day, and it lost its authority. During the first two weeks of the anthrax crisis—beginning on October 3rd—they logged 2,500 calls into their system. Many were referred to Washington where they once again disappeared into the abyss. And this is no joke. The CDC cooperated fully with me, giving me copies of phone logs, showing me exact graphing of

the patterns of calls, but that was not true in Washington. They didn't seem to know or want to say what happened.

Very persistent reporters called the epidemic intelligence service teams at various sites throughout the world. These teams now have a press officer attached, so these reporters would track down the press officer in the field. But they, in turn, would bounce the call back to the CDC office in Atlanta where it was going to get bounced to Washington, so they weren't exactly getting calls back, either. And, in fact, the reporters I interviewed said they never got any calls back.

During the second half of October, the situation became even worse. On peak days the CDC press office was logging 500 calls a day. Reporter friends of mine who now work in press communications tell me that a really, really good public information officer can handle about 20 reporter inquiries a day. At this point, the CDC folks realized that they had to do something, so they started bringing more staff on board; they started calling back more A-list reporters, although I think small publications were pretty much still in trouble.

So what did reporters do during all this communications meltdown? They dutifully went to those press conferences in Washington with Tommy Thompson and

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, and once there was anthrax on Capitol Hill, they were trampled by the senators and representatives rushing to the microphone there. Reporters used PubMed and other sources to seek out a lot of academic experts on anthrax. But the trouble was that those experts were much in demand from the FBI, which especially needed molecular biologists familiar with anthrax to help them test samples and figure out what the genome of the virus was. These people then quickly became inaccessible because they were working for the government now.

Particularly on the broadcast side, with a lot of airtime to fill, something needs to go up there. So that's where we began to see a lot of second-tier, and even bogus, experts, who were just really, really, really eager to get on television and sell space suits or special potions that would kill the spores. And, of course, as reporters, we did what we do when we're really, really desperate, we started to read. Fortunately, there was a lot of published literature, so people could do that for a while. Then, of course, we get mad when we're treated like this, so after a while, the failure of the government communications effort became the story, and many newspapers excoriated CDC for bungling communications.

So you might ask yourself, if information was so limited and communication was so poor, what was the consequence? The answer is there were almost no consequences. Only one real study was done—that one by the Harvard School of Public Health—to measure the public understanding of anthrax and of the risks that it actually posed to them and their families. Remember, this was the third-biggest story of the year, and the study found that the public's factual knowledge about anthrax was good. More than three-quarters of the people surveyed knew that the cutaneous form wasn't really serious and that the inhalational form was the kind that would probably kill you. They knew that the disease was not passed person-to-person. They understood that, so they weren't shunning people. And they knew that fewer than 10 people had died. One thing that was learned in this study is that when people are threatened by some kind of health thing, they want to hear from real doctors and real public health experts. And what I concluded from this was that the rumors of panic were vastly overstated.

There really wasn't much panic.

So that brings me to the interesting question of what about the next time? Five years have passed. The news world and the world of public health have both changed. A lot of journalists are confronting layoffs, buy-outs and changed ownership, and there has also been the rising power of bloggers. At least three times in the past six months, The New York Times's articles about pandemic flu have responded to specific claims made by what they call "Internet flu watchers." Giving national ink to people who we once would have considered gadflies is not new, but it is a rising phenomenon. Blogs were a factor during the anthrax episode, but they're going to be so much more important in a case of pandemic flu, with a huge, huge impact.

Another thing that we really have barely touched on at this conference is the tremendous growth of ethnic media outlets. Research conducted by New America Media indicates that some 51 million U.S. adults get news from ethnic, non-English news outlets, and that these publications and broadcast stations are the main source of news for 13 percent of Americans today. In November I heard Sandy Close, who is the head of New America Media, present the statistics to a national conference for state and local public health public information officers. They seemed shocked at the idea that the ethnic media has become so huge. When the state officers made presentations at their own national professional meetings about pandemic flu, they patted themselves on the back for translating some of their handouts into Spanish.

Such an effort is not going to be enough in this polyglot nation that we have become. Ethnic publications need to be better represented at conferences like this one. They need to be on the alert list. They need to have their calls returned by public health agencies in the same way journalists do who work for major dailies. Right now reporters for ethnic media do not get treated the same. So we are putting communities at huge risk by narrowing who we distribute the message to.

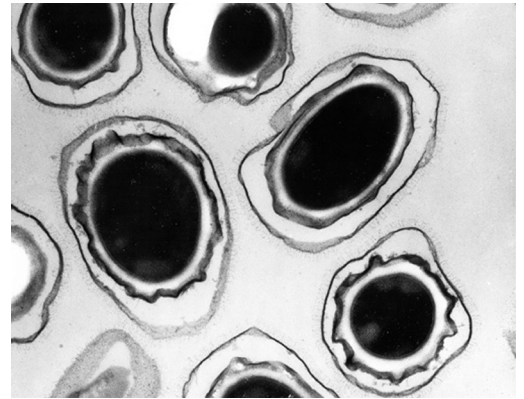
Finally, I will offer a few comments about the changes in the public health establishment that will affect how public health messages are communicated to us and to our audiences. In the wake of 9/11 and the anthrax bioterrorism, there has been a

five billion dollar windfall for public health workforce preparedness and training. Originally, this was all focused on bioterrorism, but that's been repurposed as time has passed. This infusion of money offers both good and bad news. The new money has helped bring public health technology into the 20th century, if not the 21st. When all of this happened, they were still reporting these diseases on paper; there weren't radio systems that enabled health departments and cops to talk with one another, or Web-based alert systems, or secure cable connections between state and local health departments. All of these are long overdue advances that increase the capacity for effective communication among agencies that will have to work together in the next crisis.

The bioterrorism windfall has also added epidemiologists, laboratory workers, emergency response coordinators, and public information officers to state and local health departments, all of whom were originally assigned to bioterrorism. Many of these folk have been repurposed and are just about working full-time on pandemic flu now.

Why is this bad? Paradoxically this federal infusion of tax dollars may weaken public health infrastructure in the long run, because when federal dollars pay for personnel, then state and local agencies drop these positions from their budgets. But what Congress gives it can take back. In the July/August issue of Health Affairs there is a really interesting study about public health work force. The size of the nation's public health work force increased gradually from 1980 to 2003, but it's now taken a little dive downward. The researchers predict that it will shrink more when bioterrorism is pushed aside by some new national priority and they observe a national shortage of skilled, experienced health workers and that public agencies have been very bad at setting up incentive systems that retain their best and get rid of their worst.

So where does that leave the flow of health information between agencies and



Bacillus anthracis spores are seen in this photomicrograph from the U.S. Department of Defense anthrax information Web site. Photo courtesy The Associated Press Photo/Ho, Anthrax Vaccine Immunization Program.

reporters? A study by Rand researchers finds while there have been more press officers hired, the new emergency managers come from hierarchical organizations—the military, law enforcement, or emergency response agencies—and they are people who are used to taking command. These are take-charge kind of people. From what I've seen in working on local pandemic flu planning in Georgia is that in a crisis the public health information officers will be taking their orders from the big guys with the side arms. During the recent national conference of state health public information officers, an administrator for the New York State Department cited the clash of corporate cultures, specifically law enforcement and public health, as one of her leading concerns if pandemic flu strikes. I also question whether the CDC—which has been inadequately funded throughout its history—has within its communications operation the surge capacity to handle the thousands of media calls it would receive if pandemic flu arrives, or if there is another Katrina, or if there is another bioterrorism strike.

If the next public health crisis strikes within the next two years, my bet is that administration officials in Washington will once again circle the wagons, clamp down on what CDC can say, and strive to speak with one voice. This strategy did not serve the public well five years ago, and I don't think that it will work any better the next time.

Ford Rowan, Former NBC News National Security Correspondent and Author

Ask ethical questions, in particular about what are the standards for triage. If a child is taken into the medical processing center and the parents are told, "Get in that line over there," it probably won't take much time for them to realize this is the line where the medical people let you either get well or die. The other line got the first responders, and that's where the mayor's family is standing and they're getting something, might be Tamiflu or whatever. Families are going to wonder what the hell is going on, and they are going to be upset. I would be if I don't know in advance what the system is and if it hasn't been agreed upon in advance by the religious, civic and other leaders in the community. I'm going to be

angry as hell.

Such policies and decision-making can and ought to be talked about in advance. The ethical issues are enormous, and they're not being discussed, debated and decided in a consensual way. I worry about this because the experts get together and talk about it. Like yesterday I heard researchers who have studied policy implications tell us that the closing of border crossings is "a stupid thing." I translated that as "Shit! Someone in the White House is going to close the borders!"

But we can prevent stupidity. We can prevent stupidity from reigning supreme if we do things today to think through these policies. Journalists have an enormous role to play in that, and they can do it through "let the chips fall where they may" reporting. They can do it in an "I'm going to help my community" mode, and they can do it in a muckraking mode. Any of those three ways will be productive. It will get people thinking about how we can become a more resilient community.

In a discussion period that followed, Thom Schwarz, editorial director of the American Journal of Nursing, who was a triage nurse for 25 years, spoke out of his experiences, and then a conversation ensued about the most reliable sources of information during a pandemic.

Thom Schwarz: I stepped out at 3:00 one afternoon to do the kind of triaging that you were speaking about, and there was a sea of people there because it was a very busy day. I said "Please, one at a time, if you could just quickly tell me what's going on." This woman in front of me is there with a child who had a head wound, and the kid was screaming, and his wound was bleeding. It was terrible. I said "Okay. Thank you very much." And in the back of the room, there was this little old man, and after I spoke with him I said, "Okay, you come with me," and I told the woman I'd be back out very soon. The woman freaked out and said, "Well, what are you going to do?" The man went into the back to be taken care of. I took a bandage and put it on the little kid's head, then I sat down and I looked at the wound, and I said very calmly, "Your son's going to be okay. He has a head wound, and they really bleed a lot." The kid listened to me, and the wound stopped bleeding. In

the meantime, the guy had coded in the back, and I explained to the lady, “Your son’s going to be okay, but that gentleman probably isn’t going to make it.” He didn’t make it.

I’m just somebody who’s explaining in very simple language what was going on. Who do you trust about anthrax? Nurses didn’t make your list. But I’d suggest to you—and I was a newspaper reporter before I became a nurse—that Rolodexes should be filled with names of nurse experts, epidemiologists and public health nurses and infectious disease nurses, because doctors will be doing the work, and the nurses will be available to explain in language that your readers will understand what’s going on because they’ll understand what’s going on.

Michael Osterholm, Director, Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy and member of the National Science Advisory Board on Biosecurity: I’d like to offer an alternative opinion on that issue. Having spent 30 years on the frontlines of public health in Minnesota, some of our biggest problems were local nurses and doctors who thought they were expert on a topic. When they were being asked something on a very timely manner on outbreak and so forth, they gave out bad information because they weren’t experienced to deal with the media. They felt they had good media answers and, as such, they answered in ways that actually

were wrong. The point is, you have to ask the expert for what they’re expert for. If you’re asking a local nurse about what’s going on in their emergency room, he or she is very expert about that. If you’re asking them about should, in fact, this community be vaccinated for something that has many nuances to it, that person doesn’t have the experience as an expert. The key message is to get the right expert for the right question at the right time.

Thomas: Technology is our friend here, too. In the wake of anthrax, CDC did create a much more sophisticated command and communications center. At the time anthrax hit, they couldn’t do a television news conference on the CDC campus. With this briefing room and the capacity for telephone briefings with hundreds of reporters around the country (which began to work late in the anthrax crisis), the situation improves. But if the power grid goes down, we’re left with little local core groups at local hospitals, and the public health doctors trying to work out a system. If we could have a satellite phone system, there’d be a way to reach newspaper reporters sequestered in their own homes putting out only an online version of the news. How can those doctors best talk to those reporters? That’s the level of discussion that’s going on, and if doctors can get access to something that resembled accurate information online that would help them. ■

In the wake of anthrax, CDC did create a much more sophisticated command and communications center. At the time anthrax hit, they couldn’t do a television news conference on the CDC campus.

—Patricia Thomas

Reporting From the Frontlines of the Flu

Reporters and editors discuss how they’ve covered disaster situations, including those in which people were infected by the H5N1 virus. And they talk about preparations they are making at their news organizations for coverage of pandemic flu.

Margie Mason, Asia Medical Writer, based in Hanoi, Vietnam, The Associated Press

On the ground, covering the unknown one step at a time.

As journalists, we are programmed to run toward danger. We do it daily, covering everything from war and natural disasters to political uprisings. We are fearless when it comes to chasing stories, driven to get there first and leave last. We evaluate the risks of each situation and make decisions about how to best report a story based on past experience and how much we know about the ongoing situation. It’s never an easy call and, when covering a disease outbreak, it’s like nothing else. Not only



Indonesian health officials burn slaughtered chickens after some poultry in the area were found to be bird flu positive in Sikeben Village, North Sumatra, Indonesia. At the time this photo was taken, Indonesia's human toll from the virus was 44, making it the country worst hit by the disease. August 2006. *Photo by Binsar Bakkara/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

do reporters not know what they are up against, but they also are, potentially, putting all of their colleagues and their families at risk. So there is a lot to think about.

For nearly four years I have been learning how to react as a journalist to public health threats on the ground in Asia. From my experience dealing with SARS in March 2003 to the region's most recent bird flu outbreaks, I have always responded with caution whether it's wearing protective gear or opting to not go to a site. My editors and I frequently have lengthy discussions about how to best cover a story safely. And being careful doesn't mean losing the story. In fact, we often break stories from our desks—working the phones, tapping our sources, and keeping in close contact with those people who are closest to the action.

In mid-May I got a call one night while I was in Bangkok from a trusted source close to the bird flu story in Indonesia. He had heard that up to eight people were sick in North Sumatra, several of whom had already died from the H5N1 virus. No one else outside the

family appeared to be ill, and no diseased poultry could be found in the village. We chatted for a few minutes about what this might mean. It was obviously the largest cluster ever reported. But was it spreading efficiently from human to human? He didn't think so, but it was way too early to know. For the next two weeks, I worked closely with our Jakarta bureau. Not knowing what to expect, we covered the story from a distance as more family members died.

Reporting in a Sumatran Village

On May 23rd, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that limited human-to-human transmission might have occurred between the relatives, but no other villagers were reporting flu-like symptoms. WHO also stressed that the virus had not mutated

in any significant way that would indicate that a pandemic strain was emerging. After consulting numerous experts and sources, both from the animal and human health sectors about whether it was safe to go in, I flew to Sumatra and made my way to the mountainous village of Kubu Simbelang. I was one of just a few journalists who actually went to the village, and I wrote, probably, one of my most favorite bird flu stories, ever, about the villagers and how they were confused and angry about the way they were treated during the outbreak.

They believed that Tamiflu was poison. They thought that by giving blood samples it would lead to their deaths. They believed that being quarantined was basically the same thing as being taken to a slaughterhouse room, and they just didn't believe that bird flu existed. They thought that black magic was instead responsible for killing their neighbors and that ghosts were still roaming through the streets of the village, and that leads to a much deeper issue.

Every AP bureau in Asia is equipped with protective gear that's recommended by WHO. We all have boxes of gowns, masks, booties, goggles and, of course, Tamiflu, but when putting all of the gear on, not only is it extremely hot and uncomfortable when you are running around in Asia, but we looked like Martians. And we are going into villages where—in very remote areas, often—where people have not had a lot of contact with foreigners. In fact, I'm often told that I'm the first foreigner they have ever seen.

This is one of the challenges that we face. As journalists we risk alienating the people that we've traveled so far to talk to. The Sumatran village is a perfect example. The villagers had closed off the area at one point during the outbreak. There were fears that violence could erupt because it was an area of Indonesia that was not used to taking orders from the Javanese coming in from Jakarta. There were cultural, religious, regional sensitivities that flared. It was a big obstacle for WHO.

So how do you get the story in a village where people are terrified and potentially hostile? A moon suit is clearly not going to work. We knew that wearing the full gear would hinder our work, so we opted to go in without it, but we also had a plan. We stayed in the car much of the time when we got near the houses where the family members

had lived. Instead of walking from one end of the village to the other, we drove to avoid as much contact with the ground as possible, even though the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) said there was no sign of H5N1 in any of the poultry in the village. We only spoke to a few people, and we did so outside and at a distance. Once back in the car, we sanitized our hands and the soles of our shoes. We also had a supply of Tamiflu with us, and if any flu-like symptoms had occurred, I would have phoned WHO and said, “Hey, help us! Send a doctor immediately!”

Another challenge involving the gear is to make sure that everyone understands its importance. In vast countries like Indonesia, AP has local stringers scattered across the archipelago that spans, literally, the width of the United States, and many of those stringers live in the same type of villages, with poultry running around, as the ones that we’re trying to cover. So how do you convince someone to put on a mask and plastic booties to go out and grab quotes, color or take a few pictures? If they don’t view the village as dangerous to begin with, it’s a very hard sell. And sometimes they simply do not understand the risk, which is why it’s up to supervisors, in our case bureau chiefs and photo editors, to make it clear. But again, it’s difficult to create hard and fast rules when dealing with such a complicated story. Every situation in every country is different, and there has to be flexibility to deal with the story on a case-by-case basis.

One thing I do always is to insist that everyone feels comfortable going into the story. No one is ever ordered to go into the field and, in fact, there have been times when both reporters and photographers have turned down assignments, and that’s okay. It’s their choice. We make that very clear to them from the beginning, and there’s no pressure, and if someone expresses any type of doubt, we basically tell them that they shouldn’t go. And aside from this North Sumatra case, there are only a few times that I have gone into a bird flu village or chicken farm without some form of protection. I routinely wear the booties and mask when covering poultry vaccinations and mass slaughters and when visiting villages where someone has recently died.

Sometimes when I’m going out to these villages I’ll be in the car with a photographer

or a stringer or translator and they kind of joke around and are very reluctant to put on the gear and so I always ask them, “Do you have children?” and normally they say, “Yes,” and we talk for a few minutes about that and they show me some pictures of their kids and I always say, “Well, when you go home tonight and you leave your clothes at the door, they probably don’t pose that much of a danger to you, but what if your baby crawls over and starts playing with your boots and sticks her hands in her mouth?” and that usually does the trick. Usually it becomes crystal clear then that it is not worth taking the risk.

Whenever I need a reminder of what I’m potentially dealing with I can go back through some of my old notes and stories. I’ve interviewed both SARS and bird flu survivors days after they were discharged from the hospital, and I can tell you the H5N1 virus in its current form is very nasty—raging fevers, sweats, pain so intense that one man felt he was being hit by a hammer nonstop for days, headaches, coughing and the feeling that you’re drowning because you can’t breathe.

Covering Pandemic Flu

If a pandemic flu strain were to emerge and started spreading easily among people, our coverage would change. I’m always asking questions like, “What would you do? How would you work? Would you stay or would you leave?” and I think that these are extremely difficult questions to answer, and I don’t have the answers. I think it would be a very fluid situation that none of us have ever dealt with on a worldwide scale.

Even for a disaster like Hurricane Katrina or the Asian tsunami, no one on the ground knew how to respond until they knew what they were up against and, even then, there were major problems, especially in the beginning. I don’t think anybody in the news business, regardless of how much



Villagers walk out of a church after Sunday service in Kubu Simbelang village, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Members of an extended family had died of bird flu and no links to sick birds could be found, raising fear of possible human-to-human infection. Locals blamed black magic, not the virus, for the deaths. May 2006. Photo by Binsar Bakkaral Courtesy of The Associated Press.

planning we do, will be following a step-by-step manual on how to work. I think that if it's the size of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, we will all be winging it to try to do our jobs. I can tell you that I won't be in the office, and I won't be out on the street interviewing people, and I won't be going into hospitals if that was to occur. I would likely be home, working the phones, and avoiding contact with as many people as possible and sleeping with my Tamiflu under my pillow at night.

In many ways SARS was a test run for us, as it was for WHO. We made mistakes and we learned from them and we were very lucky. We may get lucky again with bird flu, but

eventually some nasty bug is going to emerge, and Asia is a likely candidate to be the host. Until then, we should use the experiences that we've gathered from covering SARS, bird flu, and other infectious diseases to generate dialogue and strategies. We should try to avoid the problems we encounter and take note of the barriers we've overcome on the ground. Most importantly, we need to realize that it's okay to step back and take a minute to think about what we're doing before we leap headfirst into this type of story.

We're all smart, tough and very versatile people. We will make tough decisions and use our resourcefulness to find a way to tell the story. We always have, but ultimately it's up to us to inform the public and to record what would be a major moment in history.

Maggie Fox, Editor, Health and Science, Reuters

Covering bird flu on the spot and from half a world away.

This is a story like nothing else. I'm an old war reporter, in which you go in and you go out of a story. If pandemic flu strikes,

it's going to be all around us, all the time. We're not going to be able to go in and out. A year ago my editor called me in and said, "I think pandemic flu is going to be the story of 2006, and we're going to put it together as a team, and we're going to figure out how to do it and do it right." So he made me global coordinator for pandemic flu and told me that we are going to have an editor in each region and train a network of people who will know how to deal with this and make sure we're covered.

At first we started daily conference calls, and they've become more sporadic now with these regional editors being in charge of the story and getting up to speed, covering conferences themselves and making sure that correspondents come to conferences, too, so that they're familiar with the difference between a virus and a bacteria or learning how if a person has respiratory symptoms that could mean a whole lot of different things. We want them to become familiar, too, with the whole background of SARS because, like any other news organizations, people cycle in and out of assignments and might not have any clue as to what the background is.

Reuters errs on the side of caution with its reporters' personal safety. During SARS, we didn't let anyone go into a SARS affected area. I'm not saying I necessarily agree with this decision, because we certainly send people to places where they are shot at, but I think it is because of the extra level of carrying infection to other people. We opted not to send people into H5N1 infected places where clusters have broken out or where there are infected people.

Developing Reporting Resources

We designated a whole team of reporters who were responsible for bird flu. We also set up an internal Web site, which was something that we'd never done before—a bird flu Web site where all the reporters and editors could go to. I've spent countless hours putting stuff on it—links to all of the WHO information, links to all the CDC information, links to lot of the stuff that Mike Osterholm has done. [See Osterholm's comments on pages 50 and 54.] We've set up what we call boilerplate. If reporters have 15 or 20 minutes to write a story, it's a lot easier to have a block of information that they can put in, in which



A farm worker ties the legs of dead ostriches suspected of having bird flu virus. The ostriches were to be buried inside the Sambawa Farm in Jaji, Nigeria, where the first bird flu case was noticed. February 2006.

Photo by George Osodi/Courtesy of The Associated Press.

they haven't mixed up viruses and bacteria or pandemic flu and H5N1. And we update that. Every time WHO updates its numbers, we update our Web site. I've also got all of the contact numbers if we need to call experts quickly.¹

One of the things I try to bring home to our reporters is they should know now who their local state health officer, sheriff and local school principal are because they are really going to be important. They are going to be working in their home, and Reuters is going to go from being a big national news agency to being a local news agency. Whenever the pandemic flu erupts, they're going to be working from their homes, covering it like it's a local story. It's really hard to get reporters to know a source before they need that source. We are in just-in-time supply distance, too. So my guy working the morning shift who doesn't know anything about bird flu wants me to give him my contact at the CDC so he can ask a bunch of very unprepared questions.

One problem is that people at Reuters don't use the bird flu Web site. I have done this, and nobody goes to the Web site. And this is something that we haven't touched on. People want information—the public wants information, journalists want information, everybody wants information—but you know who they want information from? They want information from the one person they know to get information from. Sometimes it's a local official, sometimes it is a person at WHO. In my office, it's me. They don't want to go to my Web site. They want me to tell them personally at the very moment that they need that particular piece of information. They would like me to personally alert them. I've had to turn off my internal instant messaging system because I get questions like, "Should I feed the birds in my backyard anymore?" and I get caught on a deadline trying to write, and I get these messages sent to me.

This story has made me realize exactly how sources feel. I've always been an observer. I've always been equipped to tell people, "I don't know shit about anything." And all of a sudden I am the resident expert in my company, which is a big company, and I'm supposed to tell them this stuff, and so I put together my risk communication plan

and it's, "We've got to cover the story. We've got to make sure that we can cover the story, but on this—like no other story—we've got to cover ourselves, too." So I've been put in the unusual position of not only having to communicate to my fellow journalists but having to communicate to editors as well as corporate people.

After I became the bird flu editor, I went to my immediate editor and said, "Well, what I'm hearing at these flu conferences is that if you want people to have good measures to protect themselves, you have to make them make it a habit early on. You can't just wait until the pandemic hits and hand out a bunch of plans and apply them and give people masks and say, 'Protect yourselves.' But if you, in fact, incorporate the use of these things in your day-to-day life, you will protect yourself, not only from pandemic, but from all of the cracks that're around every fault." So I got him to put plans in the newsroom, and I was very pleased about that. But then I said, "We'll also have to think about how we keep people working, keep people filing. If they come into the office, how do we protect them, and will we provide treatment? Will we get Tamiflu for people? Will we vaccinate?" He didn't even miss a beat, and said, "What about liability? What if we vaccinate people and they get sick and they sue us?"

This really does have to start now, so we're trying to figure out these things. One of the first things we had to work with was figuring out how we can file stories. We have external access to our system, but I found out to my horror at another meeting that it is all Internet based. We don't have any dedicated lines provided so if the Internet breaks down we're going to have a whole bunch of journalists that can't file. People are working on that.

We've done exercises in which everybody



Wearing protective gear, a worker drives dead turkeys to be buried in the southern Israeli kibbutz of Holit, near the northern border of Egypt. March 2006. *Photo by Emilio Morenatti/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

¹ Another good collection of avian flu resources can be found on the Association of Health Care Journalists Web site at www.healthjournalism.org/resource/pandemic/pandemic_resources.html

in a certain area worked from home that day on their laptop to see if our system would support it and so far it appears to. The biggest flaw is that a whole bunch of journalists don't know how to use their laptops. We aren't the most technical people out there, as you know. Have you noticed there are people who can crash their laptop no matter where they go? With a pandemic, are your technicians going to want to go out there and fix their laptops at their houses? I'm thinking not.

These are issues we never had to deal with before. With Katrina or Bosnia or Lebanon, we could fly in equipment or just send in correspondents who knew what they're doing. With this one we won't be able to do that. We've also set up editorial training exercises and, boy, do I have real respect for people who do training after this. Our training manager sent me her scenario on how it would unfold, and it was clear that she had no idea how the WHO works, no idea how the CDC works. Everybody thinks we're going to just call the CDC from 800,000 different places and there will be someone on the other end of the phone to answer our questions.

So what I tried to do, and failed miserably at, is to get some correspondents up to speed on this, and the Health and Human Services pandemic flu exercise was the perfect opportunity for this. "Okay, they're going to 50 states. You go cover Pandemic Influenza Day." Well, something happens on the cattle market that day, and they can't go because most of our correspondents cover commodities or equities or things like that. Or they go and they write the really obvious story. Or Michael Osterholm shows up and brings out his very articulate, well thought out comments, and that's all that gets reported. After this has been reported six times, it's not news anymore, but it is news to that correspondent because they haven't seen it before because they haven't read my beautiful Web site.

I'm just being really honest about the challenges that all of us face in trying to get people ready to take this on. My thought was that, by now, I would have a team of 16 journalists who would know a hell of a lot about bird flu having sat through many conferences like this. And I find out I'm still the only person at Reuters who knows anything about bird flu. That's not true because we have certainly got our correspondents in the field in Asia who are experts. And we've hired a health reporter in Hong Kong who knows a whole lot about this, and she has written some real good copy, and this would not have happened were it not for SARS and bird flu, and she'll be able to add a whole lot to our coverage. And some of our reporters in Africa are up to speed on this and certainly reporters in Europe have come up to speed. Here in the United States, it's a bit more of a challenge because it's not here yet. It hasn't provided a threat. It's not on the front pages of papers.

Christy Feig, Senior Medical Producer, CNN

The TV reporter's dilemma: When getting quotes over the phone won't do.

I tend to work on the frontlines, and television is a little bit different than print. I can't really get a story by picking up the phone and talking with someone. I've really got to have a camera there. With infectious disease that presents a whole other kind of complication.

About the time when the anthrax situation was happening, in the fall of 2001, CNN hired a team out of Britain to basically serve as our security advisors on all of these kinds of things. They go with us to war zones and to Katrina. They're medical advisors, security advisors, and they have a lot more information on this stuff than we do. They think about the "Don't set your camera down there." It's been very interesting what we've learned from them. And what we have decided so far for avian flu is that we've got Tamiflu stockpiled in certain places and HAZMAT suits in certain places. We train teams in certain areas. We have a doctor on call who will brief anybody before they go in—will give them an oral quiz before they go in. They are the first people the reporters talk to when they come out. And anyone can decide at any particular time that they don't want to go in.



A farm attendant buries slain chickens suspected of contracting the bird flu virus in Jaji, Nigeria. This was Africa's first known outbreak of a deadly bird flu strain. February 2006. Photo by George Osodi/Courtesy of The Associated Press.

To their credit, CNN will actually go to great lengths to get people out of any place that they don't want to be. We've had people sign up for hurricanes and all of a sudden decide they don't want to be in there, and we will find a way to extract them. But when push comes to shove and reporters get the call—we're journalists, and we want to be in the thick of it. And we often think about our safety last. We want the story, and when I say I'm not going to go in and the Fox network says, "I'm going in," I want to pass them on the road. It's just the way it is. We really can't help it.

This raises a lot of questions about what do you do to protect yourself as much as possible? You try not to go into the houses where someone has died and disinfect as soon as you can. But we're all in the same boat wondering how safe are we going to be when push comes to shove.

We've got some interesting things going on in preparing for this. If you've been in the CNN center in Atlanta, there is the huge food court and the Omni Hotel. It's a bubble, and they've actually got plans in place to take over the whole bubble with people that they can just keep inside the bubble for months on end if they need to, and that's where they can broadcast from. They and the broadcast studio in New York are the only ones that can carry the network by themselves. I don't want to be in the bubble—but it actually might work. We've also gotten a new technology room where we can feed video over the Internet, so there are some things they are trying with technology that are quite phenomenal.

In the discussion period that followed, reporters spoke about reporting on outbreaks of illness related to H5N1.

Alan Sipress, Staff Writer, The Washington Post: I must have been in two dozen villages where there were outbreaks and a dozen different clusters and in hospitals. And it's not that I'm reckless. But what we know about this strain right now is that it's really, really, really, really, really hard to catch this. It doesn't mean it's not impossible, it doesn't mean it's not going to change or mutate. When we started working the story in January 2004, we took a lot more safety precautions than we take now. We all take risk assessments as journalists. I have to say going into a village, where there is a cluster,



Health officials kill birds suspected of contracting the bird flu virus in Jaji, Nigeria. In the five weeks since the virus had been detected, officials were overwhelmed, and the disease spread quickly across Africa's most populous country. February 2006.

Photo by George Osodi/Courtesy of The Associated Press.

is probably one of the safest things I do as a journalist. But maybe that isn't true. I go in and, when I get home, I immediately take a shower. I throw my clothes in the laundry and I wash off my shoes. And maybe that's a lot less than you do.

Maryn McKenna, Freelance Journalist and Kaiser Media Fellow: It's not just about the humans. All professionals make mistakes in estimating their risks, and the perfect example of this is that the bird flu outbreak in France that was spread from one farm to another by public health people who should have known what they were doing. That's how the outbreak expanded in France, so it's very possible for all of us to make mistakes, and it may not seem as though we are endangering each other or endangering other people or being a human vector.

Sipress: I should say if there is a farm where there is an outbreak, I won't go to the farm. I don't want to be spreading contamination, but if the site has already been cleaned and cleared, then it's a different situation.

McKenna: I have gone into disease outbreaks and covered the tsunami in Thailand. I was in New Orleans after Katrina, and I do not think there was ever a time in my

career when I didn't go to the wall—and through the wall—for a story. And I'm really concerned that this part of the culture of journalism is going to ruin us, particularly with people who are less thoughtful, less trained, and less senior than the people in this room—people who have fewer resources than major news organizations. I do not know what the answer to this is. I wish there were more editors in the room.

Feig: That is a very valid point. All of us would do a lot to get a story, and it's the reason that we're journalists and not bankers. We will push ourselves farther than we should. We've studied this inside and out and, whenever something happens, it's going to be the closest journalist who gets it first and may not have that training, so I do share your concern.

Meg Haskell, Reporter, Bangor Daily News: We are probably the smallest newspaper in the room, and I'm probably the only dedicated health reporter in the state of Maine. We've been working on our pandemic plan for about a year, and it has been done in a catch-as-catch-can way. But one of the things we have identified is the need to work. Because we have such a small pool of media outlets covering the state, what we're trying to do is work out a mutual aid agreement with people in broadcast and other print outlets who are traditionally our competitors so that in the event of a pandemic, and we are all working with a 40 percent reduction of our workforce, we have the ability to work together to get the work done. That's important to us. ■

The Many Dimensions of the Avian Flu Story

Reporters from the United States, China and Germany discuss how a story about a health issue such as avian flu can be covered competitively, with its web of connections that make it an economic, political, scientific and global news story.

Maryn McKenna, Former Senior Medical Reporter at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, now a Kaiser Media Fellow and Freelance Journalist

Stretching beyond your beat knowledge.

I spent a lot of my time over the past 10 years or so following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) around the world and, in the summer of 1997, I wrote a story about the death of a child in Hong Kong. That child turned out to be the first known case of H5N1 in a human in the world, and my story was, as far as I can tell, the first story on avian flu H5N1 that appeared in the North American media. So I've been writing about avian flu and pandemic flu for a very long time, for almost half of my too-long career as a journalist and, as a result, I've seen a lot of other journalists

come in and out of the story and climb the curve that I myself climbed in learning about a very difficult topic and then realizing all the implications of that topic and frightening myself, and then learning to live with it, and making operational, as the CDC would say, that knowledge in my daily life.

Being a flu geek has taken me to places like into the flu labs of the CDC, and to the exhumation in the Arctic of the bodies of victims of 1918, and into a street in Bangkok that in English is called Chicken Alley. I stood there in 1994, watching in horror as they packed up at the end of the day and washed all the chicken droppings out of the street with a high-pressure fire hose. I covered my mouth and tried not to inhale and tried not think about what a virologist's dream that was.

Since the summer, my journey as an infectious disease and public health reporter has taken me to some interesting places, which might parallel or predict what a lot of other people are going to have to do. I've written about how businesses are strategizing pandemic flu and about what very local health departments are doing

about pandemic flu. And I've written about how emergency rooms all over the United States and in North America (and likely in other countries, too) are looking at the possibility of pandemic flu as though a train is barreling down on them and they are tied to the tracks. I've written about the cultural imponderables—about the inherent resistance of people to change, not just in Asia, but in the United States, too, and how that's going to make pandemic preparations very challenging on this continent and around the globe.

I mention this because one lesson I want to send you home with is that all of us are senior journalists, and we've all been doing this for a while, whether or not we actually have beats. As we get mature in the business, we develop specialties. We're going to have to let go of that. To cover pandemic flu well we're all going to have to learn to be general assignment reporters again. I say this with some pain because I'm really proud of how good I am in my specialty.

All of us are going to have to learn new skills; we're going to have to learn about new subjects. We're going to have to do that in order to ask the right questions and especially to ask the deep questions that are going to be really important to covering the story well. If you're a health reporter, be prepared to start learning about globalization. If you're an education reporter, now would be a good time to start reaching out to law enforcement. If you already know about the business and financial world—a key part of the pandemic flu story—now would be a good time to start finding out how your local public health department works, because it's public health that's going to decide when the schools and businesses and others close their doors.

We think of the beats in newsrooms as silos. We're going to have to let go of the silos. I really believe covering pandemic flu is a web with lots of cables connected in it. If you tug on any one of them, all the others start to give.

The second lesson that I want to offer—and one I resisted for a long time—is that I really think that the pandemic story is local, local, local. The fact is, what people feel about a pandemic, whether they're willing to prepare, how well they're preparing, what we really want to tell people is what is happening in the local school district, in your neighborhood cop precinct, and in the



Vendors sleep near their chickens at a fowl market in Shanghai, China. October 2005. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.*

shopping mall. That's where the real drama, the real narrative, for those of you who want to do narrative, of pandemic planning and pandemic coverage is going to be.

Here are some examples:

- Whether kids in the school lunch program are going to get fed, even though the school lunch program is a federal program, is a local story.
- Whether people will come to work if they feel ill because they live paycheck to paycheck and they can't afford to stay home is a local story. It's a story that you have to ask about locally to prove and to embody.
- Whether people will insist on going to the local hospital, even if the local health authorities have told them not to, because they have a family member who's sick and they're prepared to go through the National Guard troops at the front door of the emergency department in order to get that family member care is entirely a local story.
- If people go on with their lives as normal once the pandemic starts because they're illiterate and can't read the messages from the local public health department, or English is not their primary language and the messages haven't been translated into whatever language they use or put into their local ethnic media.

The stories on that list are situations that are going to be stories—local stories, specific and different in every area if or when a pandemic starts. But I really believe that there are stories that we can be doing now that are about preparation for a pandemic that are also very local, very specific stories, different in every place. Here's a good example. I've been talking a lot over the past year to state, and especially county and local health departments. They are deeply frustrated and scared about the national pandemic planning process. The things they say about the CDC, and about the benchmarks the CDC has set for them, and about the process by which the CDC money is getting to them, are not polite. They are not the sort of thing that most of us could put in our family newspapers, as we say. The equivalent of the last mile of the pandemic planning process in this country is just at this point not working very well. Again, something that's very local, very different in every area, something that people, even those of us who want to

But I think there's another question that we have to keep in mind: "How does that work?" That's the question that will get you to the very local, very granular details of the stuff that you need to be writing about that I am now grappling with writing about. Here are some examples:

- How often does the tertiary care hospital in your town get its deliveries of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies? Is it three times a day? Is it once a day? Do they have a three-day backlog? Do they have a five-day backlog? This is something I'm going to need to learn if I write about the hospital preparations.
- Have many of the changes that were supposed to beef up local and county health departments after the anthrax attacks actually happened? What really is the state of the radio communications in a particular town? What's the state of the last mile of Internet?
- If you have a Fortune 100 heavy industrial company in your municipality, where do they get their raw materials from? If there's something like Target, where are they buying? Does all of Home Depot get its fasteners from China? If they have redundancies and they've booked five fastener factories, are all of them in China? Have they thought to go to Thailand or Vietnam or somewhere else instead?
- How far away are food wholesalers that supply local grocery stores? How much of a backlog do they have? Do they go from the port with their refrigerated truck straight to a grocery store?

None of these are questions could I answer right now about the city where I now live, but I think they're questions that we all could be asking in our localities.

A third lesson to guide us in this very local coverage, borrows from Peter Sandman's paradigm of hazard versus outrage. [See Sandman's comments on page 59.] Not too many people right now are convinced of the hazard. As a guide to where local pandemic stories are, look for the potentials for outrage.

Here's a very good example: After the anthrax attacks, I was embedded with a CDC anthrax investigation team in Washington. Later I started following their preparations for bioterror preparedness for other pathogens, and I sat through their smallpox



A man rides past a truck loaded with empty cages at a market where live fowl were kept. The market was cleared and sanitized after the Chinese government adopted stricter control measures for live birds. Beijing, November 2005. *Photo by Elizabeth Dalziel/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

cover the big global and national story, we need to be paying attention to the very local, very granular details.

For a lot of science and medical people, the essential questions we ask are: "How do you know that? What's your evidence?"

vaccination planning exercises for states and localities. After the CDC trotted out its very lengthy description of exactly who was going to get smallpox vaccine, and more importantly who was not going to get smallpox vaccine (at the time the supply was very limited), a representative of the New York State Health Department stood up and said, “Everything you’ve said makes a lot of sense, but I have to tell you this. If you don’t agree right now to vaccinate our EMS personnel, our EMS personnel will not come to work. Is that in your planning process?” And the CDC was caught absolutely flat-footed. I know of a county health department that surrounds a major state capital right now where the health department has been told that if they don’t distribute respirators, which as we all know are in short supply, to the employees’ families at home, then the epidemiologists and the public health nurses are not coming to work. And there’s a very important hospital in New York City where the emergency department leadership has decided in advance that they are not going to use respirators there except for people who are face-to-face with known, not presumed, flu victims. And they’re expecting a great deal of difficulty from the rest of their staff as a result. This is probably not the same thing that a hospital on the other side of the river has decided.

All of this is going to take time, and I have not got a solution for that. I wish I could say that getting ready to do pandemic coverage is not going to stress us more or stress our relationships with our editors more as we spend more time on this. It’s something that we have to do now or we’re going to be really, really sorry if the pandemic comes and we haven’t.

Alan Sipress, Staff Writer, The Washington Post, formerly based in the Jakarta bureau of the Post

A Westerner in Asia: How to get beyond the obvious.

While bird flu may prove to be the most important medical and public health story of our time, it’s actually much more than a medical or public health story. Medical writers need to think as broadly as possible about this story, and those who, like me, aren’t medical writers, who don’t have a formal background in medicine or science,

the good news is there’s much more to bird flu coverage.

The current episode of H5N1 began in the middle of 2003 in the poultry of Vietnam and Indonesia and later that year in Thailand. But as some reporters later revealed, those countries covered up the outbreaks for months. I started focusing on the issue in early 2004, in January, and worked on the topic probably for about two months in Thailand and Vietnam, and then put it aside and never expected to write about it again.

Later that year, we realized at the Post how serious of a threat bird flu was and decided to take a much deeper and broader approach to the topic. We decided to explore the economic and social changes that created conditions for pandemic and to look at the cultural and political factors that were hamstringing efforts at containing it. So, for instance, I spent a long time exploring how dramatic economic changes in East Asia, particularly agrarian changes known as the livestock revolution, had created near perfect-storm conditions for the outbreak of a pandemic, especially in the absence of the kind of biosecurity measures that American and European farms had taken a generation earlier.

For that story, I spent a couple of days in the wetlands of central Thailand profiling a chicken farmer whose life had been transformed by the livestock revolution over the last generation. He’d gone from a subsistence existence as a dirt-poor rice farmer to that of a successful businessman who could afford to buy computers and pay for college education for his kids. But even as his personal fortunes shifted dramatically, he didn’t take the simple safeguards to protect his thousands of birds from infection. Instead, he packed the poultry in tightly together and lived so closely among them that the chances of the virus mutating or resorting became even greater.

To explore the cultural dimensions of bird flu—and how long-standing traditions and lifestyles threaten to amplify the virus—I spent time with cock fighters and fighting cock breeders in Thailand and Bali, with backyard chicken farmers in Vietnam, Cambodia, central Java, with worshippers at Buddhist temples in Cambodia, who buy caged birds and then release them to win religious merit for the life to come. And for one of the last pieces from Indonesia, I

While bird flu may prove to be the most important medical and public health story of our time, it’s actually much more than a medical or public health story.

—Alan Sipress



A medical worker checks the health of Johannes Ginting, 25, the sole survivor of an Indonesian family infected with bird flu, at a hospital in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. At least six of Ginting's relatives from Kubu Simbelang Village died of the virus. May 2006. *Photo by Binsar Bakkaral/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

spent the better part of a week in Sumatra to reconstruct the history of the famous cluster in the village of Kubu Simbelang. There were some pretty discouraging lessons about what happens when modern medicine comes up against traditional belief systems, black magic, and skepticism toward power.

To examine how the autocratic and corrupt politics of some governments in the region undercut containment efforts, I spent a fair amount of time working on accountability pieces. We wrote a piece about China's improper use of the human antiviral drug amantadine in treating livestock, which helped make this drug ineffective in treating humans infected with some strains of the virus. We wrote about Indonesia's long record of covering up and then ignoring the virus and the utter fiasco of Indonesia's effort to vaccinate poultry against the disease.

There were several virtues in taking this broader approach to the avian flu story:

- It played to the advantage of being a reporter on the ground in Asia.
- The Post was able to interject new information into the international discussion about bird flu that wasn't otherwise

widely available. Other reporters were much better positioned than me to cover new research or CDC findings or European Union policy debates.

- By focusing on the broader trends and the deeper dynamics, I didn't have to get caught up with trying to confirm each new case or each possible mutation in the virus that, in most cases, wouldn't have been of much interest to our generalized readership.
- We could publish what I believe were compelling and often front-page stories without having to tell our readers that a pandemic was imminent that, of course, we have no way of knowing.

Watchdog Reporting

A range of political and cultural obstacles confront reporters working this topic in Asia. Included among those are:

- Getting visas to places like Burma and Vietnam and China.
- Getting reliable information from secretive officials. In some countries, there are efforts to prevent reporters from going to sensitive areas.
- There are issues of translation. Fortunately, I spoke Bahasa Indonesia well enough that I could do some of the interviewing myself, but I was also extremely fortunate to have tremendous local journalists working with me as assistants, especially in Thailand and Indonesia.

Getting around obstacles is what journalists ought to know how to do. And we use the same investigative skills that we'd use in covering local zoning boards or congressional misappropriation when we try to dig below the rhetoric of foreign governments. And, of course, we develop sources. The piece the Post published about Indonesia's long denial of its bird flu outbreak came by cultivating several Indonesian sources for more than six months, sources who ultimately went on the record with us. We also used documents, including academic studies. And I've always found the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) to be a terrific service for compiling all these in one place.¹

¹ www.cidrap.umn.edu/

There are also documents from local governments including budgets, investigation reports, field reports, medical studies, and so forth. Part of the reason we were able to break the story about China's misuse of antiviral drugs was because of a document. We were able to get a copy of an official Chinese veterinary handbook that prescribed the use of amantadine for treating livestock that come down with bird flu. Once we had that, it wasn't so difficult to get the pharmaceutical industry officials in China to go on the record with us. We were also able to uncover malfeasance in the Indonesia poultry vaccination program by getting documents that purported in detail how much vaccine was distributed and used province by province, quarter by quarter.

Conveying the Cultural Context in Sumatra

Here's the main difference between reporting from home and reporting from abroad: Overseas, it's even more important to keep an open mind. If you're reading about bird flu in the West, it can be too easy to fall into cultural stereotypes and to attribute the shortcomings of Asia's containment efforts to inherent cultural flaws. I'd like to take the example of the human cluster in Sumatra earlier this year. Margie Mason with the AP in Asia has been the first responder, and some of the stories she broke in Sumatra were just terrific. [See Mason's description of her reporting in Sumatra on page 81.] I had the luxury of going in a little later, then spending almost a week there trying to describe what had actually happened once the situation wasn't quite as perilous.

In this case, there are four siblings from a single family who fall sick with bird flu and ultimately all but one of them die. Two of the brothers who fall sick flee the hospital and literally head for the hills, refusing to accept modern medical care, including Tamiflu and other drugs. Instead, they turn to witch doctors who attempt to treat them with incense, chants and by chewing up a beetle nut-like concoction that they spit across their patient's bodies and along their extremities. Two of the most remarkable interviews I've ever had the chance to do in my life were with the witch doctors who actually carried out these procedures.

As the boys ran, they potentially spread



An Indonesian woman kisses her chicken to show her belief that it is safe. Dozens of people from the Karo regency of North Sumatra Province, where seven family members died of avian influenza, held a protest in front of the governor's office, slaughtering their chickens, drinking the chickens' blood, cooking and consuming them to protest the government's plan to kill all poultry in Karo. June 2006. *Photo by Binsar Bakkara/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

the virus to others. No one in the family believed the illness was bird flu except one surviving brother and only at the very end of his saga. Everyone else blamed it on black magic. When the public health and veterinary officials came to the hamlet, the villagers initially chased them away, actually threatening them with violence. The villagers also refused to believe it is bird flu, and in many cases they believed it was an evil spell.

So what might we conclude about this? We think these people are so backward, illogical and crazy and they brought all these troubles on themselves. But here's how the facts looked to the family and the villagers: They'd heard that bird flu was dangerous. There was a dangerous, contagious disease. Yet all those afflicted came from a single family. And who was this family? The patriarch of this family had been the mafia godfather in that part of North Sumatra. He was widely believed to have struck a deal with the local spirit to get his power. The patriarch died a few years back and now his children and grandchildren were falling deathly ill. No one else in the highlands of Sumatra, best as we can tell, even developed a cough. Is this really a contagious disease? It looks a lot more like payback or revenge against this one family.

Moreover, the experts say that bird flu almost always comes from exposure to in-

fectured birds. But all the birds in the village and its surrounding areas seemed healthy. Samples taken by animal health officials come back negative for bird flu, so how can it be bird flu? Then look what happens to the family members who were taken to the hospital. They're admitted to the hospital, injected, given Tamiflu and, in short order, one after another, they die. Would you want to follow in their footsteps and go to the hospital, or would you want to run as fast as you could into the hills away from these strange men with masks?



A child plays the role of a patient during an antibird flu drill at a hospital in Shanghai. December 2005.
Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.

I had the good fortune and the increasingly rare chance to be an American correspondent abroad. Perhaps because I lived in East Asia, it was easier to appreciate the nuances

of the Asian worldviews. But there were also real advantages in being a Westerner, especially an English speaker, in covering this story.

- I had access to international experts who many local officials and academics were reluctant to contact, either for bureaucratic, linguistic or other reasons.
- In the West we're raised to be at home with resources that are available on the Internet, whether it's ProMed or academic journal Web sites, and where there are real-time reports from the AP, Reuters, Bloomberg and others. Many of even the top officials in some of these Asian countries didn't have access to or didn't access these resources.

I patrolled through all of these online sources as often as I could and then I'd go out my front door to see what was going on firsthand. I saw my job as synthesize, explore and illustrate. I wasn't going to be the first one to report on a specific outbreak in Cambodia or in downtown Bangkok, but there weren't a lot of other people who were really looking at a lot of other related

issues such as:

- Larger cross-border patterns and epidemiology and the issue of genetic susceptibility to the virus, at least not a year or nine months ago.
- The recurring rivalries in country after country, between ministries of health and ministries of agriculture.
- The different ways in which poultry products are shipped and smuggled across the borders of countries in the region and beyond. Most of the experts on bird flu are affiliated with national governments and national institutions and focused on their own specific countries. Even WHO and FAO offices in various capitals understandably tended to focus on their own countries of responsibility.

Digging Where Others Can't Go

I haven't avoided public health writing altogether for the sake of writing about politics, economics and anthropology. And I might not have the specialized training of an epidemiologist, but in many ways journalists and epidemiologists share many of the same skills. What we may lack in public health training, we make up for in freedom of action. For instance, WHO investigators are often constrained by the relationships and the requirements imposed on them by host countries. We're not. So, at times, we can go to the scene, ask questions that international health investigators aren't able to, as much as they'd like to, and report findings that may be diplomatically difficult for international officials to disclose in public.

I was able to spend several days in northern Vietnam during 2004 exploring how the virus's behavior suggested it might be mutating into a more perilous form. WHO officials did not have those same opportunities to visit the field, and Vietnamese officials were cagey about reporting the information they had developed themselves. In another example, Indonesian officials long refused to admit that human-to-human transmission was taking place in their country, but I believe there's been perhaps a half-dozen clusters in Indonesia where it's likely that's taken place, if it's not absolutely proven. It puts WHO in an awkward position, because the agency doesn't want to make public comments that jeopardize its relationship

with Jakarta. But we can certainly publish evidence of human transmission when we find it.

Most of what I've discussed pertains to coverage of the current prepandemic situation. If and when pandemic comes, we are not going to be spending a lot of time with cock fighters and chicken farmers. At that point, the immediate medical and public health dimensions are going to become an overriding priority. But even then, we will have to think broadly as journalists. Politics and political context will still matter and with an even greater urgency than ever before. As journalists, we should have a vital role in helping to ensure public accountability in getting the truth out and explaining why government officials and others may be hiding that truth from us.

Lu Yi, Senior Reporter and Editor, Sanlian Life Weekly, Now a Knight Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Insights from Beijing: Reporting SARS and avian flu for China's largest news-weekly.

From 2002 to 2003, we had five cover stories on SARS. From 2004 until now, we have had two cover stories on avian flu and more than 50 stories on pandemic flu and SARS. In China, there are three challenges for us in covering avian flu: Can we do it? Should we do it? How do we do it?

We have censorship in China. And it comes in three different types:

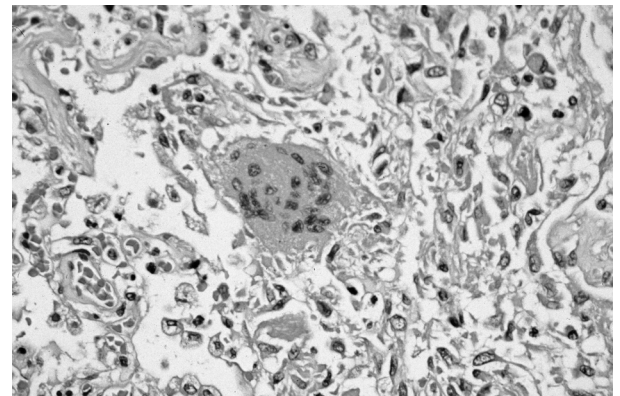
1. We have "blowing in the wind" meetings when editors of magazines or newspapers attend meetings at the propaganda department twice a week. They receive a list of topics that would be better not to report. Sometimes, you can imagine, SARS and avian flu are on this list. If you want to report those topics, then you better do it this way, not your way.
2. At many newspapers and magazines, there are editor meetings every week to discuss which story could be the cover story or which new story could be the special feature. After that, we have to report all those topics we discussed in this meeting to the propaganda department and, if they feel you should not be working around this story, then you just stop.

3. The third type of censorship happens just before you publish your story. Although you've already finished, before you publish it you have to send the layout to the propaganda department, and the people there will check it. If they think this story is not suitable for publishing, they will just ask you to change it. Sometimes many stories tend to go nowhere.

So this is a big problem we have with such limitations; we cannot run many stories we want to run.

Because we rely on newsstand sales, our cover story is very important. If it cannot sell, it's a big problem, and people in China just don't care much about science and public health issues. So many Chinese news media, including independent magazines and newspapers, don't want to report on SARS, in part because it's highly risky; they will risk being shut down and also sales are not so good. But we are very lucky because I have a very good boss, who is open-minded and just too good to be true. The editors there have this passion for science, for public health, and they believe in enlightenment and education. So we have a big portion of science and public health reporting, with three staff science writers at our magazine, the most for a weekly magazine in China.

So how do we report these stories? First we have to bypass the censorship. If we cannot discuss a topic, can we interview this person involved in this program? We do a profile of a person, and sometimes it will pass the censorship. We also try to interview foreign scientists and foreign experts who are willing to tell true stories, rather than lie. And if I cannot run a story in China, maybe I can go abroad to run some similar stories in South Asia. I went to Thailand to write HIV stories, because although we are the first Chinese magazine that discussed the HIV epidemic in Hunan Province, after that to keep running these stories we have to go to Thailand or some-



This photomicrograph reveals lung tissue pathology due to SARS. Image provided by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Dr. Sherif Zaki.



An epidemic prevention worker sprays disinfectant on vehicles going in and out of Zepu County, in the Xinjiang Uighor Autonomous Region, northwest China. Highly pathogenic bird flu epidemic had been reported in two counties of that region. November 2005. *Photo by He Zhan Jun, Xinhua/Courtesy of The Associated Press.*

where else.

In 2003 we did a story on SARS, and it was a very big issue because we were the first Chinese magazine who dared to use Dr. Jiang Yanyong's picture on our cover.² Before that, Time magazine had interviewed him, but no Chinese media dared to interview him or to publish anything about him and about the SARS epidemic. We have no problem connecting with him, because we have his phone number, and we know where he lives. The problem is that we cannot interview him because he lives in the military neighborhood and there are soldiers outside the neighborhood, so we have to pretend to be his family. We interviewed him in his son's home, and he told us that before he wrote letters to Western news organizations, he also wrote several letters to other Chinese media such as People's Daily and CCTV. "Nobody at these news organizations dared to do this story," he said to us, "and I just don't want to waste my time to talk with you and there's no story."

We really want to run this story, so we used some tricks to have this cover story published. At the wind-blowing meeting, we

pretend we'll run another cover story and, just one day before it comes to publish, we change our cover story and publish his picture on the cover. We saw that the magazines were delivered to newsstands in Beijing; if you run bad stories about the government, sometimes they recall the copies, and we don't want that to happen. I should also say that after we published this magazine, we were punished. They sent us a new chief editor, and our original chief editor was deprived of making the final decision about the cover story and our salaries and incomes were cut about in half. That situation continued until early 2005.

With the avian flu coverage, it's different. We have two people to interview. Let's call one of them Dr. G., a virologist based in Hong Kong who was interviewed by many Western media and the Chinese newspapers and the magazines. But when I scrutinized his story, I found there are many logical gaps. I finally found another doctor, Chen Hualan, who is a tough woman, very tough. Nobody in China can interview her, because she refused to be interviewed, and she refused to talk about anything. She is the director of the National Avian Influenza Reference Laboratory in Harbin, China. She is powerful and doesn't want to be a hero. But after I read all of her articles in the medical journals, and when I'd read the other studies, I found she is the key person, and she has firsthand resources, unlike Dr. G., who just hides so much information. If I just interviewed him, I can have a good story and everybody will say, "Oh, you are brave." But the fact is, it's so biased, and so I spent a week following Dr. Hualan as she flew to Shanghai and then to Beijing, then to Harbin. Finally she would like to say something about it, and I got firsthand information. It's very important that I know these things, because people in China are terrified about avian flu. People think that if the virus is mutated, it's a bad thing. We will have a big risk. But the fact is that mutation happens all the time. We should do many more things to improve our information about this virus and not just write horrifying stories. I think it's a good story, because I also got trust from the scientists, and so we have a good story.

² Dr. Jiang Yanyong is the Beijing physician who in April 2003 publicized the government's cover-up of the severity of the SARS epidemic in China.

Harro Albrecht, Medical Writer/Reporter, Die Zeit, Germany

The Euro perspective: Once infected birds hit Germany, the story was never the same again.

In March 2005 my editor told me, “We have to get some stories about flu.” I replied, with the seasonal flu stories in mind, “You know that flu is a dead story, but I can do a story about pharmaceutical companies who try to put out doomsday stories to help sell their goods.” I went into reporting this story, and suddenly I found myself in a disturbing development. After three or four days I convinced myself that something different is going on here, something odd, and we have to prepare. Suddenly I found out that the German government was at work on a national pandemic emergency plan. Then I got the unique opportunity to get a firsthand copy of the national influenza pandemic plan, given to me by the director of Germany’s equivalent to the CDC [Robert Koch Institut]. For 12 years I’d been in touch with him, so I knew him, and he trusted that I would cover this thoroughly.

I did cover the report thoroughly, but we ended up with a strange story. On the front page, there was this very healthy-looking woman with a scarf around her neck and a thermometer in her mouth that said, “Influenza, the Underestimated Disease.” It looked like a common cold story. It was kind of strange. The headline had no word about pandemic or H5N1 or avian flu, although the whole story was about it.

But in the plan, there were no answers like how a possible vaccine would be procured or how the whole system would work. It had all kinds of advice, with a lot of use of words like “would” and “should.” Even the director was not satisfied, and he was open to telling me this. And I thought, he’s giving me his plan, and he is not really proud of his product. What is that?

As I noticed this, I thought that this is the first lesson for us, as reporters, for we play a very important role as facilitators between different authorities in our country. In Germany, there’s a struggle between federal institutions and state institutions, and I found myself in the situations that I had to facilitate and critique one to the other as I bundled information in one place. After a while, people would be asking me, “What



Officials wear protective clothing as they take away dead swans in Newferry, Northern Ireland. Six dead swans had been reported. April 2006. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press/PA.*

is this guy saying? We sit together on the commission, but we’re not talking to each other.” So I’d be telling them what the other person is doing. This meant I was in the middle of all kind of weird situations.

A while after the migration of birds brought avian flu to Europe in March 2005, I started to ask questions about how well the national pandemic plan was working. I asked people in all 16 federal states, went to several hospitals and talked with other officials and asked them about the plan. I asked authorities who had Tamiflu available for 30 percent of their population what they were going to do if the people from five or six other regions came knocking on their doors—coming to them from places that had Tamiflu for only five percent of its citizens. And the blunt answer was, “I think it might be good to travel during that time.”

This was obviously not a real good plan. They had a nice database with all sorts of data on preparation, so I asked them to show me some data about how many rescue rovers and ventilators they had. “Do you have data about that?” And they said, “Well, no, sorry. We don’t have that. If you get hold of some, let us know.”

By the 14th of February, 2006, the first dozen dead swans were found at the north end of the Baltic Sea on an island in the East German part. So I went there. I had disposable boots with me to keep me from being contaminated or spreading the disease. And

And we're moving from these dead birds to the next poultry farm. I commented in my newspaper that it was kind of crazy to be doing this. Afterwards, there were a lot of discussions.

—Harro Albrecht

I found a whole bunch of people, especially people with TV teams, standing with their feet right in the feces of the dead swans. There were no tape barriers, no preparation at all, nothing. And we're moving from these dead birds to the next poultry farm. I commented in my newspaper that it was kind of crazy to be doing this. Afterwards, there were a lot of discussions.

The messages about all of this are very, very difficult, and I have to keep repeating them again and again, telling people that a seasonal flu shot is not protecting against the common cold and is not protective against the new virus that is approaching. Though we have seasonal flu vaccines, it is not that easy to produce a similar vaccine against a virus that is marching toward our area. And most important, just now the coming virus is not a threat to humans, only to birds. In case it turns into a human virus, there is a drug that might mitigate the symptoms, or might prevent death, but only if it's taken when you barely notice the symptom, which could even be a common cold. I have to repeatedly write it and write it and write it over and over, and that's what I've done.

So I explain this to readers thoroughly, make the case somehow urgent, but let them have a bit of hope by being sure they understand that the avian flu is not a deadly threat now to humans. At times, I found myself replying to questions on TV, where I was asked as an expert, and I tell people to be prepared for any crisis; "Don't think about a H5N1, but it is reasonable to prepare for anything: stockpile food, stockpile everything."

Helen Branswell, Medical Reporter, Canadian Press (CP), Canada's Domestic News Agency

How to cover an international story working the phone.

I was asked to speak because I cover the avian flu story pretty much exclusively from Toronto, which is an unusual way to do it. I'm in the print media, so I try to organize my thoughts under subheads, and the first of those is location, location and location. That's important when you're selling a house, but it doesn't have really that much to do with covering this story. There's no reason why somebody in Bangor or Chicago or anywhere can't cover this story to whatever degree they like, pretty much from

wherever they are.

I wrote my first avian flu story on January 13, 2004 when the WHO was investigating 14 suspected human cases that had occurred during the last few weeks of 2003 and early into 2004; all were young children, and 12 had already died. That story said we might be seeing the early stages of a pandemic emerging. In the intervening years, I've written well over 200 stories about avian and pandemic flu and related topics. I regularly quote WHO officials from Geneva, from China, occasionally from Indonesia; I quote experts from the CDC, the National Institutes of Health, universities across the United States and Canada, and into Europe. And I do it all from my desk or my phone at home. CP is a quite small agency with a very modest budget, and there are only two medical reporters. So I can't really jump on a plane at will but, for the most part, it really doesn't make much difference.

One thing, though, I need to keep in mind, and it's important for all of us in journalism to think about, is that all sources aren't created equal. In this conglomeration of different stories—all of them tied together under the subheads of avian flu and pandemic influenza—some might be of more interest to you and your readers than others. Others will be of critical interest to you and your readers. Among these various stories are:

- The vaccine story—a big, big story.
- The molecular biology story—what is it about this virus that makes it so virulent, way more virulent than any one they've seen so far? What might allow it to adapt to humans?
- A story about nonpharmaceutical interventions that we heard about things such as school closures. Would those things work?
- The story about what companies are doing and hospitals are doing to prepare for a pandemic.
- The very interesting and difficult stories about the ethical questions that a lot of people are trying to grapple with in terms of who would get vaccine first, who would get limited antivirals first. How would hospitals triage patients? What is the duty of care of health workers?

With the ethical questions, the WHO has a big project underway on ethics. Hospitals,

at least in my part of the world, are dealing with it. It's a great story. It's a difficult story, and medical people are tied up in knots about it. They don't even like to talk about it, because it's such an anathema to what they do all the time. They have to sort of try to figure out who they won't save. It's a very difficult issue. There's also the issue of modeling, which is what Marc Lipsitch does, and how much models can tell us about what might happen and how much they can't tell us about what might happen. [See Lipsitch's comments on page 57.]

Finding the Best Sources

The important thing to keep in mind is that there isn't a single flu expert out there who can effectively talk about all of these different subjects. What is fantastic is to hear a dependable source say, "This is outside of my realm of expertise." I trust them more, and I go back to them more. Anybody who wants to talk about every story regardless of what sort of subhead it comes under in flu, you really don't want to be talking to that person.

How do you know how expert an expert is? There's been an explosion of experts on this issue since it hit the prime time last fall. Quite a few are selling books, and there's been an explosion in that, too. To be honest, I don't know an actual flu expert who's written a book in the past few years. None of them have had the time to do that. That doesn't mean that the people who've written these books haven't done their homework, but they have got a vested interest, and they aren't on the frontline. Add that to the mix when you're thinking about whether or not these are the right people to call.

If you're writing about the science of flu, whether it's seasonal, avian or pandemic, and you're thinking about quoting somebody who isn't a well-known, mainstream flu specialist, it's really worth doing a PubMed search on them. See what they've published on flu. Right now, a New York University medical professor who's written a book about pandemic fear is widely quoted on a variety of topics including molecular biology, with such topics as whether this virus is attaching to the right receptor binding sites, could it bind to more human sites, and what it would take to do that. Search in PubMed and the only thing that you'll find under his name is an article in *Forbes*—not even

medical literature. So if he hasn't published anything in the medical literature on any topic at all, is he really the right person to be talking about the molecular biology of flu? Just think about that.

Who you talk to matters, both for the quality of the work that you're producing for your readers and also because the people who are taking the subject seriously read the serious work. The experts watch us; if they see us quoting people who aren't really high caliber, it's going to influence whether or not they're going to take your call.

This brings me to my next point: If you can afford it, if your bosses don't mind, or if you're freelancer and can afford it, there's no reason to stick to the continental United States. You can dial anywhere, and there are experts on this subject in Hong Kong; Jakarta; Beijing; Atlanta and Athens, Georgia; Columbus, Ohio and Ho Chi Minh City. I call these places all the time. They're great people. There's no point in not using them. But generally I would say e-mail first. Actually, what I would say is read the study first, do your homework first. If you're going to get somebody like Dr. Nancy Cox, who is head of the Influenza Division at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, on the line, you really want to know what you're talking about before you start asking her questions if you want to get her on the phone a second time.

Doing things remotely means sometimes you have to get creative. Most of the time, it doesn't matter that I'm in Toronto, but there are occasions when it really does. In May, when the Sumatra cluster was occurring, it was killing me. I was on the phone all the time, but I obviously couldn't be there. I knew that the people in the village were refusing to take Tamiflu, I knew they were afraid of it, and so I was trying to figure out a way to do that story. But I couldn't go and talk to those people about what was going on there. I couldn't get the story that others got. So I talked with a person at the University of Washington who was one of the first people that the WHO used to try to combat fears during the Ebola crises. He told me about struggling against the misperceptions that arise when white doctors come in and start pulling out bodies during an Ebola crisis. I talked to somebody at our national lab in Winnipeg who's an expert on Ebola and had recently been in Angola for the Marburg outbreak. This offered me

What is fantastic is to hear a dependable source say, 'This is outside of my realm of expertise.' I trust them more, and I go back to them more.

— *Helen Branswell*

Creating a Bookshelf of Valuable Resources

As a media fellow at the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Maryn McKenna, author of "Beating Back the Devil: On the Front Lines with the Disease Detectives of the Epidemic Intelligence Service" (Free Press, 2004), participated in the conference, "The Next Big Health Crisis—And How to Cover It." After the conference, Nieman Reports asked her to compile a list of important books related to the coverage of influenza—both the current threat of avian flu and the possibility of pandemic flu. We are grateful to her for doing so—and for sharing her experiences in using these resources to assist her in reporting the many stories she's written about these topics. "It helps to assemble a reference bookshelf," McKenna says. "I have been writing about pandemic and avian flu since 1997, and here are some of the works I keep on my shelf. Some of these books are out of print. To hunt down copies, try Abebooks.com and Amazon.com."

Basic Reference Books

"Influenza: The Last Great Plague: An unfinished story of discovery," W.I.B. Beveridge (Prodist, 1977). This book presents an accessible overview of influenza virology and pandemic history, written by a distinguished British scientist in the lean years when no one other than virologists cared about flu. I keep the next-to-last line above my desk: "Influenza ... is a global plague: A spark in a remote corner of the world could start a fire that scorches us all."

"Influenza," Edwin D. Killbourne (Plenum Medical Book Co., 1987). Encyclopedic but a tough read for those without a science background, written by one of the premier flu scientists in the United States.

"Influenza Rapid Reference," Jan Wilschut

and Janet E. McElhaney (Mosby, 2006). Aimed at clinicians and sized for the pocket of a doctor's coat, this paperback covers a wide range of topics from natural history to treatment options to health economics. It is compact and very up-to-date, with clear graphics and tables.

Accounts of the 1918 Pandemic

"The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History," John M. Barry (Viking, 2004). Barry's thorough history was released at a perfectly judged moment—President George W. Bush famously took it to his Texas ranch to read—and it has held the spotlight ever since. It is especially strong in its wide-ranging portrait of the havoc caused by the misnamed Spanish Flu and in its accounts of government inadequacy as the pandemic advanced. [See pages 60 and 63 for excerpts.]

"America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918," Alfred W. Crosby (Cambridge University Press, 1989). Before Barry's book, there was Crosby's, whose seminal work (first published as "Epidemic and Peace" in 1976) explores American society's decades-long refusal to remember or discuss the trauma of 1918.

Katherine Anne Porter's story, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (Harcourt Brace Modern Classics, 1936) and **"They Came Like Swallows,"** William Maxwell (Harper, 1937). These are two understated—and therefore all the more heartbreaking—lightly fictionalized autobiographical accounts of 1918. Porter's description of her own illness—during which her Army-officer fiancé died of the flu—conveys the profound delirium that came with that flu's high fevers. Maxwell's account of a family shattered by a flu death is a fractal miniature

a way to get at that story without actually having to be there and talk to survivors or people around them.

Another point I really want to make is to not forget to talk with vets. There are so many diseases that are interlinked, so vets are a huge resource on this story. Right now, H5N1 is really just a bird virus; the people

who know the most about it are in veterinary medical schools, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has some terrific experts.

People in the blogosphere have been following this story avidly for a long time. Their blogs are interesting, and sometimes they're useful and sometimes they're scary. There's a great blog called H5N1 that doesn't

of the pandemic's painful aftermath.

"The Silent Enemy: Canada and the Deadly Flu of 1918," Eileen Pettigrew (Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983) and **"The 1918-1919 Pandemic of Influenza: The Urban Impact in the Western World,"** Fred R. van Hartesveldt, editor (Edwin Mellin Press, 1993). Personal accounts of the 1918 flu outside the United States exist in library manuscript collections, but relatively few were widely published. Pettigrew's journalistic account of 1918's impact in urban and rural Canada is a glimpse of the suffering the rest of the world endured. Van Hartesveldt's is a collection of essays by historians describing the epidemic in European, South American, and U.S. cities.

The Swine Flu in 1976

"The Epidemic That Never Was: Policy-Making & the Swine Flu Affair," Richard E. Neustadt and Harvey Fineberg (Vintage, 1982) and **"Pure Politics and Impure Science: The Swine Flu Affair,"** Arthur M. Silverstein (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). After an anomalous case of flu at an Army camp, federal scientists concluded a new pandemic might have begun. The mass immunization campaign launched to prevent it caused a set of illnesses unrelated to flu and a subsequent political crisis. These two analyses of the swine flu episode provide useful context for understanding federal decision-making around pandemic preparations.

The Search for the 1918 Virus

"Catching Cold: 1918's Forgotten Tragedy and the Search for the Virus That Caused It," Pete Davies (Michael Joseph, 1999), **"Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused**

It," Gina Kolata (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), and **"Hunting the 1918 Flu: One Scientist's Search for a Killer Virus,"** Kirsty Duncan (University of Toronto Press, 2003). The viral cause of the 1918 pandemic was a mystery until two groups of researchers who were outsiders to the tightly knit world of flu virology resolved to find and reassemble it. One succeeded. Davies and Kolata tell lively accounts of the competition and the achievements of the successful team; skip their overviews of basic science and pandemic history if you are reading other books on this list. The Duncan book, by the unsuccessful team's leader, is a dispiriting glimpse into the internal politics of high-stakes science.

Avian Flu

"Bird Flu: A Virus of Our Own Hatching," Michael Greger (Lantern Books, 2006). One of the few flu books to comprehensively examine bird flu from the birds' side, this new book by a senior official at the Humane Society of the United States is especially strong in its dissection of Asia's burgeoning industrial agriculture. It includes a valuable bibliography and set of references—90 pages in length.

For Young Readers

"Deadly Invaders: Virus Outbreaks Around the World, from Marburg Fever to Avian Flu," Denise Grady (Kingfisher, 2006). This young-adult book is mostly about Grady's experience covering the 2005 outbreak of Marburg in Angola, but it includes a short chapter about avian and pandemic flu. The accessible language and relaxed voice make it a useful model for anyone writing about flu for "news for kids" pages. ■

really offer a lot of analysis, but it's a good way to keep up on what's going on.³ I use that quite a bit. There's a terrific blog called Effect Measure where there's quite a bit of very useful analysis.⁴ Then there are some

places that are really wildly inaccurate and full of rumors and, with the rumors, you just have to understand them and keep them in context, because some of these people see every bird that falls as H5N1 in North

³ <http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/h5n1/>

⁴ www.scienceblogs.com/effectmeasure/

America and every kid that coughs has got the disease. As reporters, we need to keep an eye on blogs, but you really, really need to back-check them.

John Pope, Medical/Health Reporter, The Times-Picayune, New Orleans

Living to tell: What Hurricane Katrina can teach us about covering a pandemic.

I can relay lessons that my colleagues and I learned from covering the ghastliness of Hurricane Katrina that could stand us well in covering the next awful story that comes along. As my newspaper's local medical reporter, I was kept busy cleaning up the mess that big name correspondents left behind when they parachuted into our corner of hell, interviewed apprehensive residents, and fled after filing reports brimming with scary accounts of contagion. Some talked about the possibility of diphtheria, cholera and, so help me, malaria and yellow fever. Too many described the fetid floodwater with a cliché I came to abhor, toxic gumbo.

Naturally, my editors came to me and said "Pope! Why don't you have this stuff?" I had a simple reason—from regular consultation with local, federal and especially state health officials, something a medical reporter must do under these circumstances, I knew these calamitous conditions didn't exist. So I was put to work doing a series of stories whose messages boiled down to two words: "Calm down."

The stories addressed such concerns as the conditions of the water and the safety of local seafood and also examined the effect of the storm on the West Nile outbreak, which was chugging along when Katrina blew through. I even found some local scientists who had evidence that let them take issue with a peer-reviewed article about the post-Katrina lead content of local soil. And in another story I was able to debunk the rumors about the mysterious respiratory condition that had come to be known as Katrina cough.

What I was doing in these stories wasn't mindless civic boosterism or a desire to put my hometown in the best possible light. No. My aim was simply to tell the truth to a couple of thousands readers who wanted to know the truth about the city they loved. And people who are reading us online at

www.nola.com, where we got as many as 30 million hits a day, needed to know, because this information would be a crucial factor in helping them to decide whether to return. Besides, this was simply common sense reporting based on the evidence, or in this case, the lack thereof.

Too many journalists who had come to New Orleans, dazzled by the prospect of sensational stories amidst a ghastly background, seemed to forget the basic tenets of health care reporting, which starts with finding credible stories with good sources and good databases. Sam, the piano player, said it best in "Casablanca." "The fundamental things apply."

Now, in our post-Katrina time, the old rules are broken. Everything in the city is broken. There's an edge to our coverage, sure. But how could there not be? But it doesn't come at the expense of fairness. The Katrina experience, especially multiple failures of government at all levels, made all of us tougher and much more skeptical about what we hear and read. And we have unavoidably become part of the story we're covering; when I encountered a storm-related situation, I often tried to wonder whether other people might be in the same predicament and, if so, whether it might be worthy of a story. It's a matter of putting ourselves in the reader's shoe.

Others have mentioned the need for positive stuff. Around the first anniversary of the storm I set out to find people who, despite the devastation, were working to make things better. And I found them—an internist who came back to New Orleans and started a clinic, which is a home for runaway teenagers and their kids, that is replacing the Charity Hospital infrastructure as a place for indigent care and a New Hampshire man who came down to St. Bernard Parish, which was blasted, and he's staying five years to build a community center and living in a tent. I hate to say the storm's good because it was horrible. But it's sort of like what Dorothy and her friends discovered about themselves in "The Wizard of Oz." They found out they could do things they didn't know they were capable of. It took this awful occurrence, but they did it. And they're going on.

In the discussion period that followed, Stephen Smith from The Boston Globe asked Helen Branswell to explore the challenges

The Katrina experience, especially multiple failures of government at all levels, made all of us tougher and much more skeptical about what we hear and read. —John Pope

involved in keeping this story on the radar screen of editors, especially if a few seasons go by without a few huge cases to grab attention.

Branswell: I was lucky coming into it because Toronto had gone through SARS. SARS hit us, and I almost did nothing else for the rest of the year. During SARS I kept going to my editors at the beginning and kept saying, “You’re not getting how big this is. You’ve got to get the business department writing about this because conferences are going to start pulling out of Toronto and sports teams are going to start refusing to come to Toronto.” Fortunately, or unfortunately, within about two days, stuff like this started to happen. As a consequence, my editor saw me as some sort of visionary. At the beginning of 2004, I came back to them to say that this big thing—avian flu—is coming, and I have to write about it. They really gave me a lot of leeway, and I credit them immensely.

Right now, the story is starting to wane. When I mentioned I really want to do this terrific story about how we know how effective the vaccine is, I am not getting the same reception to these ideas that I used to get. I don’t know what the answer to this is, but I am very concerned that I’m not going to have the leeway that I’ve had, and other people won’t, either.

McKenna: I experienced this same thing at my Atlanta paper. But since I’ve been writing the past couple of months more about businesses experience of a potential pandemic and their planning, there’s a definite chill on the story at the same time that the private sector interest in preparing for a pandemic is ramping way up. By definition, most of that stuff that businesses are doing is happening behind the scenes, because it’s competitive intelligence for them. DHL doesn’t really want to talk about their planning in case they are doing it better than FedEx. The reverse may be true.

Christine Gorman, Time magazine: Journalists also have competitive issues, and we don’t want to share sources. Just the idea of sharing your sources with other reporters within your own organization is enough to give you the willies. During a true pandemic situation, aren’t we going to have to do some of this? And none of us is really

prepared to do that.

Sipress: With the scenario in Indonesia, which is probably the closest parallel that we have, a lot of the other news organizations were our competitors. With the exception of the newspaper in New York, we ended up cooperating with everybody. During coverage of the tsunami, a couple of us were the first ones there, with only one taxi we could find. So it was The Washington Post, Financial Times, L.A. Times, and two other reporters and the driver in one taxi and we all filed our stories together. We filed essentially the same material, but our stories were all remarkably different because of what details we put in, what approach we took, whatever context we put in. I suspect you’ll see the same thing happen when the pandemic comes out. And there aren’t that many people who have taken this story all that seriously. Margie Mason always has been very generous with me when I tell her I’m coming to Vietnam. [See Mason’s comments on page 81.] And I’ve done the same for other people who come to Indonesia. So I don’t worry that much about it at this point.

Mason: Right now nobody asks me because I don’t think any of them care, but if I go on vacation and somebody says, “Oh, by the way, could you leave your Rolodex open so that we could sort of pluck through your cards if we need cell phone numbers for those people at WHO?” I would be really reluctant to do that because of the relationship I have with those people, right?

Pope: I’m going to take out a position in the middle. Post-Katrina, and everyone has taken over everything, and I can’t do all the public health stories. But I don’t give out cell phone numbers. I don’t tell people I have the cell phone numbers, but I give out office numbers, I’ll give out names of folks, but I’m keeping the cell phone numbers to myself. When I go on vacation, if I see something coming up, I will say this might come up while I’m gone, here’s the person to call. Again, Katrina taught us the value of collegiality. ■

Journalists also have competitive issues, and we don’t want to share sources. ... During a true pandemic situation, aren’t we going to have to do some of this? And none of us is really prepared to do that. —Christine Gorman

The Book as an Investigative Vehicle for News

A journalist explores why news organizations too often fail ‘to treat the investigative discoveries of the book authors as headline grabbers.’

By Steve Weinberg

On August 15, 2006, a book review I wrote appeared in *The Boston Globe*. In it, I explained my enthusiasm for “The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11,” by journalist Lawrence Wright. It is “a book of synthesis, of re-emphasis, of explaining seemingly isolated events in an improved context,” I wrote. “Perhaps the most important re-emphasis is how the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency—for what appear to be petty, bureaucratic reasons—failed to share information with the Federal Bureau of Investigation that might have halted the airplane hijackers from carrying out their missions in New York and Washington.”

In the book review, I explained how Wright helps readers make sense of confusing, isolated breaking news accounts by constructing a coherent narrative built around four characters: John O’Neill, an FBI counterterrorism specialist who just weeks before 9/11 accepted the job as World Trade Center security chief, then died in the rubble of the collapsed towers; Osama bin Laden, the wealthy Saudi Arabian businessman turned al-Qaeda financier and public leader; Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian doctor believed to serve as al-Qaeda’s planner of deadly operations, and Prince Turki al-Faisal, director of Saudi Arabian intelligence agencies trying to stifle the al-Qaeda brand of terrorism.

Despite the review appearing on a Tuesday and running on page six of Section E, Melissa Ludtke, *Nieman Reports* editor, read it. She wrote me the next day to say that she was “struck

especially” by my reading so many recently published, intricately reported books about 9/11 and Iraq. [For a list of those books, please see the box on page 105.] “I was also interested in how you characterized Lawrence Wright’s book as being the best example of narrative storytelling *and* for providing a synthesis of extremely isolated events in an improved context.”

Furthermore, Ludtke said, she found it interesting that I included Wright’s explanation of how his reporting “required constant checking of hundreds of sources against each other, and it is in this back-and-forth inquiry that the approximate truth—the most reliable facts—can be found.”

My review, Ludtke remarked, “prompted me to think about some broader journalistic issues, in particular, the present and future role that investigative books like Wright’s are likely to play in a news media environment in which newsroom resources for this kind of reporting are being squeezed, news outlets are more fragmented, and in which the digital news environment means that in-depth, contextual reporting is becoming a rarer commodity. Journalists, it seems, are in increasing numbers turning to book writing as a way of reaching the public with the type of content, context, perspective and information that years ago might have found a more welcoming home in the news outlets where these journalists work.”

Investigative Reporting

I am uncertain whether an increasing number of journalists are turning to

book writing because of diminished resources in daily print and broadcast newsrooms. Quantifying the phenomenon accurately would be difficult, if not impossible. But I am certain about other phenomena:

- The irony of so many readers relying on books when attention spans are supposedly so attenuated that publishers and editors in lots of newsrooms deem in-depth journalism superfluous.
- The guts demonstrated by publishers who pay advances for public affairs books like “The Looming Tower,” despite the high probability of them being money losers. These publishers are in the company of those in corporate suites who—despite a bottom-line culture—encourage, or at least tolerate, high-quality investigative and explanatory book-length journalism.
- The stupidity of daily newsroom gatekeepers for refusing to treat books as news—even as space for book reviews is diminishing in many outlets. The result is countless potential book readers never even hear about important titles that would help them better understand daily news reporting.

The outpouring of superb books by talented journalists about controversial events does not surprise me as much as it seems to surprise other commentators. That is because I have been privileged for 30 years to view the panorama of investigative journalism from a perch occupied by nobody else during the same span. As a result,

I am perhaps the most bullish journalist alive when it comes to the current state of in-depth reporting.

The perch I have occupied and continue to occupy is provided by an organization called Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), with about 5,000 members across the United States and around the globe. I joined IRE shortly after its founding in 1975, became active almost immediately, served as its executive director from 1983-1990, and have never ceased to write for and help edit its magazine.

IRE¹ is based at the Missouri School of Journalism, just a few miles from where I live, making it convenient for me to examine the remarkable in-depth journalism pouring into the office every day. The stories come from journalists at newspapers large and small, magazines local and national, broadcast outlets of all market rankings—and book publishers. I can guarantee that many of the journalism outlets submitting superb in-depth journalism have never entered the personal radar of many reporters and editors.

Is the situation perfect? Of course not. I wish more news organizations turned out more investigative and explanatory pieces than they do. Still, my relatively rosy outlook is not exaggerated or naive. Far more high-quality, in-depth journalism is being disseminated each year than any individual can absorb, and a great deal of that high-quality, in-depth journalism is arriving in book format.

What Makes Investigative Books Different?

“The Iraq mess is a large and tempting target,” Washington Post media writer Howard Kurtz noted in his newspaper on October 16, 2006. “And despite a huge volume of coverage over the last several years, a considerable amount of material remained beneath the surface, awaiting excavation by authors. Some critics grumble that the journalists should have gone public with their information sooner, rather than saving

The War in Iraq and 9/11: Recent Investigative Books

Chandrasekaran, Rajiv, “Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq’s Green Zone” (Knopf).

Cockburn, Patrick, “The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq” (Verso).

DeYoung, Karen, “Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell” (Knopf).

Fallows, James, “Blind Into Baghdad: America’s War in Iraq” (Vintage).

Gordon, Michael R., and Bernard E. Trainor, “Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq” (Pantheon).

Isikoff, Michael, and David Corn, “Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal and the Selling of the Iraq War” (Crown).

Jones, Ann, “Kabul in Winter: Life Without Peace in Afghanistan” (Holt).

Miller, T. Christian, “Blood Money: Wasted Billions, Lost Lives and Corporate Greed in Iraq” (Little, Brown).

Packer, George, “The Assassin’s Gate:

America in Iraq” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

Rich, Frank, “The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9-11 to Katrina” (Penguin Press).

Ricks, Thomas E., “Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq” (Penguin Press).

Risen, James, “State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration” (Free Press).

Shadid, Anthony, “Night Draws Near: Iraq’s People in the Shadow of America’s War” (Holt).

Suskind, Ron, “The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11” (Simon & Schuster).

Woodward, Bob, “State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III” (Simon & Schuster).

Wright, Lawrence, “The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11” (Knopf).

it for books. But it takes time to build a case and to coax information from people who may have little interest in joining the daily political sniping.”

Thomas E. Ricks, the author of “Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq” and a Washington Post reporter, told Kurtz that one former Coalition Provisional Authority official supplied “every e-mail he had sent to the unit’s boss, Paul Bremer.” A commander gave Ricks “a CD-ROM with every PowerPoint briefing he had received.” Sources even gave him the classified plan for invading Iraq. Ricks said he never would have obtained such information in 2003. “They would have deemed it too sensitive. Two years

later, who cares?”

In his book, “The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11,” former Wall Street Journal reporter Ron Suskind revealed useful contextual information about the relationship between President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. Suskind told Kurtz that books, unlike deadline reporting, can break through a White House administration’s “message discipline.” Suskind said “What you can do in a book that gets around the daily battle over news cycles is you can say to subjects that they will be rendered in context.”

Those who practice journalism, es-

¹ www.ire.org/

pecially journalism in the nation's capital, grasp precisely what authors such as Ricks and Suskind are saying. Their ability to break news in long-gestating books is not a surprise. If anything surprises me, it is the willingness of book publishers—even those that are part of bottom-line oriented corporate conglomerates—to disseminate works that challenge the conventional wisdom and power structures.

But I am even more bewildered—and definitely dismayed—by the failure of newspapers, magazines and broadcast outlets, including their online iterations, to treat the investigative discoveries of the book authors as headline grabbers. Books by The Washington Post's Bob Woodward are among the rare exceptions. His third book about the George W. Bush administration generated headlines regarding the egomania and incompetence of former Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, a different portrayal from Woodward's other books describing the administration's engagement in the Iraq War. The Woodward book documented how Rumsfeld excluded Bush's national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, from war-related decision-making. The CBS television news magazine "60 Minutes" devoted a segment to the new Woodward book, even though it had previously passed on interviewing many other journalists who disclosed new information about the Iraq War before "State of Denial" appeared.

David Rosenthal at Simon & Schuster commented to New York Times columnist David Carr on the first day of Woodward's sales that "a book has a much longer arc than one day. But it has been on sale [just] one day, [and] it is already causing a ruckus, dominating the Sunday morning shows, and will determine the agenda for weeks. It is interesting to me that in an age of blogs, Webs and texting that a book, something which is essentially a tortoise, can carry the most immediacy."

Jack Shafer, media writer at slate.

com and former editor of the Washington City Paper, calls Woodward's tomes "newsbooks." They include news because sources and subjects are more willing to speak candidly about the events of last week, last month or last year than about today's controversy. Furthermore, books promise a modicum of influencing posterity, unlike less contextual pieces disseminated by newspapers, magazines and broadcast newsrooms.

Books As News

The sad story of books as news is so foreign to so many journalists that it requires elaboration. While providing this, I want to express my intellectual debt to the small number of commentators who have addressed the situation previously. I owe the largest debt to Carlin Romano, a public intellectual who freelances for numerous outlets, teaches in university classrooms, and is primarily employed by The Philadelphia Inquirer as a book critic.

Near the beginning of a lengthy essay Romano published in the Media Studies Journal 15 years ago, he wrote these sentences: "Newspaper work draws people who like to cut corners, deal superficially with subjects, make generalizations without support, and read book reviews rather than books. The book, which ideally treats subjects at extensive and appropriate length, offering either the documentation or human riches that a subject demands, strikes fear into the heart of a newspaper person's psyche. In the realm of Plato's prose forms, the book would be the sworn enemy of the newspaper article. And so it makes sense that the modern newspaper has, since birth, largely conspired against the book. It has treated the book's birth upon publication—except in special circumstances—as an event that doesn't count as news. When you're talking about coverage, it's always been better to be a crime than a book."

When Romano wrote his essay, civil war raged in the former Yugoslavia. Extending his comparison from crime and books to genocide and books, Romano wrote "The next mortar shell lobbed in a Sarajevo market comes with its entrée into U.S. coverage guaranteed. Yet ... a scholarly book on Yugoslavian nationalism from the Indiana University Press, which details the history of ethnic cleansing in places such as Bosnia, gets no automatic attention, and maybe none at all."

A relatively small number of magazines are providing the contextual coverage found primarily in books. For example, James Fallows' excellent book, "Blind Into Baghdad: America's War in Iraq," is essentially a gathering of articles he wrote for the Atlantic Monthly. The Lawrence Wright and George Packer books grew out of their reporting for The New Yorker magazine. The New York Review of Books runs in-depth analyses of current controversies by those who write books; the same magazine publishes in-depth reviews that treat books as news. A superb example of such a review appeared there in the December 21, 2006 edition. Under the headline "Iraq: The War of the Imagination," reviewer Mark Danner filled 11 pages of the publication with an insightful piece based on the recent war-related books by Bob Woodward, Ron Suskind, and James Risen. On October 5, 2006, under the headline "Cheney: The Fatal Touch," The New York Review of Books published an analysis of the vice president based on close readings of 16 books, old and new, by the always scintillating cultural critic Joan Didion.

Public radio stations are also notable as being places where substantive interviews with journalists who are book authors take place.² These outlets also offer the possibility of stimulating dialogue taking place with listeners. Occasional discussions with journalist authors occur also on the Lehrer "NewsHour." The exceptions, however,

² On the Nieman Foundation Web site at www.nieman.harvard.edu, Nieman Reports has assembled numerous links to in-depth interviews with journalist authors. We are grateful to the hosts and producers of these various shows for helping us to create this unique online database.

emphasize the rule: News organizations that see themselves, rightly, as existing mostly to provide breaking stories will often fail to provide their audiences with vital context. As a result, those news organizations should feel an obligation to cover books far more fully than they currently do.

If I ran a newsroom, I would create a book beat with the same stature and space allocations as the White House beat, local politics beat, business beat, education beat and, especially, sports beat. I'd designate writers and journalists the likes of Carlin Romano, Joan Didion, and Mark Danner to staff the beat. Then almost every day I would make sure those who constituted our

audience would have the ability to read interviews with authors of important books, plus in-depth reviews and analyses of the books' news content by my Romano-Didion-Danner-like staff writers. With digital media in its ascendancy, informative excerpts from such books could be only a click away.

It's an idea I doubt will happen, given the lack of inclination I've observed, not to mention the slide in the opposite direction by some news organizations as fewer book reviews are published and payment for doing them drops to ridiculously low amounts. A decade ago, a dozen or so major metropolitan newspapers still published separate book review sections; that number will

soon be reduced to five.

All of this leaves us where we began—observing the odd juxtaposition between journalistic institutions that fail to recognize the value of this contextualized news against the book publishers and consumers who appear to acknowledge—with their pocket-books—its value. ■

Steve Weinberg is the author of six nonfiction books, with numbers seven and eight in the editing process. He writes features and reviews for newspapers and magazines, plus teaches part-time at the Missouri School of Journalism.

Nieman Notes

Compiled by Lois Fiore

Allister Sparks Laments the Journalistic Decline of the United States—His Lodestar

A personal note from one '63 Nieman Fellow to another, and in it a harsh repudiation of American newspapers and TV.

By Saul Friedman

Allister Sparks, of South Africa, is my closest and dearest friend, although we are thousands of miles apart. We have been friends since we were Nieman together in 1962-63. And each in our own countries, we have done journalism the old fashioned way—he reporting on the evils of apartheid, I covering the struggles for civil rights in the south. And we have visited each other's country—he when he needed respite to write a book, I when I had a chance to teach journal-

ism to newly freed young journalists in the new South Africa.

But recently, I heard from a friend that Allister, a winner of the Louis Lyons award, among others, no longer wished to visit the United States because of its behavior since September 11, 2001. I asked him why and suggested I convey his thoughts to others, just as I wrote once for an American audience a long time ago about apartheid in South Africa. Allister still writes a syndicated column and works as a consultant for

a South African bank. Here's what he replied [This essay first appeared on the Nieman Watchdog Web site.¹]:

What I said was that I had no wish to visit the U.S.... I shall probably have to in the course of my work for the bank—although I may well be denied entry because of all the stamps of Arab countries in my passport—especially Syria. A friend of mine, the head of political analysis at our important Human Sciences Research Council, was turned

¹ www.niemanwatchdog.org/

back from Kennedy Airport the other day for that reason. Or it may have been because he has a slightly dark skin and a Muslim name, Adam Habib.

But I must confess that I have felt paralyzed, too, by your challenge to me to write for a U.S. audience about your country, or at least to write to you so that you can communicate those thoughts in the stuff you are writing for the Nieman alumni. This is hard to explain. I guess it's a bit like the break-up of a love affair. For so long the United States has been a kind of lodestar for me in my more idealistic beliefs, beginning with my Nieman experience and the idealism of the Kennedy years, the civil rights campaign, and all that followed.

Whenever I felt down, struggling to maintain a sense of optimism in all the gloom of life in the midst of a twisted ideology and personal defeats, I would travel to the United States to have my batteries recharged.

But now that pattern of my life has been reversed. My own country has emerged, albeit still with many faults, as a beacon of racial reconciliation and coexistence that gives me at least some sense of personal fulfillment in my evening years, while my old moral lodestar, the U.S., has slipped into an abyss of moral degeneracy, of political lies and casuistry, of torture and cruelty and of a contempt for human rights and human decency that violates your own supposedly sacred Constitution. For me emotionally, it is as though the U.S. has become the old South Africa—and although you challenge me to write about this in the U.S., as you yourself once did in South Africa, I find that, frankly, after all I have been through, I do not now, at the age of nearly 74, want to revisit the old South Africa. To fight that fight once in a lifetime is surely enough.

I must stress that it is not only the behavior of the Bush administration that repels me, but the craven obsequiousness of the U.S. media, both television and newspapers. As you know I was in the U.S. at the time of 9/11 and so I am aware of and sensitive to the shock of that terrible event, but I have been appalled from the very beginning

at the meek and uncritical way television and even the great newspapers have reported and commented on the decision to go to war in Iraq—the triumphalist coverage of the “shock and awe” bombardment of Baghdad with no thought for the thousands of Iraqis being incinerated in it.

On my several visits to the U.S. in the course of this war I have been disgusted by all the cheerleading for your “brave boys in Iraq,” the flag-waving and the craven desire to be seen as patriotic that wiped out the journalistic duty to ask the tough questions about why the war was being fought, who told the lies, or even to portray the carnage that was taking place inside Iraq. I was appalled to see newspapers and journalists I had admired, old friends and colleagues, fall into the conformist trap of jingoistic patriotism. Even the op-ed page of my own old newspaper, *The Washington Post*, was fully in step with Bush, Rumsfeld and the other neocons.

I felt betrayed. I had faced all those pressures for patriotic coverage when my own country went to war against those it called “terrorists” in what is now Namibia and in South Africa itself, and when I defied those huge pressures I was applauded and given awards (including the Nieman Foundation's Louis M. Lyons award) by the American journalistic establishment.

I came to despise the very concept of patriotism, which so often through the ages has been used to command support for evil. Now I had to watch while that journalistic establishment that had applauded me itself succumbed to the patriotic pressures. To such an extent that it was left to a few magazines, notably *The New Yorker*, to expose the crimes against humanity that were being committed.

Only now, as the tide of fortune is turning and it is clear that America is losing the war, is the press reportage and commentary turning against the war—in an opportunistic way that I find almost equally contemptible. If it looks like you're winning, the war is wonderful; when you start losing, it was all a wretched mistake.

And even now, the essence of the

new opposition to the war is that too many American troops are being killed. More than 3,000. Never mind the 150,000 Iraqis that have been slaughtered, or the fact that their country has been destroyed, perhaps for generations to come. The cry is to get out. Bring the brave boys home. Forget the shattered lives and the shattered country left behind. Turn now to carrying the “war on terrorism” to Somalia—and maybe Iran, and who knows where else.

Nor is the Iraq War the only thing that has disillusioned me about the country I once so admired. I was in the Middle East at the time of the Palestinian elections and was shocked by the refusal of the U.S. to accept the clear victory of Hamas, even though the election was declared “free and fair” by Jimmy Carter's observers among others. Wasn't the final justification for the Iraqi war that it was being waged to bring democracy to the Middle East?

After talking to Palestinians in Qatar, including both the managing director and editor in chief of Al Jazeera, who have become friends, I began to suspect that my own impressions of Hamas may have been distorted by stereotyped reporting in much the same way that my impressions of the ANC had been in South Africa—even though I had thought myself immune to apartheid regime propaganda. Even liberal South Africans shunned the ANC as a “terrorist organization.”

When I ceased to be editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* and other papers and became a foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post* et al., I decided to visit the ANC in exile and check out those preconceived impressions. As I think you know, it was an eye-opening experience for me to discover how sophisticated and pragmatic they were. It was an experience that changed my entire outlook on what should happen in my own country.

Recalling that, I decided to do the same with Hamas. So last September, on my own account and for my own personal interest, I flew to Damascus and spent two days at Hamas headquarters talking to their exiled leaders. Again it was an eye-opening experience

to hear their side of the story and discover the degree to which they, too, are sophisticated, pragmatic people who I believe are the only ones capable of negotiating a peace agreement that could stick—since, like the ANC, they are the only ones whose control extends to the people with the guns.

I came away with five hours of tape recorded conversation with these key leaders whom the authorities of both Israel and the U.S. refuse to speak to—because they are “terrorists.” I don’t know of any other Western journalist who has done this. Why?

Why haven’t these men and women who have preached to me over so many years about the importance of balanced reporting and getting “the other side of the story” done what I, with no funding or backing of any big organization, did?

If I do get into the U.S., the only pleasure I shall derive from it will be in visiting you and a number of other very dear friends. Just as you did in the old days, I draw a sharp distinction between a country and the many fine individuals in it. I admire your idealism and your resilience and the determina-

tion with which you keep the voice of sanity alive in a country—and within a profession—that has lost its way. But the task is too big for me.

I don’t want to look back into that abyss from which I have only just emerged. ■

Saul Friedman, a 1963 Nieman Fellow, is a former White House correspondent for Newsday and Knight Ridder newspapers and now writes a weekly column, “Gray Matters,” dealing with senior issues, for Newsday.

—1951—

Simeon Booker, a veteran journalist, has retired from Jet magazine at the age of 88.

Booker’s career was celebrated at the National Press Club (NPC) in Washington, D.C. on January 23rd. As Jet’s longest serving editor, Booker, who joined Jet in 1953, served for 48 years as Washington bureau chief. During that time he garnered numerous awards for his coverage of civil rights events in the South and the Emmett Till murder case, his coverage of which has been considered pivotal in the civil rights movement. Booker was the first black journalist to win the NPC’s Fourth Estate Award for lifetime contributions to journalism and was recently inducted into the Golden Owls, an honor given after 50 years of continued service.

Audio clips by Simeon Booker, including the segments “Thoughts on the plight of black Americans today” and “The dangers of covering the Emmett Till trial” can be heard at Jet’s 55th anniversary Web site, www.ebonyjet.com/media/jet55/civilrights.html

—1960—

Edmund Rooney, 82, died on January 27th at his home in Chicago, Illinois of a variety of illnesses, including a stroke in December. Rooney spent 26 years at the Chicago Daily News, taught journalism at Loyola University starting in the 1960’s and continuing

throughout his career, and earned a doctoral degree in education at Loyola in 1992, when he was 67.

In an obituary by Trevor Jensen in the Chicago Tribune, Rooney is characterized as “a tenacious reporter who got to sources first and wouldn’t take no for an answer.” Bob Herguth, one of Rooney’s colleagues from the Daily News, said “He was a personality that stood out. He had a big voice, and he was very straight ahead. He hated to get beaten on anything.” Rooney was “an old-fashioned street reporter who worked out of a car equipped with a police scanner and a two-way radio to his city desk,” Jensen writes.

In 1957, Rooney shared a Pulitzer Prize for an investigation into Orville Hodge, the state auditor, who was sent to prison for embezzlement. In 1982, he founded the National Center of Freedom of Information at Loyola, a center for reporters and others interested in first amendment issues.

Rooney is survived by four sons and two daughters. His wife, **Mary**, died in 2000.

—1962—

Te-Cheng Chiang died on December 11, 2006, after a short illness. He was 82. His son, Eric Chiang, writes, “There was no suffering on his part, and we’re very thankful for that. My father was always proud of being a Nieman Fellow. It played an important role in his rich and wonderful life....”

John Hughes stepped down as editor of the Deseret Morning News in January. Hughes, who had been editor since 1997, had been on an extended leave of absence from Brigham Young University (BYU) while editor. He returned to BYU as professor of communications specializing in international communications and newspaper management, and he will also continue to write a weekly syndicated column for The Christian Science Monitor.

Hughes was editor of the Monitor from 1970-1979 and is a past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. He won a Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting and the Overseas Press Club award for best reporting from abroad while he was a foreign correspondent for the Monitor.

—1967—

Philip Meyer, class scribe, sends two updates:

Walter W. (Bill) Meek has retired as president of the Arizona Utility Investors Association, an organization that he helped found in 1994. Before that, he was a marketing and public relations consultant in Phoenix for 15 years.

Joseph Mohbat appeared in the title role in the Irish family comedy “Da” produced by the Brooklyn Heights Players. By day, he is an attorney for the city of New York. “A different kind of stage,” he writes, “but still show biz.”

Philip Meyer's name has been given to an award administered by the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, a joint program of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), the Missouri School of Journalism, and the Knight Chair in Journalism at Arizona State University. Begun in 2005, the Philip Meyer Journalism Awards "recognize the best uses in social science methods in journalism" and honor Meyer, who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is author of many editions of "Precision Journalism," a well-known book on using social science methods to improve journalism. Meyer used survey research to examine the roots of the 1960's race riots.

This year The Wall Street Journal received the first place Meyer award for "Perfect Payday," described by IRE as a "series of articles over the past year that exposed the widespread practice of secretly backdating stock option grants to benefit corporate insiders." Gannett News Service received the second place award for "Special Report: Rating Hospital Health Care," and The Philadelphia Inquirer took third for "Camden Schools Investigation," a series on a cheating scandal in standardized testing. More about the awards and the winners can be found at www.ire.org/meyeraward/

—1977—

Hennie van Deventer "reports that I am now venturing a book in English. On Sanparks' [South African National Parks] Web site are two chapters from my book, 'Mayafudi—memories of an elephant.' The book is an English adaptation of the booklet 'Mayafudi,' which was published in 2005. It is the eventful life story of the elephant bull Mayafudi (from the Afrikaans invective 'maaifoedie'—rascal). He meets with natural disasters like floods, droughts and fires. He experiences culling, hunting and poaching. The deaths of his grandfather, twin sister, mother and father in different disasters have a severe impact on his life. As a result, he finds himself in constant conflict with the values his mother, the matriarch

In Remembrance of Sonja Hillgren

By Huntly Collins

I feel great sorrow at Sonja's passing. I lost not only my best buddy during our Nieman year, but also a faithful friend during the 23 years since we left Harvard. I am especially saddened that Sonja had so little time to enjoy her newfound partner in life, Bruce Downs.

I spent about an hour with Sonja and Bruce at their home in early December. I sensed then that it was only a matter of days. Even in her weakened state, she was so happy to have found Bruce and to have him at her side through the surgery at Pennsylvania Hospital in September and five weeks of chemo and radiation. Despite the treatments, the tumor continued to grow. Sonja was to take a month off and then start a highly experimental treatment program at Penn, but that plan had to be scuttled because her white blood count had dropped to almost zero.

When I saw her, she was extremely tired and largely confined to bed. But her mind was alert and her voice strong. All three of us sat

on the bed and talked about some of the good times. Bruce had not heard about Sonja's "wild side," so I recounted how she had driven a group of friends around D.C. one midnight in her old Cadillac, with the top down. I told her that Bill [Marimow, a Nieman classmate] had been named editor of the Inky. She had not yet heard that and was thrilled for him.

I held her hand and told her I loved her. She said she loved me. And that was about all there was to say. She had difficulty walking, but she was in no pain, since brain tumors, unlike other cancers, typically are pain free.

True to her nature, Sonja fought to the very end. She and Bruce were desperately trying to get her enrolled in an experimental protocol involving a cancer vaccine being tested at the University of California/San Francisco. They were also trying Chinese herbs.

Alas, the cancer won. ■

Ukuthula (Peace from Within), had taught him."

Van Deventer continues, "People who know me, know well that I have a passion for nature. The book is an attempt to convey that passion to the reader...."

Van Deventer has previously written and edited 11 books in Afrikaans. More information about van Deventer and "Mayafudi" can be found at www.mayafudi.com. The book (and pdf) became available early in 2007.

—1983—

Sonja Hillgren, 58, died on December 19th of a brain tumor. Hillgren was senior vice president/editorial for Farm Journal Media, the parent company of Farm Journal. She edited Farm Journal from 1995 to 2004, after serving as

the magazine's Washington editor for five years. She also worked for United Press International and Knight Ridder Newspapers. In 1996 she was president of the National Press Club. Hillgren had been writing about agriculture since 1978, and for 10 years she provided radio broadcasts about agriculture, including for NPR.

In her obituary from the Farm Journal, the reporter described her in this way: "But it was during the farm financial crisis of the early 1980's that Hillgren, then the beat reporter responsible for covering Washington-based agricultural news for United Press International, first established herself as the nation's premiere farm writer. At one point, Hillgren rode in the tractorcade with farm protestors who later encamped on the Mall, just outside the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Often

she was the last person in the press gallery watching Congress debate critical farm legislation, as Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) noticed after the 2 a.m. finish to the 1996 Farm Bill....

“Clayton Yeutter, a former Secretary of Agriculture and U.S. Trade Ambassador, credited Hillgren as having a role in framing the debate over farm policy over the past several decades. ‘At all times, she had the long-term best interest of American farmers at heart, even when her articles generated controversy,’ he added.”

Hillgren served on the board of directors of a number of organizations, including Winrock International, which runs agricultural, energy and other natural resource projects in the developing world, and Philabundance, a Philadelphia regional nonprofit organization that distributes food to low-income people.

Hillgren is survived by her husband, **Bruce T. Downs**.

—1985—

Ed Chen writes, “I’ve again changed jobs/careers. After a glorious but all-too-short time at the Natural Resources Defense Council (10 months), I’ve returned to the fold—as the senior White House correspondent for Bloomberg News, which also means covering the ‘08 campaign.”

Samuel Rachlin has been appointed to a newly created position as Saxo Bank’s executive director of corporate communications, where he will “lead the formation and guidance of strategic messaging and public relations with external media partners,” said the bank’s announcement.

“Saxo Bank has taken active trading into the 21st century, and I see the bank and its leadership as some of the most innovative and creative operators in the financial markets,” Rachlin said in a statement. “I am delighted to become a member of the team....”

Rachlin has been a Washington and Moscow Danish TV2 correspondent and served as spokesman and media advisor at The World Bank from 1995-1998.

—1988—

Bill Dietrich has just published his sixth novel and ninth book, “Napoleon’s Pyramids,” which combines the saga of Bonaparte’s 1798 invasion of Egypt with pyramid mysteries and a treasure hunt involving an ancient medallion, Freemasons and mystical mathematics. Carefully researched, it’s informative fun for history buffs or Da Vinci-Indiana Jones fans, and foreign rights have sold in 16 languages. Dietrich is working on a sequel while still writing for The Seattle Times and teaching environmental journalism at Western Washington University.

—1990—

Carla Anne Robbins has been appointed deputy editorial page editor of The New York Times, effective January 7th. Robbins will lead the editorial board with newly appointed editorial page editor Andrew Rosenthal and oversee the Letters to the Editor and production staffs.

Robbins was previously a reporter and news editor at The Wall Street Journal. She has shared two Pulitzer Prizes and received the 2003 Georgetown University Weintal Prize for diplomatic reporting.

—1993—

Sandy Tolan’s climate change class at the University of California-Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism has received a 2006 George Polk Award for radio reporting for “Early Signs: Reports From a Warming Planet,” a seven-month student project led by Tolan and aired in collaboration with American Public Media’s “American Radio Works” and the NPR program “Living on Earth.” Tolan’s 11 student reporters conducted interviews and reported on global warming from eight global locations including Bangladesh, New Zealand, and Mount Kilimanjaro. The project, which began in the fall of 2005, was codirected by UC-Berkeley climatologist John Harte. It can now be heard and read online at <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/>

features/earllysigns/index.html.

The Polk award will recognize the project’s three producers: UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism, American Public Media, and “Living on Earth.” It is the first time a journalism school has been recognized in the 58-year history of the Polk Award.

Tolan wrote about this project in the Winter 2005 issue of Nieman Reports. His article, which he cowrote with a student, can be found at www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/05_4NRwinter/NR05W_GlobalWarming.pdf

—1995—

Mike Riley has been named editor and senior vice president of Congressional Quarterly. Riley had been editor of The Roanoke (Va.) Times since 1998. Riley said the opportunity to move to the Congressional Quarterly “combines two of my prime passions: political journalism and the ongoing digital transformation.”

Here are excerpts from Riley’s last column as editor of the Times:

“In most communities, it’s good sport to moan and groan about the local newspaper rather than celebrate it. People like to complain about flaws in news coverage, criticize any perceived bias, cringe when the newspaper raises uncomfortable issues, and lash out when they read about controversial problems....

“But what some of you may not realize is how fortunate it is to have an excellent local newspaper....

“At the Times, the journalism always come first as we seek to inform, understand, explain, educate and entertain. No doubt, we’ve made mistakes and sometimes fallen short—we’re a human enterprise, after all—but we have not wavered in our mission to inform readers and help them become better citizens.

“Sadly, though, many other newspapers across the country these days are forsaking their obligations to their communities as some harsh winds of change buffet the industry.

“This newspaper has, quite wisely, embraced those changes and, along the way, become a leader in the digital

Cecilia Alvear Retires From NBC Network News

Cecilia Alvear, NF '89, recently retired after almost 25 years with NBC Network News. She had been working as a producer in the Burbank (Calif.) bureau. Alvear wrote a letter to her colleagues as an "¡Adios!". Here are some excerpts:

It was the best of times—and we will leave it at that.

It was an adventure and an education. In the 80's I witnessed natural and man-made disasters. I dodged bullets and tear gas in Central and South America, survived earthquakes in Mexico, El Salvador and Ecuador, witnessed a volcano eruption in Colombia, the war on drugs, the rebirth of democracy in Argentina and Chile. I interviewed guerrillas, death squad leaders, contras, Sandinistas, presidents, dictators, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, narcos, coyotes, politicians, actors, artists, poor people, rich people, suffering people, people.

Sometimes I felt like "Zelig," observing surrealistic backstories to history like the time in 1988 when Fidel Castro in Havana gave Maria Shriver and me a dressing down for daring to report on Nightly News that a Cuban American, indicted for trafficking drugs in Miami,



Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Chair Zev Yaroslavsky and Board Member Gloria Molina present a scroll to Cecilia Alvear at a February 13th ceremony honoring her work. *Photo by Nina Zacuto, zac@zacoline.com.*

claimed that he did it with the help of the Cuban government. As the interpreter I felt I was the main target of Castro's anger as he pointed an accusatory finger at us. However, after venting for a while he turned charming again, signed photographs for us, promised to send cigars to Arnold [Schwarzenegger] and kissed us goodbye.

As the first Latina producer for NBC News I had the privilege of helping the company diversify its personnel and its coverage. (I also had the great honor of being the first U.S. Latina Nieman Fellow.)

The 90's and the aughts brought me to the Burbank bureau ... where I covered riots, earthquakes, fires, floods, presidential elections, WTO, Columbine, immigration, Hollyweird, O.J. Simpson, Schwarzenegger and anything else that came my way.... I went to Spain for the Barcelona Olympics, to Vietnam for the 25th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, and I was onboard the USS Lincoln for the 'Mission Accomplished' moment.

Throughout my long career I have worked with a team of incredibly talented people with an unmatched commitment to excellence. I feel honored to be their friend.

I will keep busy with my work on several boards (including the Nieman Advisory Board where I chair the Diversity Committee). I will also continue with my crusades in favor of the Galápagos, my birthplace. And there is also a book and a documentary in my plans. Stay tuned!

PS.: On February 13th the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors honored me with a scroll for 'being a pioneer Latina journalist and advocating for the inclusion of journalists of color.' It was a lovely gesture that touched me deeply. ■

news revolution and online journalism. You may not realize it, but The Roanoke Times stands on the cutting edge of the newspaper industry and has become nationally recognized for its online achievements, as you see when you visit <http://roanoke.com>."

—1996—

Alice Pifer, now director of professional education at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, is coeditor of "The Authentic Voice: The Best Reporting on Race and Ethnicity," published by Columbia University Press

in July 2006. The multimedia project, which includes a book, DVD and Web site (www.theauthenticvoice.org), is intended to teach best practices to journalism students and professionals covering stories on race and ethnicity. Pifer coedited the project with her colleague Arlene Morgan, associate dean for prizes and programs, and Keith Woods, dean of faculty at the Poynter Institute.

The project is an anthology and more. There are 15 stories—eight newspaper and seven television stories—which have been honored by the Columbia University "Let's Do

It Better!" Award for excellence in reporting on race and ethnicity. The book also contains essays written by the journalists deconstructing their stories and giving tips for producing notable reporting on race and ethnicity. The DVD also contains 14 interviews with the journalists whose stories are included in this project. Anne Hull of The Washington Post; Elizabeth Llorente of The Record of Bergen County, New Jersey; Ted Koppel, formerly with ABC News "Nightline" and now with the Discovery Channel, and Bob Simon of "60 Minutes" are among the journalists interviewed. For those who

will use “The Authentic Voice” in the classroom, there are also assignments and discussion points.

“This project has been so meaningful to me,” said Pifer. “When I left ABC News in 2001 to teach and work on documentaries, I could not have imagined finding such a worthwhile project as this.” Pifer and Woods did a workshop with the Nieman Fellows about “The Authentic Voice” in March.

—2000—

Jerry Zremski, newly appointed Washington bureau chief for The Buffalo News, has been elected the 100th president of The National Press Club (NPC). Zremski was sworn in during a black tie inaugural event entitled “Black Tie and Snow Boots Ball,” featuring the fare and winter footwear of Zremski’s adopted hometown of Buffalo, New York. Zremski’s presidency follows four years as a club officer and three as a committee chairman.

“The National Press Club has been a strong voice for the free press worldwide and a home away from home for Washington’s journalists for nearly 100 years,” said Zremski. “I see it as my job to protect those traditions and carry them forward into the club’s second century.” Zremski’s presidential campaign goals include empowering club members to bring in cutting-edge programs, drawing the world’s top newsmakers for the club’s luncheon program, organizing the upcoming centennial celebration, and completing the organization’s strategic plan, which he began in his previous role as NPC vice president.

Zremski has been a member of the NPC since 1989. He has been with The Buffalo News since 1984.

—2001—

Sunday Dare writes that the book that he has spent the past three years working on, “Guerrilla Journalism: Dispatches From the Underground,” was self-published in February. An article by Dare and an excerpt from the book was a part of “Journalists: On the Subject of Courage,” the Summer 2006 issue of

Nieman Reports. The excerpt describes a “Gestapo-like raid” on The News, an independent magazine in Nigeria, in April 1998, “when military dictatorship under the regime of General Sani Abacha was in its most brutal stage.” After the raid on the magazine, Dare wrote: “Darker nights lay ahead for The News and other media houses. The team rallied, as it had always done after every attack, to strategize. The group met in a safe house somewhere in central Lagos where a mobile newsroom was quickly set up within hours. There was work to do and no time to waste.... There was no let up. Work continued on the next edition of the magazine. Instructions were issued, and everyone basically knew what to do after several years of similar experiences. It was back to the trenches, and the newsroom was a no-go area.... [Idow Obasa, the general manager], was on call as always and ensured that the publications ... stayed on the streets during the darkest days of the siege against the media.”

Dare’s article is online at www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06_2NRsummer/Courage_International.pdf

—2002—

Yuan Feng writes, “I left China Women’s News in August 2006 and moved to the China office of ActionAid International, a nongovernmental organization for poverty elimination and social justice, as its women’s rights and gender theme coordinator. I am very happy with my new job. My 20 years of media experience is still helpful to my new career.”

Jeffrey Fleishman will become the Cairo bureau chief for the Los Angeles Times this summer. He is the paper’s bureau chief in Berlin, Germany, a position he has held for five years.

—2003—

David Dahl is regional editor of The Boston Globe, overseeing the Globe North, Globe South, Globe West, Globe Northwest, and City Weekly sections. Dahl had been the paper’s political editor since 2003. Before his move to Boston, he was deputy metro editor at the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times.

Two Nieman Fellows Receive 2007 ASNE Awards

Two Nieman Fellows have received recognition from the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) for their distinguished writing.

Anne Hull, NF ’95, a reporter for The Washington Post, received the Batten Medal. “Her five stories,” the announcement read, “eloquently explored the subtle effects of the Iraq War on a range of Americans.” The Batten Medal is named for the late James Batten, who had been a reporter, editor and chief executive for Knight Ridder. The award, ASNE notes, “recognizes a body of work that represents the journalistic values Jim stood for: compassion, courage, humanity, and a deep concern for the underdog. In short, journalism that touches real people.”

Ken Armstrong, NF ’01, a reporter with The Seattle Times, received the Distinguished Writing Award for Local Accountability Reporting for a series entitled “Your Courts, Their Secrets” that, ASNE said, “revealed how judges in the state’s largest county had illegally sealed hundreds of civil cases, depriving the public of vital information about public safety, health care, courts and schools.” Armstrong received this award along with Seattle Times colleagues Justin Mayo and Steve Miletich.

The awards, for which recipients receive \$2,500 prizes, were to be presented in March at the ASNE convention in Washington, D.C.. The articles that won the awards and interviews with the journalists will be published in “Best Newspaper Writing 2007,” by the Poynter Institute. ■

Geoffrey Nyarota has established a Web site to cover developments in his homeland, Zimbabwe, which he operates from his home in Massachusetts. In an December 2006 article in the *Telegram & Gazette* in Worcester, reporter Winston W. Wiley writes that “the exiled former editor in chief of the Zimbabwe Daily News uses a different medium to share his discoveries with his countrymen, who he is convinced are unlikely to find the information anywhere else.” Nyarota concurred, saying, “Most Zimbabweans rely on government-owned sources of news for their information and most of that news tends to be censored. It’s what the government wants the people to hear, rather than what is actually happening on the ground.” Nyarota’s newspaper in Zimbabwe was banned in 2003 by the government.

In explaining to Wiley why he has endured such sacrifices to write about his country, Nyarota said, “When you start a newspaper in a situation of tyranny, your paper becomes a symbol of hope for an otherwise hopeless, frustrated nation. Once you are viewed for creating such a paper, you can’t abandon it at the first sign of trouble. You are betraying people who have trusted their faith in you.” The site’s Web address is

New 2007 International Nieman Fellow Appointed

Aboubakr Jamaï, one of Morocco’s foremost independent journalists, joined the Nieman class of 2007 in March under an emergency appointment arranged in partnership with the Committee to Protect Journalists. Jamaï recently resigned from the magazines he founded, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* and *Assahifa al-Ousbouiya*, as a consequence of a defamation suit against him and his magazines that carried an excessively high financial penalty. Over the years, *Le Journal* has been targeted by the Moroccan government for its strong reporting on issues normally considered off-limits for journalists. In addition to founding and publishing the magazines, Jamaï is a founding member of The Working Group on Press Freedom and Free Expression in North Africa. ■

www.thezimbabwetimes.com

Nyarota is managing editor of the Web site, which is supported by contributions from journalists in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Great Britain, and the United States. He is also a visiting professor of political studies at Bard College in New York.

—2005—

Richard Chacón has been appointed director of policy and cabinet affairs for Deval Patrick, the new governor of Massachusetts. In this capacity, Chacón works with members of the governor’s cabinet to oversee policy initiatives.

He joined the Patrick campaign in May 2006 as deputy campaign manager/communications director. Chacón had been with *The Boston Globe*, where he held a number of reporting and editing positions including Latin American bureau chief, deputy foreign editor, and ombudsman, the job he was in when he left the *Globe*. He had been with the *Globe* for more than 10 years. Chacón has also worked in politics in New York City under Mayor David Dinkins, from 1990-1992, as assistant to the deputy mayor for economic development. He then became deputy media director for the 1992 Democratic National Convention in New York. ■

End Note

Global Health Fellowships at the Nieman Foundation

In a new and unique collaborative effort, Nieman Fellows devote a year to the study of global health issues, including a reporting trip to a developing nation.

By **Stefanie Friedhoff**

For the first time since the Nieman Foundation’s environmental journalism fellowship was established in 1994, journalists are invited to embark on a new specialized fellowship. In the fall, three journalists

joined the Nieman class of 2007 as the foundation’s first Global Health Fellows. In each of the next two years, during this fellowship’s pilot phase, three journalists will be also selected as Global Health Fellows.

This fellowship is unique in that it combines the Nieman experience with a four-month fieldwork project in the developing world. After studying at Harvard for an academic year and meeting many major players in international

public health, these fellows will take reporting trips to developing nations of their choice from June through September. This allows them to take a closer look at how health-oriented projects are carried out in the field and then return to the newsroom with stories ready to publish or broadcast.

Having been an international science journalist in the 2001 Nieman class, I now advise the Global Health Fellows in this Nieman effort. This opportunity arrives at a crucial time, when the intersecting complexities of global economics, international affairs, and health issues require a new level of expertise among journalists. Yet this is also a time when many newsrooms are reducing their staffs and resources and pointing towards localized coverage. In this environment, consumer health reporting is increasing, just when global health issues are urgently in need of news coverage. However, editors can scarcely afford to send a reporter on a three-month reporting trip to investigate, for example, the global business of counterfeit drugs, which kill people in faraway places, not in their hometown.

While more money and greater commitment exist in the global health arena today, a number of fundamental questions, such as whether funds are being spent effectively, remain unanswered—and are ripe for reporting. A specific intervention might work in some places but not well in others. Some aid organizations or local governments are more honest with their bookkeeping than others. Also, few donors and nongovernmental organizations are willing to engage beyond their prescribed agenda or collaborate with other aid organizations working in the same region.

Sorting out the many dimensions of the global health story and investigating the interconnectedness of health issues with global economic and political forces is part of the challenge of this fellowship—and of global health reporting in general. But an even greater challenge is to push this beat beyond conventional storytelling, which touches on compassion for the poor and sick in less fortunate

parts of the world, by more effectively conveying how these far-away health crises are connected to our lives in the developed world.

In learning more about global health, as we've been doing this year at Harvard, we've come to discover many such connections—from the migration of African health providers to work in hospitals in the United States and the United Kingdom to the spread of infectious diseases from poor to wealthy nations.

By creating this fellowship—through the generous support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—the Nieman Foundation is participating in elevating the coverage of global health issues and in helping to define this vital, emerging beat. The three Nieman Fellows in Global Health Reporting, who are developing their fieldwork reporting projects, are Harro Albrecht, medical writer/reporter at *Die Zeit*, Hamburg, Germany; David Kohn, medical and science reporter at *The (Baltimore) Sun*, and Kondwani Munthali, a reporter and editor with the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation. Each describes, below, his plans for future reporting on global health issues.

Shared Lessons

By Harro Albrecht

Are money, debt relief, and good intentions enough to solve global health problems and mitigate the burden of diseases in sub-Saharan Africa? Uganda is the ideal place to study the risks of foreign health aid implied in this question. In the 1990's Uganda was the darling of health aid agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and private donors. With soaring HIV/AIDS rates, Uganda was one of the few African countries capable of tackling the problem, given that President Yoweri Museveni was one of only three African leaders who in 1986 acknowledged that HIV/AIDS was an urgent problem and recommended precautionary actions. His message seemed to be heard; citizens' behavior changed. Consequently HIV/AIDS prevalence fell rapidly, from a reported 15 percent then to six percent now.

But hard-earned gains in Uganda's fight against AIDS are eroding; HIV prevalence is on the rise again. Corruption has become a big issue in Uganda, and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria has withdrawn funds. Subsequently, the Commission of Inquiry revealed how funds meant for lifesaving AIDS drugs were spent by the contracted agency on personal phone calls, lavish "Christmas groceries," and the medical bills of former ministers. A question looms large: Did the huge amount of aid money harm the already weak health structures in Uganda? The focus on AIDS probably diverted money from other important medical concerns such as pneumonia, diarrhea in children, and maternal mortality. Especially in the neglected north of Uganda, citizens suffer from all sorts of diseases other than AIDS.

For a series of about six articles about global health issues, Uganda will be my starting point. These stories will offer an overview about the ongoing search for better solutions at a time when more money for health aid is available than ever before. The series will start at Harvard, with a narrative about the global health scene—its proponents, ideas and controversies. The articles will then take the reader on a journey from Harvard academia to unexpected health problems in a developing country, and then to Germany, where I am medical editor at *Die Zeit*, in Hamburg.

Why Germany? What connection exists between a developed and wealthy country such as Germany (with a life expectancy at birth of 78 years) and the desperate situation in a poor, developing nation like Uganda (life expectancy at birth 47 years)? For a long time diseases in Uganda have been tackled only in terms of public health; this meant that measures were not aimed at curing the individual but at treating large groups or even the whole population. (This strategy changed with the spread of antiretroviral medicines against HIV/AIDS.) However, in developed countries like Germany, where individual treatment is the dominant health approach used, the broader view of the whole popula-

tion has been lost. But irrational and unhealthy behaviors, scarce resources, inequality and misdirected priorities are not only challenges for the developing world. Lessons learned in Uganda will illuminate failures of a developed health system like the one in Germany. As Rudolf Virchow, the German pioneer of social medicine, observed in 1848, "If disease is an expression of individual life under unfavorable conditions, then epidemics must be indicative of mass disturbances of mass life."

Making the Abstract Real

By David Kohn

Who deserves treatment more—the taxi driver in Sri Lanka with heart disease or the farmer in Zimbabwe with HIV? I'd never thought a lot about this question prior to this fellowship. But after taking several public health classes and discussing such issues with professors, colleagues and students, it's one of the many topics I find fascinating about global public health. Issues involved with resource allocation are crucial. In an era when the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and others are donating billions of dollars to fight a range of deadly diseases, there is still not enough money to deal with all of the developing world's health challenges. How should governments, aid organizations, and donors decide who gets what?

There is a controversy between vertical systems, which are health programs built by big donors to treat and prevent a single disease, and horizontal systems, which are health programs designed by countries (although often funded from abroad) to tackle a wide array of problems. Each approach has the potential to benefit different constituencies in different ways. Then there is "scalability," which is the potential for a given health program to be enlarged to reach an entire region or country, rather than the village that serves as a test case.

Such concerns fascinate public health researchers but are necessarily abstract. What I now regard as my challenge as a global health journalist

is to make these important issues concrete for the average American reader, who will arrive at the story with no idea what scalability means and little interest in the vertical vs. horizontal debate. To do this requires that I find circumstances that exemplify these concepts and stories to tell of people whose lives offer testimony in these debates. My project will focus on inequities in health care among various groups in developing countries, as I also investigate how poor countries are working to build up their public health and hospital systems.

Africa: What Went Wrong?

By Kondwani Munthali

Is it poverty? Is it the question of leadership? Who shoulders the blame for Africa's health crisis—the multilateral agencies, foreign governments who provide both budget and development aid to African governments, or the World Health Organization, whose leadership has come under scrutiny and whose role is changing with the emergence of other potent players in global health? How can information be given to a 40-year-old African villager who does not know how to read or write? How can African men be convinced to use condoms or accept a daughter with AIDS? How does the need for an early prenatal clinic visit get explained to a 36-year-old woman who has had four deliveries at home or with a traditional birth attendant?

Questions and then more questions arise during a year at Harvard, where scientific, medical and public health scholars offer their accumulative years of knowledge and experiences in the field of global health. Here I've become acquainted with the social medicine and social justice approach of Paul Farmer, with economist Chris Murray's discussion of the global burden of diseases and the vaccine trial discoveries, along with the all-you-need-to-know-about-AIDS authorities Max Essex and Saidi Kapiga, and the vast wealth of knowledge of Africa, its successes, failures and challenges. While many solutions and strategies

have been proposed and tried, progress has been painstakingly slow. Maternal and child mortality continue to rise. Malaria remains the leading killer. AIDS has brought the already weak health systems to almost a total crash. Tuberculosis is mutating to becoming more resistant to antibiotics. And African leaders have decided to embark on academic debates about the link between HIV and AIDS while denying people treatments that are available.

Where does an African journalist fit? In the delicate balance between what is scientifically proven and the stories of the poor Africans, overwhelmed by the lack of life basics like food, clean water, and decent housing. In my reporting, I will seek to bring to my stories a series of voices—including those of people from the scientific, academic and technical communities—to evaluate Africa's place in global health. I will narrate the perspectives of global health players about what has gone wrong in Africa.

Ultimately, my focus will settle on the political and economic authorities in Africa. I will travel from Congo, Brazzaville, the regional headquarters of the WHO in Africa, to visit key government and other stakeholders in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Then, the voices of the poor—those bearing the burden of poor living conditions and inadequate health care on a daily basis—will be meshed with the thinking of these global health leaders in a search for answers to profound questions: What has gone wrong in Africa? And what solutions might emerge? ■

The fellowships in Global Health Reporting are supported by a three-year, \$1.19 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and are a joint initiative of the Nieman Foundation and Harvard's School of Public Health. The initial pilot phase will run through 2009, when both the Nieman and the Gates Foundation will review its potential for endowment.

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