

Nieman Reports

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

VOL. 63 NO. 1 SPRING 2009

Voyages of Discovery *Into* New Media



21st Century Muckrakers

Investigating Medical and Health Issues

Words & Reflections

News Photography in Afghanistan

Climate Change and Politics

Economic Calamity and Coverage

'to promote and elevate the standards of journalism'

Agnes Wahl Nieman
the benefactor of the Nieman Foundation

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Nieman Reports
The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University

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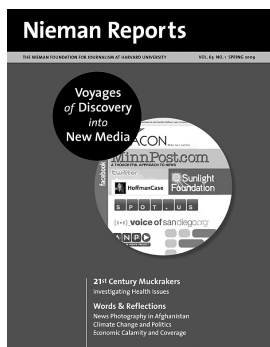
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Change Is in the Air at Lippmann House

Applications for fellowships are on the rise, as a multimedia curriculum is readied for the new fellows who will engage in the industry's digital transformation.

BY BOB GILES

Attached to the personal statement in the file of a Nieman Fellowship applicant for the class of 2010 is this note of explanation concerning his “evolving situation.” He had been offered a buyout from his company, he said, and had decided to accept it. He and his family would be moving back to the United States from a foreign posting in the spring, and he planned to become a freelance correspondent. He was applying with the institutional backing of his news organization but, if selected, he would come to Harvard as a freelance journalist.

Another candidate wrote that the leadership of her newspaper “has decided that they will no longer support applications for long-term fellowships. The understanding is that the paper is at a critical juncture and everyone needs to be on board, contributing to make the new newspaper a success.”

One reporter lamented that editors were being short-sighted in failing to recognize the Nieman experience was an “opportunity for the paper to help me grow as a journalist and return with a deeper understanding of a subject that I write about.”

We also learned that candidates applying without support from their editors would, if selected, be required to resign from their jobs. Their editors told them they would be welcome to reapply for their jobs following the Nieman year, but there would be no guarantee. I counseled these anxious journalists that if they applied, the Nieman Foundation would welcome their application without the required letters of recommendation. I also urged them to be straight up with their editors in telling them they were applying without the newspaper's support. Other aspiring fellows seem resigned to setting aside their dreams of a fellowship for now, hoping that staying put will enable them to protect their jobs.

In this time of shrinking news staffs, when news executives are posting unusual obstacles in the paths of journalists who want to seek a fellowship year, a sharp increase in the number of applicants might be surprising. Yet the pool of U.S. applicants for the class of 2010 totals 164 (compared to 127 a year ago). Overseas, where staff reductions are not as prevalent, interest in the Nieman program also is on the rise. A new class of international fellows has been chosen from among 150 candidates; 111 applied for places in the class of 2009.

Over the years, journalists from daily newspapers traditionally have dominated the applicant pool and Nieman

classes. But those numbers are changing. A year ago, 68 newspaper candidates made up half of the candidate pool. For the class of 2010, 45 fellowship aspirants are from newspapers, fewer than one-third of the applicants.

Sixty-four of the U.S. candidates identify themselves as “freelance journalists;” some have been working independently for several years, while others are newly separated from their newspapers or broadcast outlets and are setting out to shape new professional lives. Last year, 26 self-identified freelance journalists applied. The applicant pool also reflects increased interest from radio and television journalists—28 compared to 16 in 2009.

Six candidates work full time as online journalists, against one in 2009, but that number doesn't tell the full story. Several applicants from mainstream news organizations told us their duties include reporting for or directing work for the news organization's Web site. Others wrote enthusiastically about their blogs.

In our initial reading of applications, we also can recognize shifting expectations of what the new class might want the Nieman Foundation to provide toward their development as journalists. In essays laying out their aspirations for the year, many fewer mention an interest in strengthening their writing skills in our creative writing and narrative journalism classes. Rather, candidates are more likely to say they want to broaden their skills in using multimedia tools. This pattern has emerged during this Nieman year, in which participation in the writing programs has declined, and fellows have chosen to invest time in learning about digital journalism.

Anticipating that the new class will have a similar high interest, the foundation is working to create and provide a coherent curriculum; our plans include 19 Friday afternoon sessions with multimedia teachers during the academic year, supplemented by other opportunities to improve one's skills with a range of online tools for telling stories in words, images and sound. The curriculum is organized by topic and will include a mix of hands-on and theoretical work beginning with a session about how the Web works.

As the complexion of Nieman classes evolves and becomes less print-centric, the foundation will address the challenge of satisfying expectations for a different kind of transformative experience, one that holds to the tradition of getting the most out of Harvard classrooms as well as investing in helping fellows develop the competencies necessary to strive for journalistic excellence in the digital age. ■

Voyages of Discovery Into New Media

Crisis has its way of focusing the mind. And so it has—many minds. In February, one metro newspaper ended its 150-year publishing history, while others are so financially strapped as to be teetering on the cliff's edge; the fate of still others resides in bankruptcy court. In such times of despair, ideas about how to pay for journalism are blossoming. Debate about their utility is also well underway.

Since late in 2008, when Nieman Reports invited journalists at U.S. digital news sites and some at newspapers doing multimedia storytelling to share their experiences, the search for viable solutions has intensified. These practitioners' voyages of discovery now offer guidance. Their experiences become pieces to fit into our jigsaw puzzle of possibilities—a puzzle that most experts believe still lacks a completed border of viability.



Questions abound: Is news reporting—content to digital practitioners—a commodity for which people will pay? If they will, then how much and by what means? Micropayments deducted for a click? Or a Web banking system with the coin-rattling name of Kachingle? Subscriptions? Would payment by users *and* on-line ads be enough to support the work of journalists? (Hint: One analyst calculated that “publishers recaptured just 1.7 cents in online ad revenue for every \$1 of print advertising that they lost in the first nine months of 2008,” according to Alan Mutter, who discusses such issues on his blog “Reflections of a Newsosaur.”) Stop the presses—and thereby eliminate print production and delivery costs—but can the digital product support those who create the content? Should for-profit news companies be transformed into nonprofit organizations? Will philanthropists and foundations be willing to fund news sites on more than a temporary basis? How is the labor-intensive watchdog role of journalists to be assured in such unsettled times?

While discussions go on, digital news enterprises gain respect (and receive resumés) from their journalistic brethren. Investigative reporters live by the axiom “follow the money,” so as we follow the awards that journalists hand out, we discover that digital news is being welcomed at the table. The Pulitzer Prizes now allow submissions “entirely of online content” in all 14 prizewinning categories. At the first Shorty Awards honoring Twitter microbloggers, Knight Foundation President Alberto Ibargüen, a financial backer, sent a Tweet: “@shortyawards winners, how will you use Twitter to innovate?” And at the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, a New Media Index tracks what bloggers follow and the content of the top linked-to stories is compared with what the mainstream news media covered.

Digital media have arrived. Will journalism find a way to remain? ■—Melissa Ludtke

The New Front Page: The Digital Revolution

A former newspaper editor figures out how to fund serious digital journalism with an annual budget less than what newsrooms sometimes spent on one investigative project.

By Joel Kramer

MinnPost.com
A THOUGHTFUL APPROACH TO NEWS

ABOUT COMMUNITY VOICES FOR MINNESOTA

9°

Friday, January 23, 2009

THE DAILY CLEAN
A SUMMARY OF MINNESOTA LOCAL STORIES

Will Obama's \$3 billion save state's bacon?
By Paul Bauer | Friday, Jan. 23
Not speculation, says House speaker. Also: Police officer's courthouse misadventure.

Bankruptcy casualty: Star Tribune's St. Paul bureau
Star Tribune news reporting promised beyond money
MEDIA | 10:00-10:30 PM

More good news about December web traffic
MEDIA | 10:00-10:30 PM

CURRENT POSTS
UPDATED THROUGHOUT THE DAY

Jay Weiner: Obama could end one of the most important jobs in the world
By Jay Weiner | 10:00-10:30 PM

Joe Kimball: Corro Park promotes Saturday for environmental education
By Joe Kimball | 10:00-10:30 PM

Steve Dahl: Video report: How time to enjoy the first winter holidays
By Steve Dahl | 10:00-10:30 PM

ArtsArena
COMMUNITY VOICES FOR MINNESOTA

40 theater evaluators needed for new awards by Glassy Girls
By Glassy Girls | 10:00-10:30 PM

Former MPJ staff now moves to KREM by Pamela Eckhardt
By Pamela Eckhardt | 10:00-10:30 PM

MINNCLIPS
MINNESOTA'S MOST INTERESTING LOCAL STORIES

Worthington dairy breaks with help from Big Macs and Whoppers
By Dan Worthington | 10:00-10:30 PM

Capella names new CEO to replace founder by Joe Kimball
By Joe Kimball | 10:00-10:30 PM

Wagner joins Republican Whip Team by Cynthia Wagner
By Cynthia Wagner | 10:00-10:30 PM

EPA overrules Big Stone damper by Joe Kimball
By Joe Kimball | 10:00-10:30 PM

Minnesota secretary of state picks
By Steve Perry | 10:00-10:30 PM

Stranger Art Pica examines the use of bioscapes as a design element
By Art Pica | 10:00-10:30 PM

Wall Street Mawney: An investment look at Wall Street's take on former Merrill Lynch CEO John Mawney
By John Mawney | 10:00-10:30 PM

Guaranteeing ordered closure with a new, disease-treatment rules changed
By Steve Perry | 10:00-10:30 PM

Intelligence director nominee on Senate: 'not more, less or effective'
By Steve Perry | 10:00-10:30 PM

Obama's transition team
By Steve Perry | 10:00-10:30 PM

UP-CLOSE WITNESS TO HISTORY: Mondale reflects on the inaugural, 'It's close call, his VP talks with Biden'
By Doug Dowd | Thursday, Jan. 22, 2009

Minnesota job losses in 2009 could be up 50 percent from 2008
By Steve Perry | Thursday, Jan. 22, 2009

Minnesota is due to issue to December 2009 job loss figures later today, this coming the book on a week-end year for state employment. As for 2009, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development research director Steve Hine tells me that current

A lot of pixels are being spilled these days reflecting on the future of newspapers, news, journalists and journalism. I spent my career in newspapers, first as a journalist and later as a publisher, and I left when the business was financially near its peak. With the for-profit model now shriveling, I've spent the past 16 months trying to build one example of what might be coming next—a not-for-profit enterprise providing high-quality regional journalism on the Web.

Here are some reflections from that battlefield.

MinnPost is a certain kind of nonprofit journalism enterprise—one that aims to eventually breakeven on operating revenues, such as advertising, sponsorship, membership and perhaps other sources such as syndication.

This is different from a pure philanthropic endeavor, like ProPublica, which (at least in its current plan) depends for its success on the continuing generosity of foundations or very large individual donors.

MinnPost has had early support from major donors and foundations, and we believe that serious journalism is a community asset, not just a consumer good, which is why we're nonprofit. But we are focused on breaking even by 2011, or at the latest 2012, without relying on foundation support to keep the lights on.

Why? Because (a) we think it's possible to reach breakeven; and (b) we think it's desirable, since foundations already have so

many causes to support, and it's questionable whether they have the capacity to support journalism on the expansive scale that may be needed to replace what's being lost, especially regionally, in the for-profit industry.

We can argue the merits and demerits of each approach and, in our age of digital experimentation, it seems wise to let every flower bloom. But it's important to understand MinnPost's approach, to make sense of my dispatch from the frontlines.

Traffic

We draw our MinnPost members—more on how people become one later—from among our readers, and because the inventory we have to sell to advertisers is our page views, traffic to our Web site, MinnPost.com, is critical to our financial success.

Google Analytics tells us exactly how many times each item we publish gets read. This has a powerful effect. It makes us want to do more of what gets read, and less of what doesn't, while remaining true to our mission.

What does this mean? A glance at MinnPost lets a visitor know that it's for serious newsreaders. Our brochure proudly declares, "NO Britney. NO Paris. NO Lindsay." MinnPost is not a place to visit for stories about entertainment celebrities, or sex, crime and advice for the lovelorn—even though we know that such content would bulk up our page views.

Even for our serious audience,

we've learned that \$600 spent on one long story produces a lot less traffic than \$600 spent generating six to 12 shorter items. We still do longer stories every day, including many that combine in-depth reporting and analysis with personal voice.

But a careful reader of our site over the past year will note that we have a great many more short, quick hits, published all day long. So while we are spending less on news today than a year ago, our traffic has more than doubled during that time. On a three-month rolling average, we now have more than 200,000 unique monthly visitors and more than 700,000 page views—and in mid-February we enjoyed our first 31-day period with more than one million page views.

We are confident we can keep this number growing and keep quality high. Even short-form work can involve outstanding reporting and analysis—for evidence, check out David Brauer's Braublog (www.minnpost.com/braublog) any day. [A screen grab is on this page.] But it does mean that we do a lot fewer ambitious investigative reports than I would like us to publish.

In 1974, I copyedited a Newsday series called "The Heroin Trail," which won a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. I'll bet Newsday spent more money on that project (adjusted to today's dollars) than MinnPost's entire news budget in its first year. Our most ambitious MinnPost investigation, financed by a Watchdog Journalism fund we created, was a series on the resegregation of Twin Cities-area public schools, and it cost less than \$15,000, fully loaded. Another major project was a series on the intimidating reign of our former state attorney general. Its author, Eric Black, acknowledged that it made him antsy to give up daily posting for weeks while he worked on it.

The screenshot shows the MinnPost.com website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for HOME, REGION, WORLD/NATION, POLITICS, HEALTH/SCIENCE, BUSINESS, ARTS, POSTS, SPORTS, MULTIMEDIA, and COMMUNITY VOICES. A weather forecast for 10° is shown. The main article is titled "Meet the Star Tribune's big creditors" by David Brauer, published on Jan 16 2009 at 4:30 pm. The article text discusses the bankruptcy of the Star Tribune and lists major creditors. A sidebar on the left contains several news teasers: "EXPOSED brick", "NATURAL light", "space that WORKS", "CROWN 500 - 8,300 SF New Windows NE Minneapolis Free Parking", "HILLCREST DEVELOPMENT, LLC", "MINNPOST Flyerboard", and "LATINO WRITERS". A search bar is located at the top right of the article content.

News Staffing

MinnPost is a professional journalism site. It has always been part of our mission to support professional journalism and pay for it. But how we do so has changed substantially since we launched.

At the outset, our editors were on staff, and all our writers were freelance, paid by the piece. Some critics wondered whether it was possible to publish a five-day-a-week news site with all freelance reporters and writers. Our editors wondered, too. The nightmare question was, "What if one morning all the writers say they're not available today because they have other assignments, or they want to play golf?"

During 2008, we added one full-time writer, then a second, reducing the freelance budget accordingly. Later still, we put four of our best reporters on full weekly retainers and several more on part-time retainers—again reducing the budget for paying by the piece. In January, we added a full-time Washington correspondent, an unusual step when so many bureaus are shrinking or dissolving. The new

system works much better. The critics were right.

Paying for News

Like almost all news on the Web, MinnPost content is free to all, but we do ask our readers to become members, which entails making an annual donation. This is a variation on the model that public radio and public television use but minus the intrusive pledge weeks.

The good news is that more than 1,250 people have signed on as members during the first 15 months, with donations ranging from \$10 a year to \$20,000. On our membership list, available at www.minnpost.com/members, you can see that the two most

popular categories are Cub Reporter (\$50–\$99) and Night Police Reporter (\$100–\$249).

Yet we know that many thousands of our regular readers are not donating. Even some who have told us how much they like what we do are not yet donating. To reach breakeven, we probably will need 5,000 donors by 2012. And we need to achieve these results without expensive incentives, like mugs or CDs, and without paying a large membership-support staff. (Ideas are welcome.)

We regularly ask ourselves whether we could charge for premium content on our site. With such a strong expectation out there that the Internet will be free, we have not yet come up with a viable idea. (Again, your ideas are welcome.)

From the outset, I assumed that advertising could not by itself sustain high-quality regional journalism, for two main reasons: Serious public affairs subjects and local orientation are both bad routes to maximizing traffic, and the staggering number of publishers online depresses ad rates, so that without high traffic it's not possible to generate big revenues. Be-

fore MinnPost launched, I estimated that the eventual breakeven would be based on 70 percent from advertising, 30 percent from membership. With a year of experience, I now believe it will be more like 50-50. Membership is challenging, but advertising is more so.

Our strategy is based on providing advertisers a high-quality environment and excellent service and asking them to pay accordingly. For example, we don't allow intrusive advertising that interferes with the visitor's reading experience. We also help our advertisers create effective banners and landing pages.

In one respect, this is working. Our advertisers pay \$15 or more per thousand impressions, or appearances, of their ad, and we have been able to hold this rate in these tough times—though we have increased volume discounts, and we now target local advertisers' ads to local readers only, thereby increasing their value. Meanwhile, our local competitors often offer our customers half that rate, and national networks like Google Ads offer to sell ads onto our site for a tenth of what we charge or less.

But the number of advertisers willing to pay for that quality is still too small. This much I know: If the rate for locally sold advertising drops to \$1, or even \$5, only publishers with truly gigantic global traffic will survive on ad revenues.

Increasingly, the pitch we're making to advertisers is to sponsor part of the site, rather than just buy banner ad flights. This is working well. In the past two months, we've sold two sponsorships: One for the Daily Glean, a midmorning roundup summarizing and linking to the best of what's in the other local media, written with attitude, and one for Community Voices, our daily op-ed feature.

These opportunities give sponsors more exposure than they would get with regular banner ads and a stronger connection to our core mission.

Foundations have provided critically important funding to MinnPost. The Knight Foundation has been especially generous, but they told us from the outset that they wanted us to find local foundation support, too. We now have two major Minnesota foundations, the Blandin Foundation and The Minneapolis Foundation, supporting us with sizeable grants as well, along with smaller grants from a few corporate foundations. But our challenge, confronted by all nonprofit enterprises, not just those in journalism, is that we need unrestricted operating funds to sustain us until we fully develop our operational revenues—and many foundations prefer to fund a specific new activity. Right now, without the help of these foundations, we could not survive, and we are working to add additional ones, both national and local.

Finding Our Place on the Web

When we launched, and occasionally since, some observers have predicted our demise because we're a bunch of

old newspaper people who don't "get the Internet." In response I readily admit that our primary interest is sustaining high-quality journalism, not exploiting what the Internet makes possible. But that doesn't mean that we have not been open to learning all we can about how best to use the medium to achieve our goal.

Some things that the Web makes possible might not help us get there. For example, take a look at the unfettered comments that populate so many Web sites. From day one, MinnPost has accepted—and encouraged—comments on all our articles, but we have insisted on civility and set two hurdles in place to ensure it.

1. Those who want to leave a comment must register, and their full real names are attached to their comments.
2. Comments are prescreened by volunteer moderators and rejected not only for foul or hateful language but also for things like name-calling.

We took plenty of heat from Web-savvy readers for this decision. But as readers have watched the quality of comment on respected sites that don't require real names, many are now grateful for our approach. Recently we published our 7,000th comment. Some sites with looser standards appear to be reconsidering their no-holds-barred policies.

On the other hand, the Web makes possible the convergence of the written word and video, and in this realm we are playing and learning. We have discovered, for example, that high-quality documentary video raises the same challenge as investigative reporting: high cost for the traffic generated. But rougher, newsier video works great.

Interactivity and so-

The screenshot shows the MinnPost.com website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for HOME, REGION, WORLD/NATION, POLITICS, HEALTH/SCIENCE, BUSINESS, ARTS, POSTS, SPORTS, MULTIMEDIA, and COMMUNITY VOICES. A search bar is located on the right. Below the navigation, there's a featured article titled "Everybody's scrambling for a local Obama angle" by Doug Grow, dated Monday, Jan. 19, 2008. The article text discusses the late Thomas Griffith and the historic meaning of Barack Obama's inauguration. To the left of the article is a sidebar with a "MinnPost's Arts arena" section listing various arts categories like Fine Art, Theater, Dance, Books, etc. Below that is a "COMMUNITY VOICES" section with the subtext "COMMENTARY AND OPINION". On the right side of the article, there's a "THE DAILY GLEAN" section, which is a midmorning roundup. It includes a search bar, a "GO!" button, and a "RECENT EDITIONS OF THE DAILY GLEAN" link. At the bottom right, there's a small text box that says "You have all day to scour the Internet, but The Daily Glean skims the cream before that first cup of coffee. The Glean distills facts from multiple sources — the morning papers, late local news, and overnight web offerings — for a fast-paced summary of important and interesting local stories. And when facts collide, The Glean will note that too."

cial media have been more difficult for us to figure out for our site and audience, so we're not as far along as I'd like on crowdsourcing stories, for example. But we are now tapping into a great community for getting tips, spreading the word about our work, and other forms of community building such as Twitter. Minnpostnow, our Twitter account, was launched in June with a couple of dozen followers and, eight months later, we have more than 1,300.

Guiding Those Who Follow

I receive calls almost every week from people in this country and around the world seeking my advice about starting a regional Web site. My colleagues who have started sites in San Diego, Chicago, New Haven, and St. Louis get these calls, too, which is one of the reasons we're exploring starting a consortium of nonprofit regional

online news sites: to help others get started. [See articles about these efforts in St. Louis, below, and in San Diego on page 11.]

I answer their questions and ask a few of my own. My number one question: Do you have significant start-up funds? When I started MinnPost, we had commitments of one year's operating budget, about \$1.2 million. The business plan called for having two, but my startup donors and I agreed that the time was right in late 2007 to begin, so we did so even though we were undercapitalized. It was the right decision, but it means I spend a great deal of my time finding the funding to sustain us through the next few years instead of devoting all my energy to the things that will sustain us longer term.

Many of the callers tell me they have no start-up funds in hand yet. "Well," I say, "I'd start by getting some."

With each new announcement of

a paper closing, or a news company contemplating bankruptcy, or a dozen more journalism jobs being eliminated, my belief intensifies that the nonprofit approach has the best chance of sustaining serious regional journalism. But I am reporting back from the frontline of this digital journalism revolution that making it happen is no picnic. The same forces working against the for-profit model make self-sustaining nonprofit models challenging, too.

A lot of people are rooting for us to succeed, even counting on us to succeed. We're making progress, hanging in, and learning and adapting every day. No promises, only possibilities. ■

Joel Kramer, CEO and editor of MinnPost.com, was editor of the (Minneapolis) Star Tribune from 1983 to 1991 and publisher and president from 1992 to 1998.

Watchdog Analysis: Offering Context and Perspective Online

At the Beacon in St. Louis, reporters attempt to 'provide context to illuminate why something is happening, explain what's at stake, and assess what might—or what should—happen next.'

BY MARGARET WOLF FREIVOGEL

The spotlight often focuses, justifiably, on the threats that downsized newsrooms pose to investigative reporting—the kind of muckraking that should (but didn't) spot a governor dickering over the value of a U.S. Senate seat. But investigative reporting has a less celebrated cousin in the family of watchdog journalism—that is hard-hitting analysis. It is equally important and equally threatened by the economic earthquake rattling journalism.

Investigative reporting exposes corruption. Watchdog analysis exposes sloppy thinking by raising uncomfort-

able questions about public policy and political issues. Both are essential for keeping public discussion real and public officials honest. For example: Did the Senate really have the legal authority to refuse to seat the appointee of Illinois's tainted governor? For days, most senators vowed they would prevent Roland Burris from taking the seat vacated by President Barack Obama. But a previous court case involving Representative Adam Clayton Powell and other legal precedents seemed to offer strong precedent that said they'd have to seat Burris.

We reported this in the St. Louis

Beacon, our online-only nonprofit regional news site, www.stlbeacon.org, that launched last spring. Our reporting—and analysis—might not have directly influenced the Senate's decision to seat Burris, but it did give our readers telling and little-known facts that turned out to be important in the outcome of the controversy.

Watchdog Analysis

At first glance, an online-only news publication might not seem the ideal home for watchdog analysis. The Web is known for breaking news, short

video, and pithy opinions. Watchdog analysis requires words, sometimes many of them, and it demands patient attention to looking at issues from several perspectives. At the Beacon, we're acutely aware of these challenges. Yet we do this work because we regard watchdog analysis, along with investigative reporting, as among our core responsibilities and greatest opportunities for serving our region.

Among our founders are several veteran St. Louis Post-Dispatch expats who still take inspiration from the tradition of the newspaper's three editors named Joseph Pulitzer, whose platform commands "always be drastically independent," and "never be satisfied with merely printing news." These two phrases capture the approach and value of the entire genre of watchdog analysis.

"News That Matters" is the Beacon's motto. Amidst the flood of information swamping all of us, our mission is to help St. Louisans understand events, trends and issues that have long-lasting significance for our region. To do this, we provide watchdog analysis that takes several forms. We give readers the story behind the story. We provide context to illuminate why something is happening, explain what's at stake, and assess what might—or what should—happen next. We raise pertinent and sometimes impertinent questions that can fundamentally reshape the assumptions of a current debate.

Our most ambitious and sustained effort has been a project called "Facing the Mortgage Crisis."¹ It began early last summer, when subprime mortgage foreclosures were mounting, but the larger economic meltdown was not yet apparent. Working in partnership with our local public television station KETC, which mobilized resources to help prevent foreclosures, the Beacon zeroed in on a series of tough questions.

How did so many homeowners get overextended? Why was the larger economy ensnared in their problems?

The screenshot shows the St. Louis Beacon website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links like Home, Issues/Politics, Health/Science, Arts + Life, Voices, About the Beacon, and Member area. The main header features the Beacon logo and the tagline 'NEWS THAT MATTERS'. Below the header, there's a search bar and a 'Public Insight Network' logo. The main content area displays the article 'Anatomy of a foreclosure: For Sale - A house full of memories (Part 1)' by Mary Delach Leonard. The article includes a 'Part 1 of 3' section with a summary, a video player showing Maureen McKenzie speaking, and a sidebar with 'INAUGURATION 2009' and 'Facing the Mortgage Crisis'.

Why was it so difficult to funnel help to those who needed it? Would the proposed solutions work? Beacon reporter Mary Delach Leonard dug deep into each one to understand and analyze what was known. To do this, she explored St. Louisans' housing situations and tapped experts with St. Louis perspectives.

To our surprise, perhaps the most insightful explanation of the big picture emerged when Leonard focused microscopically on the plight of one person, Maureen McKenzie. This reporting took weeks of effort as Leonard worked to gain McKenzie's confidence, pored over her documents, tracked down and questioned her originating mortgage broker, and interviewed counselors and consumer advocates who put her situation in context. As Leonard's reporting was in motion, the economic crisis exploded.

The Beacon introduced our three-part series about McKenzie this way:

The collapse of some of the nation's oldest financial institutions started on Main Street America with hundreds and thousands of homeowners such as 56-year-old Maureen McKenzie of Kirkwood who in May lost to foreclosure the small ranch house that had been in her family since it was built after World War II. How could this happen? The answer is ... complicated. The Beacon will unravel the story of how Maureen McKenzie of Kirkwood, Mo., lost her 900 square feet of the American Dream.

McKenzie's experience, and Leonard's reporting, challenged conventional wisdom about the mortgage crisis. Most discussion at the time presumed borrowers were largely to blame for overextending themselves to satisfy their oversized consumer appetites. This longtime homeowner wanted nothing more than to stay

¹ Stories in this series can be read and viewed at www.stlbeacon.org/facing_the_mortgage_crisis.

in the house she'd always loved. But aggressive lenders, who had much to gain and little to lose by luring her into a loan she could not afford, played a big role in her demise.

McKenzie was a cautious borrower. Yet the explanation she was given of the terms of her variable rate loan made it nearly impossible for an average consumer to understand the potentially dire consequences that would befall her—and so many others. The truth is that she'd be losing ground financially even while she made her monthly payments. And while it might theoretically make sense to renegotiate loan terms so that homeowners like McKenzie could keep their homes, time and the fractured nature of the mortgage market made this impossible, and she lost her home.

McKenzie's story did not have a happy ending, save that her courage in sharing her experience enlightened others about the pitfalls they might face. And it instructed the larger community about the complexities of bad mortgages that, to this day, remain the knot at the center of our tangled economy.

Like good investigative reporting, good watchdog analysis begets new lines of inquiry. The Beacon's mortgage crisis coverage has branched into related questions. For example, if the federal government is bailing out big banks, how will this initiative affect smaller ones? (Local bankers characterized the plan unfair and unwise.) Why hasn't the Wall Street bailout trickled down to Main Street? (Local housing counselors identified three alarming reasons and predicted that the wave of foreclosures will continue to gather momentum.²)

Our most recent related project, dubbed "Beacon-omics," addresses economic questions that are obvious but still perplexing: Why is deflation bad? What, exactly, are mortgage-backed securities? Is 0.00 percent interest a good idea?

Just as investigative journalism gives citizens the information they need to

hold public officials accountable from a legal and ethical standpoint, watchdog analysis provides the information citizens need to hold them accountable for sound public policy.

How We Do What We Do

Why are we doing this kind of journalism online? The first reason is happenstance. Print and broadcast newsrooms are shedding reporters and institutional memory. New online regional news sites like the Beacon offer an immediate home for serious

Digital stories, we're learning, get traction when they're very interesting to some group of people—usually those who are knowledgeable about the issue and eager to learn more.

work—and as we read about the loss of newsroom jobs, the Beacon is interviewing for new hires.

It's also true that online news sites are ideal for meeting citizens' needs for information—when and at whatever depth they choose. A Web-based news organization can provide instantaneous coverage of the latest developments on a topic such as the mortgage crisis. At the same time, we can compile in-depth analysis of context and potential solutions and make this material constantly and easily accessible.

Having spent 34 years working in print, I know that much newsroom effort is geared toward playing up stories that will appeal to "everyone"—an elusive concept that often results in

lowest common denominator coverage of little interest to anyone. Digital stories, we're learning, get traction when they're very interesting to some group of people—usually those who are knowledgeable about the issue and eager to learn more. By digging deeply on questions that matter, we can construct a path to understanding complicated issues, and anyone's access to this path is just a mouse click away.

Finally, as good journalists know, the experience and wisdom that make watchdog analysis possible reside not in newsrooms but with people in the community. The Web is by its nature an interactive medium, so this makes it easier to draw community resources into a larger conversation.

Certainly, in the short time we've been doing this, we haven't taken full advantage of all of the ways that we can do watchdog analysis online. We'd like to make better use of multimedia tools and not rely so much on our words alone. By hiring more reporters, we could pay sustained attention to more issues—and now, with a Knight Foundation grant for local reporting, we will make advances in meeting this goal.

It's been less than a year since the Beacon was launched. Our staff and resources are nowhere near the size of a major metro newsroom. Yet around us we find increasing recognition that our watchdog analysis is important. Fortunately, we've also found a willingness among St. Louisans and some foundations to step forward with support so the Beacon can continue the work we have begun—work we hope will demonstrate how vital kinds of reporting can be done in digital media and find new audiences who appreciate the effort. ■

Margaret Wolf Freivogel is editor of the St. Louis Beacon (stlbeacon.org). She previously worked as a reporter, assistant Washington bureau chief, and assistant managing editor for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

² This analysis piece by Leonard can be read at: www.stlbeacon.org/facing_the_mortgage_crisis/bailout_hasn_t_trickled_to_main_street.

Defining an Online Mission: Local Investigative Reporting

At the nonprofit voiceofsandiego.org, 'From our first day our job has been to fill the gaps between what people want from their local media and what they have.'

BY ANDREW DONOHUE AND SCOTT LEWIS

There's a common refrain that comes with many commentaries lamenting the decline of newspapers these days: Investigative reporting is an expensive endeavor.

Our experience proves that bit of conventional wisdom dead wrong. For the past four years, we've been running voiceofsandiego.org, a nonprofit online-only daily publication dedicated to local in-depth and investigative reporting. And, on a budget of less than one million dollars, we've been able to produce stories that have an impact on a daily basis by running an efficient organization of full-time, professional journalists free from the burden of printing an actual paper.

Indeed, we've learned that it's not investigative reporting that's expensive, it's printing a newspaper.

Sam Zell, owner of the Tribune Company, says that 86 percent of the cost of the newspaper business is print, paper, distribution and promotion. We turn that on its head and spend the vast majority of our budget on the actual journalists—the people out on the street finding the best stories. Web hosting and production represent a sliver of our costs. And though we have a similar financing model to public broadcasting, our costs are also a tiny fraction of what it takes to run a local affiliate of NPR.

New York Times investigations editor Walt Bogdanich recently summed it up concisely in a conversation with readers: "Good investigative reporting depends less on money than on the commitment of editors and the skill of its reporters."

Nonprofit Online Journalism

Still, the decline of the major daily newspaper in metropolitan areas around the nation means that more and more important stories are going untold, especially in America's big cities. While it won't be the only vision for journalism's future to spring up as newspapers shrink, the nonprofit online-only model is uniquely situated to fill the rapidly growing gaps in the local news landscape for a number of reasons:

Efficiency: The Internet is simply more efficient and cost-effective than any other medium available to a local entity. While print still provides newspapers with a lion's share of their revenue, that share is continually declining, and we can plan for the future without having to drag a dying paper product with us. Especially in local investigative reporting where there are few travel costs, investigative reporting is more about mission than it is about cost.

Mission: Reporters step into this newsroom with a very clear mission: produce in-depth and investigative reporting. They don't have to worry about being a paper of record, covering a celebrity trial, rushing to a harmless house fire, or figuring out what direction their general-interest publication is going. They learn how to let the small stuff slide in order to go after the more ambitious stories. They don't touch anything if it isn't a clearly local story. This is our best route to making the biggest impact.

Measuring Success: As a nonprofit, our success is measured in one simple

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voice of san diego.org
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Audit Finds 'Fraud,' Details SEDC Problems Beyond Bonuses
The audit paints the picture of a public agency where top officials consistently resorted to creative and clandestine means to boost their own pay and perks.
» By ANDREW DONOHUE and WILL CARLESS | Sept. 11
» SEDC Audit (pdf)
» Redevelopment Gone Wrong: The SEDC Investigations
» Audit: SEDC Lease Is 'Conflict' -- 11:49 a.m.
» SEDC Audit: 'Inappropriate' Spending -- 11:23 a.m.

THIS JUST IN
Education Plans at Children's Museum:
The space originally earmarked for a charter school is now rotating among visiting schools. » Sept. 11 -- 9:27 am
Court Denies Port:
Proposal for massive development at 10th Ave. will go on ballot. » Sept. 11 -- 9:22 am
Personal DNA Test Deal:
A genetic screening company slashes prices, but health officials are skeptical. » Sept. 10 -- 3:46 pm

Helen Edison Lecturer Donald Kennedy
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Jury Slaps City with \$8 Million Police Misconduct Verdict
Panel finds that officer was negligent when he knocked man to the ground in 2006.
» By DAVID WASHBURN | Sept. 11

Iconic Downtown Project Scrapped in Scandal's Midst
'Fundamental betrayal of trust' dooms \$409-million skyscraper proposal.
» By ROB DAVIS | Sept. 11
» Nancy Graham's Changing Story

Today's COMMENTARY
Elections and Wealth
The biggest divide in the country on display recently was not between delegates of the two different parties, but between those delegates and the general population.
» By James O. Goldsborough | Sept. 11

FROM LETTERS
Think Again, Mayor
Leave the district attorney out of the SEDC investigation.

Election Central
What Would

metric: the impact of our stories. Dedicated journalists forever have measured their success by the impact of their stories. But their organizations as a whole have always had different measurements. Quality journalism in many of those is important. But so is returning a profit to the owner or shareholders. And in today's market, when newspaper Web sites are scratching and clawing for every hit in order to raise advertising revenues, those goals of providing meaningful journalism and profits can directly collide. We don't have to make money for anyone, just make our budget. And when we go to our board of directors every quarter, we have a very simple question to answer: What was the impact of your stories?

More Revenue Streams: Taking the very long view, we have more revenue streams available to us than do most media operations. We have the nonprofit streams long used by public broadcasting: foundation grants, corporate sponsors, and membership drives.

Civically engaged San Diegans are realizing that journalism at its core is a public service institution and, as it is threatened, they're going to have to fund it like they've funded so many other causes they care about, just as they do the museum or soup kitchen. We also accept online advertising. While this is a small pillar of our budget, we see it as a significant potential growth area as we invest more resources into drawing advertisers to our site and the value we offer becomes better defined by the marketplace.

Starting From Scratch: We were fortunate to be original and autonomous—not an offshoot of a daily newspaper or other established news organization. We don't have legacy habits, costs or debts. We've never had to be everything to everyone, nor have we ever tried to be. We don't need to try to find room in our budget to still do local in-depth government reporting while also have a staff-produced society column or cars section or things that can be handled by national publications such as movie

reviews, reviews of personal electronic devices, or coverage of presidential politics.

Deciding What Stories to Cover

We don't try to be what the newspaper used to be—and is still trying desperately to be—a general-interest collection of things. It's easy to get stretched a mile wide and an inch deep, especially when you're operating on limited resources. People every day always want to know why we don't cover this or that.

We don't try to be what the newspaper used to be—and is still trying desperately to be—a general-interest collection of things.

From our first day our job has been to fill the gaps between what people want from their local media and what they have. So how do we decide what we cover? This is a key question, and the answer is likely different in every community, but the two principles that guide our decision-making are firm.

1. We cover something only if we can do it better than anyone else or if no one else is doing it (which, by default, would make us the best at it).
2. We look at what issues aren't getting sufficient coverage in the local media.

In San Diego, we've gradually identified those as the cornerstone quality of life issues. Those aren't static, though. As local media outlets continue to shrink at an alarming rate, the gaps that we were created to fill keep expanding.

As we decide how to handle this

situation, again we find benefit and direction in our mission. Throughout 2007 and 2008, there were many distractions in San Diego, as in any big city, that could have proved devastating to any long-term investigative projects. A less disciplined approach would have had us running around with the media pack from daily press conferences that can bog down a beat to the scandalous trial of the day, only to duplicate what other news outlets were already covering. Despite cuts, there are still plenty of reporters in town doing this kind of coverage.

But time and time again, we reminded ourselves to stay focused—focused on doing something special, on making sure we added something to a community that needed it.

It was during that period that we performed arguably the most significant and sustained investigative journalism to emerge from any outlet in the city. We broke open scandals at two local redevelopment agencies that have led to criminal charges, scrapped development projects, and complete overhauls at the agencies. We exposed the police chief's lengthy history of misrepresenting crime statistics, detailed a school official's financial misdeeds, and unveiled a group of other investigations that never would have been told without the emergence of a new local publication.

Again, it wasn't a huge investment that produced this. It wasn't a legacy newspaper that dedicated dozens of writers and millions of dollars to these stories. It was a simple mission pursued efficiently.

Our goals now are to expand to continue to fill as much of the growing gap as efficiently as possible. And while some, like the police chief, finance guru, or ousted redevelopment agency presidents might not be entirely excited about that, San Diego residents are, judging from the enthusiasm among our donors and readers. ■

Andrew Donohue, as editor, and CEO Scott Lewis direct voiceofsandiego.org, a four-year-old nonprofit online daily dedicated to local in-depth and investigative reporting.

Crowdfunded Reporting: Readers Pay for Stories to Be Told

‘Reporting for Spot.U.S, where money directly changes hands, is the same as reporting any story for Wired.com. For Spot.U.S, the ethical promise inheres in the transparency of the funding.’

BY ALEXIS MADRIGAL

It seems to be a time-honored journalistic tradition to launch partnerships over beer. So whatever else David Cohn and I might have gone on to do differently, know that some things are still sacred among reporters.

That night, as I heard his Spot.U.S idea, I knew I wanted to be involved. Floating around the San Francisco reporting scene, I’d heard plenty of ideas for new Web sites, but they all relied on the same advertising model—Punch-a-Monkey ad sales. Few people were thinking about new business models, particularly one requiring people to donate money to pay reporters to do stories.

So happens that a year before, I talked with a very smart, young engineer who spun some yarns about how corn-based fuels get from Iowa fields to California refineries. He’d convinced me that there was a story in the fragility of the bio-fuels transportation infrastructure in our state and that ethanol’s role in our state’s energy system could bear deeper examination. At any minute, this engineer said, a derailed train could make the whole enterprise a very difficult proposition.

The story was a little too local for my day job at Wired and a little too technical for San Francisco Magazine. It stuck with me, however, as a story in search of a home. When I’d hear a train whistle or read another overheated story about biofuels, I’d say, “You know, I should write that story.”

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S P O T . U S

Start a Story Browse Stories

Story: **Ethanol Could be a Weak Link in State's Energy Network**

Story by Alexis Madrigal
Located in Bay Area

Fact Check Editor
David Cohn
Located in Bay Area

What happens if, all of a sudden, you need to change the entire energy infrastructure on which California's transportation system runs?

Most Californians probably haven't noticed, but that's exactly what a combination of Midwestern farmers, Big Oil companies, railroad operators, and fuel terminal owners have done over the last decade.

How can California's energy infrastructure evolve? How did it fair trying to adapt for the increase in ethanol?

History of this story

PITCH: **Ethanol Could be a Weak Link in State's Energy Network**

Posted Sunday, December 14, 2008 by Alexis Madrigal in Bay Area

California's biofuels usage is expected to jump nearly 600 million gallons over the next couple of years, but the ethanol supply is already stretched to its limits. Almost all of... [Read More >](#)

Keywords

ethanol,

The first Spot.U.S story involved an investigation of the role ethanol will play in California’s energy network. Reported by Madrigal, 13 supporters donated \$250 in 11 days to enable him to report this story. Six months later, investigative proposals on Spot.U.S were receiving an average of \$750 donated by 35 to 40 supporters.

So I wrote up a quick pitch for Spot.U.S, and to my great surprise in 11 days various people had come to the Web site, read my proposal, and decided to fund my story.

People—OK, only other journalists—often ask me, “Did you think about who was funding your story?” Sure, I did. I wanted to thank them by providing the most honest reporting I could. Even if I’d wanted to write what the funders wanted, I don’t think I could have. It would have taken a lot of research just to figure out their angle on biofuels. As I told a Dutch weekly when they interviewed me about

it, “There was no John ‘I Love Ethanol’ Smith on the [funders] list.” And besides, this was my story that they’d agreed to fund, and I was the one going to report it. None of my funders contacted me or in any way suggested that I push the story in a given direction.

It’s easy to take potshots at Spot.U.S in a vacuum. Wouldn’t it be great if reporters could be paid by unmarked bills falling from the sky? Then we could write about anything we wanted. But there is a monetary system that supports journalists, which can’t be ignored, even though that seems to be the basis for a lot of old-school ethical thought.

Take my day job. Wired is an advertising-supported publication and Wired Science, my particular section, often gets ads purchased by the same companies, Shell and Chevron, mostly. Every day I see their ads next to my stories. Sometimes, the colors of our logo (fortuitously) even match their ads. At the end of the day, I know who pays my salary, and it’s only nominally Conde Nast. But that doesn’t change the responsibility that I have to our readers to report from as close to the locus of truth as I can.

Reporting for Spot.U.S, where money directly changes hands, is the same as

reporting any story for Wired.com. For Spot.U.s, the ethical promise inheres in the transparency of the funding. In traditional reporting, my ethics supposedly remain uncompromised because of the opacity of the firewall between our advertising sales team and me. But that firewall is narrow; it doesn't take much to peek around and see the inner workings of the machine staring back at me from a set of Shell ads deployed on my stories about climate change.

Granted, with my ethanol story, I had it relatively easy. I only made

\$250, and the story I was trying to tell wasn't really about the good or evil of ethanol. It was about how the ethanol system works—illuminating facts about government regulations, the number of unit trains carrying ethanol, and future mandates. This left open further debate about the substance's merits.

I wasn't investigating the Oakland police shooting of Oscar Grant, that's for sure. But the principles that I had to hold close—that journalists and fact finders of all stripes have to hold close—remained the same. Get my boots on

the ground and ask people who know. Follow my nose for the truth. Don't trust everything I'm told. Act in good faith. No matter who paid for what, those who read the product depend on an individual reporter and his or her conscience to report the truth.

If we lose faith that reporters can do that, we've got bigger problems than crowdfunded investigative journalism. ■

Alexis Madrigal reports on energy and science at Wired.com.

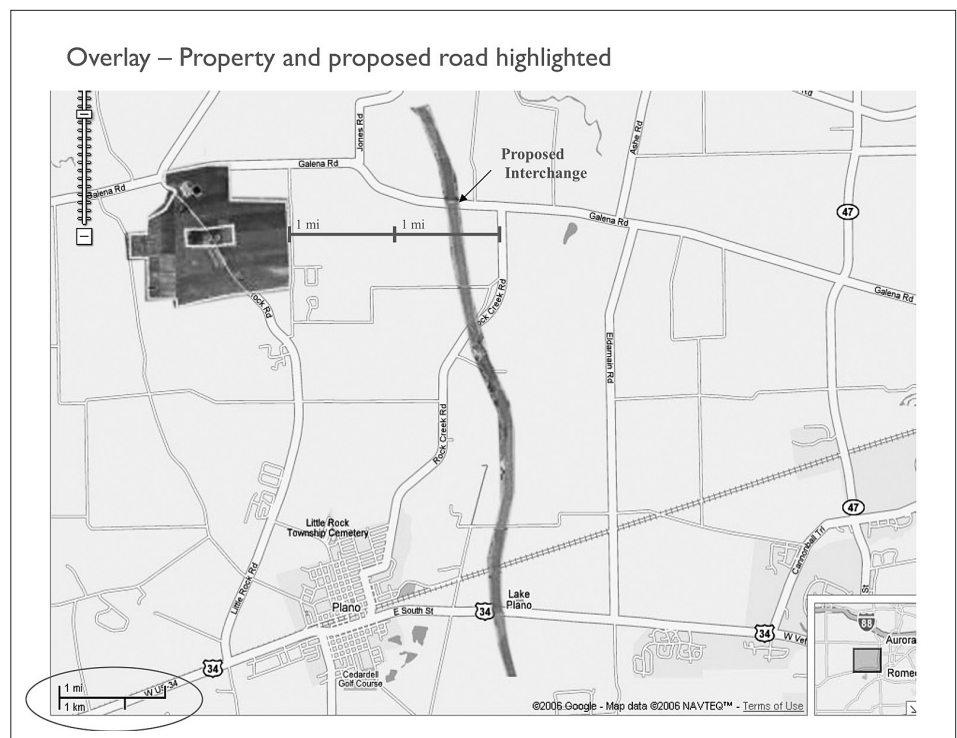
A Digital Vision of Where Journalism and Government Will Intersect

'... the journalistic process of assembling information and connecting the dots to inform tough questions will be easier.'

BY BILL ALLISON

Soon after I came to work for the Sunlight Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that uses the power of the Internet to bring greater transparency to government, I started to investigate the connection between a multimillion dollar Illinois highway project and some land owned by U.S. Representative Dennis Hastert, then the Speaker of the House. Applying tried and true investigative techniques from my time spent at The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Center for Public Integrity, I cultivated local sources, dug through public records, accumulated copies of deeds, plat maps, and Illinois Department of Transportation road plans. In time, I was able to determine that the cryptic "1/4 share in 69 acres (Plano, IL)" Hastert listed on his 2005 financial disclosure form was a parcel of property a few miles from a proposed exit along the route of a highway project called the Prairie Parkway.

Hastert had funded the parkway



On the day Allison posted his story, a reader combined three maps to create this one, which illustrates the proximity of Hastert's property to the Prairie Parkway project for which he earmarked funds. *Image created by Tony Tyner.*

with a \$207 million earmark that, thanks to his powerful position, he was able to insert at the last minute—with no review by his colleagues—into the 2005 transportation bill, known by the acronym SAFETEA-LU. A few months after securing funding for the highway, he sold his land to a real estate developer, making a neat two million dollar profit on property he held for less than a year.

The Sunlight Foundation published a story showing how the House speaker personally benefited from his legislative handiwork.

Digital Public Access

A few months later, Andrew Rasiej, one of our senior technology consultants, gave a talk to a group of state and local politicians about Sunlight's mission and work. He mentioned all the digging and meticulous spadework Sunlight used to break the Hastert story. Then he asked the audience to imagine something different: Suppose that the paper financial disclosure forms on which members of Congress each year must list their financial assets, debts, transactions and sources of income were instead put on the Internet with technology that made the information easily accessible for members of the public to view.

In this scenario, Hastert would not have listed a "1/4 share in 69 acres (Plano, IL.)" on a piece of paper filed away in the basement of the Capitol. Instead, his financial disclosure form would include a Google map showing the exact location of the land he owned. (It's worth noting that ethics rules require members to disclose the location of property they own "sufficient to permit its identification, e.g., street address or plat and map location.") Similarly, instead of the bland "U.S. I-80 to I-88 North-South Connector" line item in a transportation bill conference committee report, that \$207 million highway earmark



would also be put on a Google map, complete with the name of its sponsor and the amount of taxpayer money committed to it.

If this happened, anyone could overlay on a single map the two sets of data and see all of the nation's road projects funded by congressional earmarks and all real estate investments of those same members of Congress.

Put aside the obvious hurdles for a moment—chief among them government's reluctance to publish data in user-friendly formats. Try to envision what reporting would be like with lots of mashed-up (easily linked) data sets floating around.

What if digitized data and online reporting tools allowed reporters to cross-reference regional unemployment numbers, housing foreclosures, and bank reports to the FDIC with localized spending transactions from the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) and the stimulus bill in only a few minutes? Very quickly, data-driven stories would emerge; one might be about a large, politically connected bank based in one city using TARP funds to expand by buying up smaller, sound banks in other cities that had avoided writing risky mortgages. Or perhaps an enterprising reporter would find that while her metro area suffered through double-digit unemployment, the bulk of the federal aid coming in was directed not to joblessness benefits and retraining, but to restoring footpaths in area parks.

We're getting closer and closer to this being able to happen every day. Public demand for government transparency—for easy access to

basic information about how government does everything from spend money to count votes—has never been higher; John McCain and Barack Obama pledged greater government transparency during their presidential campaigns. Meanwhile, new and improved technologies are putting more information at the fingertips of reporters faster than

ever before.

Applying Technology to Journalism

Machines can translate paper documents into electronic formats, allowing reporters to quickly search them for key words and phrases. When the Senate released the hundreds of pages of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act—the bailout bill—in 2008, Sunlight parsed the document and put it on our Web site (PublicMarkup.org) the same day. Its searchable format allows users to quickly navigate and even annotate the document. Now, in 2009, as Congress considered the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—better known as the stimulus bill—an ad hoc coalition of government watchdogs and fiscal conservatives did the same thing as fast as we did without our help on a site called ReadTheStimulus.org.

Web-based platforms now exist for building databases and cleaning data that nonspecialists, of whom I am one, can use for free. I built a pair of databases using Dabbledb.com; a simple one listed donors to Bill Clinton's presidential library. A more complicated one tracks congressional sponsors, beneficiaries and lobbyists of various trade bills that reduce tariffs (that is, taxes) on specific imported items for specific companies. Visualization tools let even an artistically challenged guy like me plug a bunch of numbers into a site like IBM's Many Eyes and see trend lines on a graph, concentrations on a map, or pick out the really big numbers using a bubble gram.

As tools become more sophisticated and more data become available from government—and perhaps the private sector, if greater transparency is required from banks and corporations in the wake of the financial crisis—the investigative benefits experienced through computer-assisted reporting will become the norm. Access to data and easy-to-use tools to show quickly what it means will let reporters question those in power by bringing with them a tremendous amount of empirical information. And as reporters

look for trends in their communities, they will be able to sort through much more data than they now can and use it to spot them.

None of this means it will be any easier to get a politician under the spotlight of scrutiny to answer a tough question. But the journalistic process of assembling information and connecting the dots to inform tough questions will be easier. By learning when and how to use these tools, journalists will no doubt be able to produce more substantive and infor-

mative stories, and they can do so at a time when the financial resources available for this kind of reporting are diminishing. ■

Bill Allison, a senior fellow at the Sunlight Foundation (www.sunlight-foundation.com), was an investigative journalist at The Center for Public Integrity for nine years after working at The Philadelphia Inquirer as a researcher for Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporters Donald L. Barrett and James B. Steele.

Tracking Toxics When the Data Are Polluted

How computational journalism can uncover what polluters would prefer to hide.

BY JAMES T. HAMILTON

Each year the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) program releases information from more than 20,000 plants on their self-reported emission and transfer of nearly 650 chemicals.

In the early years of the program, the failure of a plant to file a TRI report arose more from ignorance about the reporting requirements than evasion of the law. Those guilty of nonreporting tended to be small facilities releasing small amounts of toxics. The pollution reports did attract attention from investors, causing stock prices for some firms to decline when the data became public. For companies releasing carcinogens into the air, plants whose emissions generated higher than expected cases of cancer ended up reducing their emissions more.

But the nature of the surrounding community affected these decisions. The higher the voter turnout in an area around a plant, a proxy for residents' political power, the greater the facility's reported reductions in air carcinogens. Yet not all the reports of pollution reductions may be real. When you compare TRI reports of pol-

lution releases with actual measures of nearby pollution, for heavily regulated chemicals such as lead and nitric acid it appears that firms are not accurately reporting their emissions.

It took me more than 10 years of study to generate these results about the TRI program, which are summarized in my book "Regulation Through Revelation: The Origin, Politics, and Impacts of the Toxics Release Inventory Program." Originally, to study the TRI I had to stay up late at night so that I could mount large tapes on a university's mainframe computers and run regression analyses when computer time was relatively cheap. Now the TRI data are freely available online at www.epa.gov/tri, and the calculations that took me days can be done with a click on the EPA site. The easy availability of data makes the TRI a likely source for environmentalists, community groups, and regulators.

Journalists have also used the TRI since its inception. USA Today ran a series when the TRI data were first released in 1989 based on a three-month investigation and extensive computerized analysis. The rapid advances in computer power, data availability, and algorithms mean that

TRI data may now serve as inputs into a newly evolving form of reporting—computational journalism.

I view computational journalism as the combination of data, algorithms and knowledge from social science to yield information that can supplement and, in the future, substitute for part of journalism's watchdog function. By supplement, I mean that analyses like text mining and cluster analyses can generate electronic tips that lower the cost to reporters of deciding what and where to investigate. By substitute, I mean that eventually some watchdog articles will be written by algorithm in a way that would allow readers to see a customized, personalized article about how a policy problem is playing out in their neighborhood, block or lives.

How might this work? Consider how a reporter could investigate the local chemical data provided by the TRI.

Statistical Analysis: Some numbers follow Benford's Law, which means that if you look at the distribution of first digits, 1s outnumber 2s, which outnumber 3s, and so on. Work in forensic accounting shows that when people fudge their numbers they forget

to do it in a way that replicates Benford's Law. This means that analysis of first digits is a way to check the accuracy of self-reported data. In looking at the actual level of pollution near plants reporting TRI emissions, Scott de Marchi and I found that for the chemicals such as lead and nitric acid, the measured pollution concentrations around plants followed Benford's Law. But the self-reported data did not. This suggests that for these two heavily regulated chemicals, TRI reports may not be accurate. The TRI form actually provides a name and phone number if the public has questions about a plant's reports, which could be a starting point for reporters investigating the accuracy of TRI data.

No change: If facilities are not serious about their pollution estimates, they may fall back on a simple rule of thumb—simply report the same pollution figures each year. I got the idea for this test after reading David Barstow and Lowell Bergman's Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation of workplace injuries and deaths at McWane manufacturing plants. Thinking that a company willing to violate workplace regulations so egregiously would not be likely to invest much time in estimating its pollution releases, I looked and found that TRI reports at McWane at times simply remained the same from one year to the next. When de Marchi and I checked nationwide, we found that plants where pollution levels stayed the same across years were likely underreporting their actual emissions. Journalists looking for underreporting can start by seeing which local polluters report the same figures year to year.

Visualization: I have found across environmental programs that even after you take into account income and education levels, areas with higher voter turnout get better levels of environmental protection. The higher the voter turnout in an area, the greater the reduction in air carcinogens, the more stringent the Superfund cleanups at hazardous waste sites, and the

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Select State: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii

Select County: (Choose state first)

Select City: (Choose state first)

Select Watershed:
 Subregion
 Catalog unit

Enter ZIP Code:

EPA Region: Select EPA Region

Enter Latitude And Longitude:
 Decimal Degree Format (e.g.: latitude= 40.7833333, longitude= -73.96667)
 Latitude: Longitude:
 Degree-Minute-Second Format (e.g.: latitude=40°47'10.11", longitude=-73°58'05.12")
 Latitude: Longitude:

Facility
 Conterminous USA

Tools found on this EPA Web site enable people to find polluting facilities in their neighborhoods. In the future, algorithms could use this information to "write the story of your local environment." —J.T.H.

lower the chance that hazardous waste processing capacity will be expanded in the area. One way for online news sites to show the relation between pollution and politics is to show how voting rates differ around polluting facilities. In a state such as North Carolina, you can purchase from the State Board of Elections the voter registration file for the entire state for \$25. This shows the addresses of registered voters and whether they turn out at the polls, too. Voter address data can be used to create maps that show how political activity varies across streets and neighborhoods.

Mapping: The TRI forms provide the address for where polluting facilities ship their toxics for disposal. The records generated by the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act contain similar information for where non-manufacturing firms send their waste. In my environmental policy classes, we track where (radioactive) medical waste from Duke ends up. Such data would allow reporters to show whose toxics are ending up in your local area and what neighborhoods in the United States end up receiving waste shipped from your area.

Matching: To find people who should have reported TRI emissions but did not, regulators initially compared local business directories and manufacturing lists with the facility name and addresses of TRI filers. In some industries, the production process almost by definition would entail the release of particular chemicals. The easy availability today of detailed information on plants and facilities makes this a matching process that journalists can conduct on their own. This would be especially helpful in discovering violators when programs are new and word of requirements has not traveled widely.

Personalization: Right now the EPA collects pollution data from multiple programs into the Envirofacts database and merges environmental data with community information in the EnviroMapper function. In the future, algorithms could take this information and write the story of your local environment, letting you know likely exposures from different facilities, types of enforcement actions recently taken at nearby plants, trends over time in local public health, pictures of emitting facilities, and how these

pollution patterns compare across time and across other areas in your city.

Data from the TRI can at times be controversial, imperfect and (strategically) slanted. Yet as the field of computational journalism develops,

the use of algorithms and knowledge from social science should allow reporters to use data such as the TRI to lower the cost of generating watchdog coverage and raise interest in political issues by personalizing the impact of public policies. ■

James T. Hamilton is the Charles S. Sydnor Professor of Public Policy Studies at Duke University and the director of the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy.

An Investigative Reporting Partnership: A Serendipitous Collaboration

‘At Northeastern University in Boston, where I joined the faculty in 2007, students in my investigative reporting seminars have produced 11 Page One stories for The Boston Globe in just 20 months.’

BY WALTER V. ROBINSON

It is a journalistic paradox. Newspapers and other media are shedding reporters and editors by the thousands, with worrisome ramifications: The press watchdog, so essential to a functioning democracy, doesn’t bark as much or as often. Yet despite the newsroom carnage, journalism schools are brimming with fledgling reporters convinced that career opportunities in the news business are boundless.

In those crosscurrents, there is opportunity for collaboration in almost any city with a newspaper and a college or university journalism program. For news organizations that can no longer afford to do much enterprise and investigative reporting, journalism students eager for experience—and bylines—can help fill the void. And their work can be overseen by journalism professors who most often have substantial news credentials.

At Northeastern University in Boston, where I joined the faculty in 2007, students in my investigative reporting seminars have produced 11 Page One stories for The Boston Globe in just 20 months. What’s more, the university’s School of Journalism has started a regionwide First Amendment Center to fight for public records for news organizations that no longer have the money to wage those battles.

This enterprise, however, is not for the academic faint-of-heart or for risk-averse local editors. But the potential rewards are well worth the effort: students learn reporting techniques that will help make them valuable postgraduate hires; newspapers find the extra reporting firepower a god-

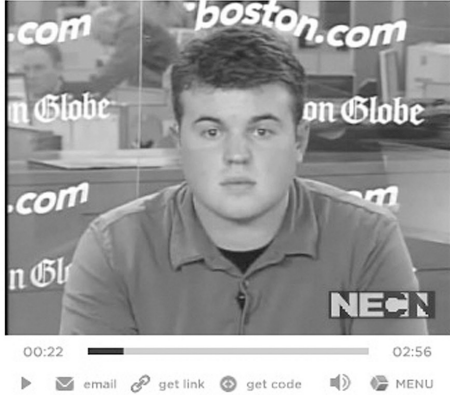
send. And there is a payoff, too, for a public justifiably concerned about what the loss of in-depth reporting in so many newsrooms might mean for them.

My graduate and undergraduate students try to outdo one another with their doggedness. In two succes-

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A parking deal for the chosen ones

City-owned space used by the well connected



A parking deal for the chosen ones
(NECN: Boston, Mass.) - For more than a generation, it has been perhaps Boston’s most covert bargain, a city-owned parking lot in the North End where the lucky, the affluent and the politically connected had assigned parking for just \$55 a mo...

By Kate Augusto and Matt Collette
Globe Correspondents / December 15, 2008

Matt Collette, a Northeastern University journalism student, talks on TV station NECN about his investigative reporting for a Boston Globe story in which he and another student uncovered a sweetheart deal for the politically connected in a city-owned parking lot.

sive semesters, students spent weeks poring through voluminous records in county courthouses as part of two separate investigations of the commonwealth's court system. One of those articles prompted reforms to protect the rights of the elderly. The second story forced the courts to change the way they treat adults who are developmentally disabled.


Last year, weeks of database reporting by two graduate students resulted in the exposure of a disability pension scam involving more than 100 Boston firefighters; those articles prompted an ongoing federal grand jury investigation. In another seminar, four students produced an exhaustive Sunday article about many Boston high-end restaurants that had been cited for serious health code violations by city officials who chose to keep the results private.

This Northeastern University-Boston Globe collaboration was not born of necessity. Although the Globe has made substantial staff cuts, Editor Martin Baron remains deeply committed to investigative reporting. Globe reporters routinely dig out important stories. And the investigative unit, the Spotlight Team, has not been affected by staff reductions. [See the story on page 52 about a recent Spotlight Team investigation at The Boston Globe.] When I was assistant managing editor for investigations at the Globe and worked for Marty, I ran the Spotlight Team. I left the paper after 34 years to teach investigative reporting, but I didn't want my students learning in a laboratory. Marty quickly realized the potential of a partnership. So, too, did Stephen D. Burgard, the director of Northeastern University's School of Journalism.

In Boston, there are so many investigative story prospects that even a standard-issue class assignment can bear fruit. One such assignment requires students to do soup-to-nuts public records scrubs on public figures to acquaint them with the myriad public records that can be plumbed for just about any story. Last year, in delving through those records, two students turned up a pattern of questionable

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, URBAN AFFAIRS, AND PUBLIC POLICY

Northeastern University



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A partnership between the New England First Amendment Coalition and Northeastern University

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- ❖ WHO WE ARE
- ❖ FIRST AMENDMENT NEWS
- ❖ GUIDE TO PUBLIC ACCESS LAWS
- ❖ FIRST AMENDMENT HOTLINE
- ❖ LINKS TO RESOURCES
- ❖ CONTACT US

First Amendment Hotline

WHEN YOU NEED HELP

At the First Amendment Center, we are committed to using our resources, to include the expertise of our staff - and, when the need arises, First Amendment lawyers - to advise citizens, journalists and news organizations when they run afoul of public officials who block access to public records or meetings.

If you need our help, and cannot find the information you seek on our website, we urge you to contact us. Here are some of the ways we can help:

OUR ADVICE. Most often, the Center's staff director, members of Northeastern's experienced journalism faculty or board members of the New England First Amendment Coalition can advise you on how to obtain the public access the law requires in your state.

OUR ASSISTANCE. If you need further help, the Center may lend its expertise to help you navigate your way through the Freedom of Information process.

OUR BULLY PULPIT. Our website is a region-wide attention-getter - for anyone who needs access to public information; for government officials, elected and appointed, who have to interpret public access laws; for opinion leaders who care about First Amendment issues; and for news organizations that monitor our website for egregious cases in which the public's access to its government is being illegally blocked. That means the Center's website can be a powerful tool when widespread public attention to a First Amendment issue is warranted.

OUR LEGAL ADVICE. When important issues of broad public import arise, the Center's advisory board of First Amendment attorneys will offer legal advice to protect our First Amendment rights.

If you need help, email us: firstamendment@neu.edu. Or call the Center at 617-373-5120.

New England First Amendment Center
School of Journalism
Northeastern University
102 Lake Hall
Boston, MA 02115-5000
Telephone: (617) 373-5120 or
(617) 373-4198

New England First Amendment Coalition
P.O. Box 15
Niantic, CT 06357

business dealings by a top fundraiser for Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick. The governor, the Globe subsequently reported, abruptly jettisoned the fundraiser when the Globe asked about the business dealings.

The university's New England First Amendment Center, formed in collaboration with a group of New England editors, is still in its formative stages. We have a Web site—<http://neu.edu/firstamendment>—that updates news on public records and open meeting law issues. The center also hosts a hotline to help reporters fight for access to public records that make for important watchdog journalism. Few newspapers, however, can afford to go to court to force the issue of obtaining critical public documents when access to them has been blocked. So our center has enlisted help from students at Northeastern University's School of Law. They've written the briefs. And with pro bono help from a First

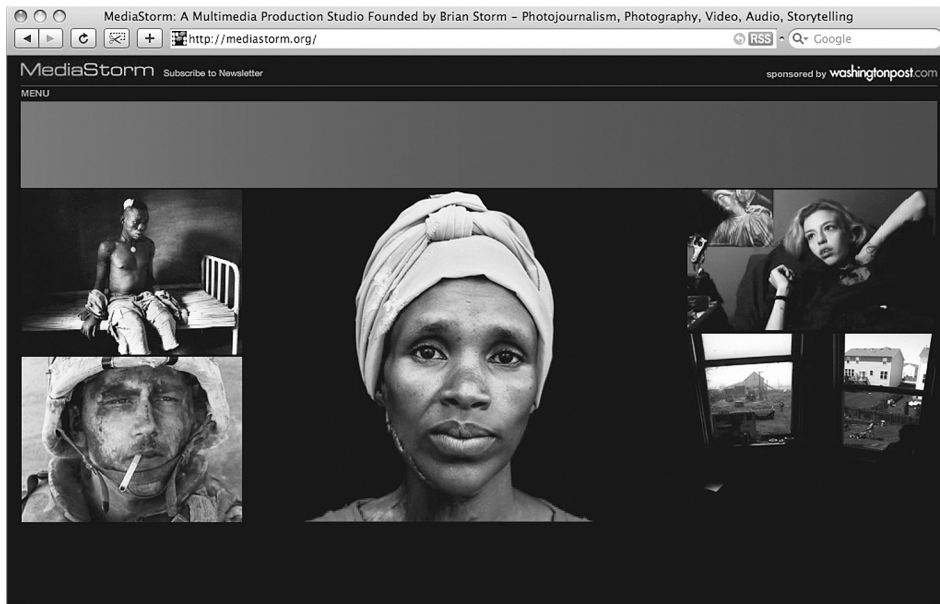
Amendment lawyer, we've filed our first lawsuit on behalf of a midsized Massachusetts newspaper.

Our modest start at Northeastern can be replicated by any adventurous journalism program. Journalism teachers need not limit themselves to wringing their hands at the plight of the news business. Nor should students need to wait for newsroom internships or graduation to do reporting that gets published in a metro newspaper—reporting that makes a difference. And savvy newspaper editors ought to welcome the help. ■

Walter V. Robinson is Distinguished Professor of Journalism at Northeastern University. For 34 years he was a reporter and editor at The Boston Globe. In 2003, he and his Spotlight Team reporters won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for the Globe's coverage of the clergy sexual abuse scandal.

Long-Form Multimedia Journalism: Quality Is the Key Ingredient

As a producer of social documentary projects—viewed on digital platforms—Brian Storm talks about the excitement of doing journalism in this way, at this time.



MediaStorm describes its mission as ushering in the next generation of multimedia storytelling by publishing social documentary projects incorporating photojournalism, interactivity, animation, audio and video for distribution across multiple media.

Brian Storm is the president of MediaStorm, a production studio located in Brooklyn, New York, which publishes multimedia social documentary projects at www.mediastorm.org and produces them for other news organizations. In an interview I did with Brian on December 30, 2008, he spoke about how he envisions the future of long-form, multimedia journalism from the perspective of its creation, distribution and economic viability. An edited version of our conversation follows.

Melissa Ludtke: In a commencement speech that you gave in December to graduates of the University of Missouri School of Journalism,¹ you let them know that you are optimistic and passionate about journalism. Can you describe where your optimism comes from at a time when we hear so much about the enormous challenges facing journalism and this despair being expressed by so many journalists?

Brian Storm: The journalism industry is not in despair, it's simply going

through a redefinition. I feel like we're living in such an epic moment, a transformational moment. Think about the big stories happening right now: climate change, new president, and an economy that is totally falling apart, and as journalists, these are big stories. It's a great journalistic moment to be in this business. The big opportunity is that the tools are so powerful that anyone can create high production value content and distribute it globally. I don't need to own a printing press or a television station, but I can be on television through new distribution devices like Apple TV or TiVo. It's an absolutely revolutionary moment, and I feel incredibly empowered as a journalist. As a storyteller, I feel empowered to do the best work of my career right now, even though I don't have the big mainstream media infrastructure sitting underneath me that I used to have.² Now I can do the kind of stories that I've always wanted to do without any limitations.

Ludtke: Let's talk about the other part of the equation—the passion for journalism. There is so much tension now, with journalists trying to find a way to earn a decent living using new media tools and distribution. Where do you see the passion fitting into that part of the equation?

Storm: I certainly can understand why journalists at big media companies

¹ Storm's commencement speech can be read at www.mediastorm.org/blog/?p=512.

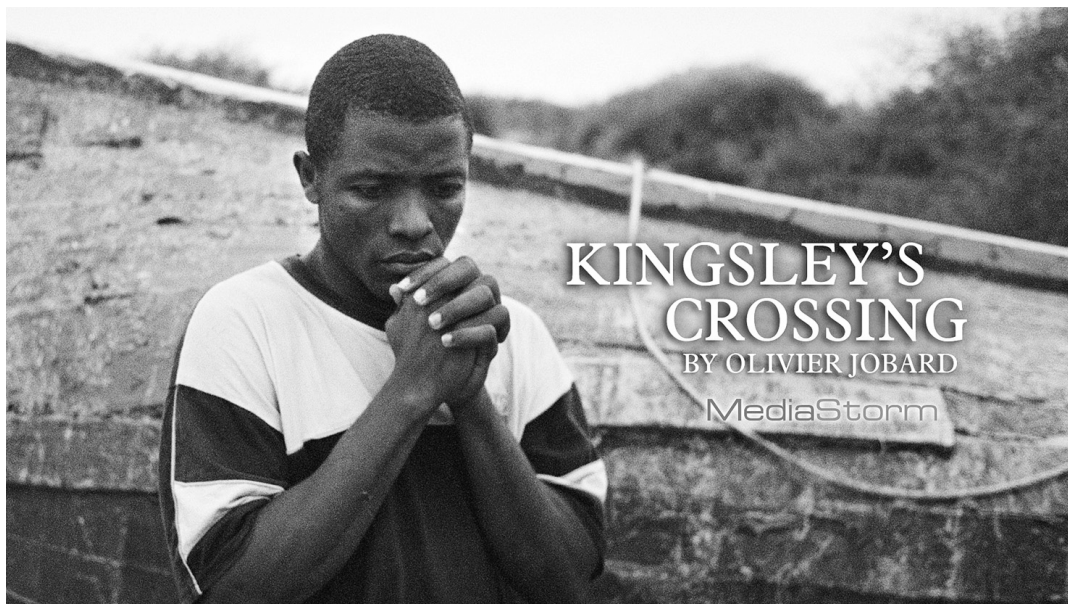
² Before he founded MediaStorm, he was vice president of news, multimedia and assignment services at Corbis, a digital media agency, and director of multimedia at MSNBC.com.

are depressed. Their passion for journalism I don't think has changed at all. It's the business environment that is creating this chaos. Everyone is being asked to do everything and nobody is being allowed to do in-depth quality journalism.

Ludtke: Where do you see the passion that you bring to journalism emerging? You've talked about the difficulties and challenges that a lot of journalists are facing today. How do you see passion being imbued into this?

Storm: For years I've been saying it's time for us to take journalism back. To take it out of the business development role and back into the world of why we got into journalism in the first place. We have to remember back to the time when we decided, "I want to be a journalist." Why did we want to be a journalist? Did we wake up one day and say, "I want to make a pile of money?" I don't think any of us did that. That's not what drives us. We're curious and want to learn about the world. It's an incredible gift to enter into someone's life and tell their story. What makes me passionate is that I feel now, even though the fiscal environment is way out of whack, the ability to do stories at the level that I always aspire to do them is here; it's right in front of us in such a profound way right now. With the ease of distribution and the powerful new production tools, journalists can practice their craft with independence.

Ludtke: You touched on this, but let me explore it with you a little bit more. In many newsrooms now, reporters are being expected to use a variety of new media tools. They're being trained in sort of a helter-skelter way to tell stories across several platforms on the Web, and also for many, still in print. Having this expectation of producing this kind



"Kingsley's Crossing," by Olivier Jobard: A 23-year-old lifeguard from the impoverished town of Limbe, Cameroon, dreams of a better life in Europe. He embarks on a harrowing journey that takes him halfway across Africa, and photojournalist Jobard documents the passage. See the project at www.mediastorm.org/0010.htm.

of quality reporting with video, audio and print on stories seems very tough for them to meet. Yet at MediaStorm, your approach is very different. Can you describe how you see multimedia storytelling working best to produce high-quality journalism?

Storm: You sneaked into your question the word "quality," so I'd have to disagree with you on that. You said newsrooms are asking reporters and journalists to do everything, but the word 'quality' doesn't come into that conversation. The phrase that comes into that conversation is "do more with less." It's not a journalistic decision; it's not a decision being driven around telling better stories. It's the decision being driven by creating stories in ways that are more economical, more fiscally responsible.

Ludtke: By having one person do more.

Storm: Yes. I don't know one person operating at a high level who is an independent one-man band who is telling the kind of stories that you could tell in a collaborative environment. There's just no way. In every project

we do, several people collaborate to make that story happen: the designer, the producer, the executive producer, and the journalist who covered the story in the first place. What we're trying to create are universal stories that are not perishable. That's the core element of our strategy. We publish a story in 2006, and a certain amount of people see it when it comes out, and the blogosphere takes over and they promote it like crazy; it's all viral, all word of mouth. It doesn't matter if you watch this story in 2006 or 2009. It's still relevant and still a powerful story. Those are the kinds of stories that we're looking for—projects that are not perishable but will endure for years. That's a different editorial focus than a daily product, and it takes a team of experts with a variety of skills to pull it off at a high level.

Ludtke: Your training originally came in visual journalism, but can you talk a bit about how audio is best employed as a storytelling tool as part of visual media?

Storm: For me, audio has always been the extra element that helps make a story work. One of my favorite examples

of this is a project about “The Marlboro Marine” from Iraq. His image became an absolute icon. Everyone in the world saw it; everyone perceived it as the macho, badass American. The reality is that that’s exactly wrong. His life is an example of incredible posttraumatic stress disorder, which about 30 percent of our soldiers coming home are suffering from. Having [the Marine] James Blake Miller’s words with the pictures allows him to tell you the reality of the situation. It gives a context, and that makes the visual images much more powerful. In this case, we did an interview with the photographer, Luis

new media revolution that we’re going through is not about some reinvention of storytelling or the journalistic creed. Ethical and accurate information will still rule. Instead, you talk about how much it is about the access people have to the powerful tools to produce and distribute the information through the interconnected global Web. Can you talk about how this ease of access is remaking the process by which news and information is being gathered and absorbed?

Storm: When everyone has access, that is disruptive and causes chaos. Access

them. We have to get better as journalists. From my perspective, this actually helps long-form in-depth journalism since the crowd is less likely to go that direction. In fact, they’re taking some of the burden off of us in producing and discovering the things that waste our time. For me, the larger question is why we are wasting our time and skills covering stories that the crowd is all over. Why are we, as professional journalists, allocating our resources for such daily, perishable stories? We should be allocating them for things that are in-depth, investigative and require the kind of expertise and professionalism that we have. We need to take a deep breath and remember all the things that we used to do, then reconsider given the new landscape and decide what is going to give us the most value over time. What is the role that we need to play? I don’t believe that is day-to-day, perishable content. I think we need to be more in-depth, more investigative, and more robust in what we do. I know that over time, that will actually pay off. That has proven itself time and time again for us at MediaStorm.



“The Marlboro Marine,” by Luis Sinco, Los Angeles Times: This photojournalist’s picture of Marine Lance Corporal James Blake Miller became an iconic image of the Iraq War. This story describes how Miller tries to heal the scars of war and how two lives became connected by a photograph. See the project at www.mediastorm.org/0020.htm.

Sinco; this gives transparency to our stories. I want people to understand the kind of passion that these photographers have. The way we present this on our site, he is the backstory, but the engagement of the story and the way in which he interacts with it are compelling elements. We need to create more transparency in the way we do photojournalism so people have a better understanding of it.

Ludtke: Storytelling is something that humans have done since the beginning of recorded time, on cave walls, now in cyberspace. You’ve observed that the

is the territory that journalists used to own and now they look at what is happening with the crowd. The crowd has access to these great digital cameras, to this incredible powerful publishing tool called the Web, and they have expanded the conversation. They have access to distribution that we, as professional journalists, have. This doesn’t make me fearful; it makes me excited. That’s democracy—to have more people, more input, and more access to different perspectives.

We, as journalists, also have to elevate our game. We can’t keep doing things the way we’ve always been doing

Ludtke: You’ve talked a lot about a new breed of journalistic entrepreneurs. What you’re doing at MediaStorm is a good example of how to be entrepreneurial in the new media era. Can you describe the key ingredients an individual needs to pair their interest in journalism with an entrepreneurial business model that will provide a foundation from which they can do it?

Storm: That’s the core question. How do we practice the craft and make a living? For me, the element of entrepreneurship has to be there. There used to be the separation between church and state. I’m a journalist, and I’m not going to think about page views or advertising or business models; it’s not my job. My job is to tell the story. That era is coming quickly to an end. We’re all well aware of this. The legacy business model needs to be completely rewritten. The way in which media companies used to make

money has changed, in fact, the way in which every company used to make money has changed. It's a revolutionary moment. We need to rewrite how we communicate with each other. That's a pretty big deal, but I'm excited because in disruption there's opportunity. You have to look at the landscape, take what you care about, build on it, and then reinvent the other parts. That's why I think it's really important that the next generation of journalists have to be more entrepreneurial. I don't just mean that in a business sense; I also mean it in an outreach sense. Like how do we get our stories out there? How do we get the right people to get to the stories that we care about? That's entrepreneurial thinking. It's not just how do we go make money, it's also, how do we connect with the right people, how do we get involved with the right groups who can advocate for change? That's a big leap. At MediaStorm, we're focused on advocacy, not just information. We don't want to just create awareness with our stories, we want to create action.

Ludtke: More the need to find the right people, to find the agents of change.

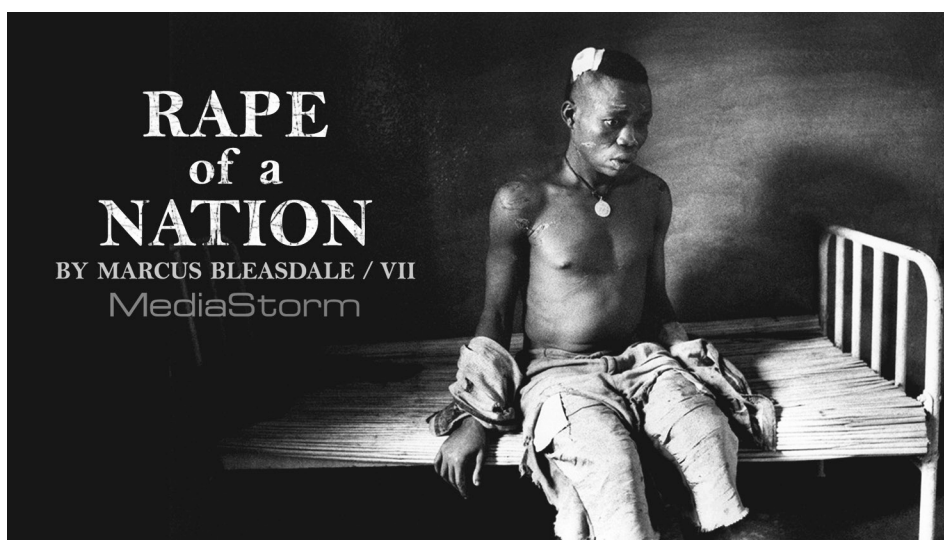
Storm: Exactly. The story we've done with photographer Marcus Bleasdale is about the Congo.³ The people who care about what's happening there will find it, and they are already helping, and this is brand new. Ten years ago, this was impossible to do. Today, with a click of a mouse, it's off; one person can quickly spread this story, and it's not just one network. It's powerful. It's unbelievable, and it's driving awareness.

Ludtke: You use the phrase "surge of connectivity" to describe what you see as the greatest hope for restoring quality journalism. At MediaStorm you don't publish on any set schedule, nor do you advertise the stories you

publish, at least in traditional ways. Yet many of your long-form multimedia pieces find a global audience. Talk more about how this happens, giving an example of one of your projects growing its audience.

Storm: For the most recent project we published on Rwanda,⁴ I sent an e-mail out to 11,000 people who signed up to receive our newsletter. The e-mail goes out, and there's a surge in traffic. Immediately, people start clicking the link, and over the course of several days traffic continually climbs, because a lot of those 11,000 people are forwarding

to, helping to filter in the good stuff, which again is why I really believe quality is the key. If you just push out a bunch of drivel, no one is ever going to forward it to a friend. Over time, there's no payback on that. After the e-mail surge happens, then people start blog posting it; that is another really powerful thing, because we have people from 135 countries who come to our site every month. That still just baffles me. People from all over the world come to our little Web site to watch stories, and the way they find it is e-mail, blog posts, and Tweets. Ten years ago, all of these ways for people



"Rape of a Nation," by Marcus Bleasdale: The Democratic Republic of Congo is home to the deadliest war in the world today. An estimated 5.4 million people have died since 1998. These deaths are byproducts of a collapsed health care system and a devastated economy. See the project at www.mediastorm.org/0022.htm.

that e-mail to their friends. And what is more powerful than you sending me an e-mail saying, "Brian, you have to look at this project. You've got to find the time to look at this thing"? It's the most powerful word of mouth marketing that can possibly happen. Your friends are trusted sources. They're helping to screen a massive amount of information that you have access

to spread information didn't exist.

Ludtke: You've said your RSS feed drives 35 percent of your traffic to the Web site. And now you are saying Twitter accounts for a large amount of it, too.

Storm: Yes, Twitter went from nowhere, not even on our radar four

³ A Nieman Reports photo essay by Bleasdale in the Fall 2004 issue can be seen at www.niemanreports.org.

⁴ "Intended Consequences," by Jonathan Torgovnik, can be seen at <http://mediastorm.org/0024.htm>.

months ago, and it is now number 11 in driving traffic to our Web site, which I just think is remarkable. Facebook is number seven.

Ludtke: What's number one?

Storm: Google. I think you would be hard pressed to find anybody who didn't respond to Google as their number one traffic driver.

Ludtke: Twitter is now number 11.

Storm: It's a remarkable thing to watch that grow. It just proved to me that people care. It's so ironic. Ten years ago, I remember sitting in a newsroom and scratching my head, saying, "How do we get people to care about AIDS in Africa? How do we reach people with this story?" I remember everyone in the newsroom saying, "The audience is apathetic; they don't care." I felt that was wrong. They do care; of course, they care. They just need to have access to this stuff.

The irony now is that the apathy we're seeing is actually inside of the newsroom. The audience is totally energized, totally connected, and totally spreading around these powerful stories. But because of the crisis that we're going through, news organizations don't have the resources to do the kind of stories that I'm describing. People are asked to do less with more and not given the time. Time is the greatest luxury in journalism. It's why we don't publish on a deadline. We publish when we feel a project is ready. All of these things connect to each other and in really interesting ways to passion. What an exciting time to be practicing journalism!

Ludtke: Many of the stories on MediaStorm are lengthy, some more than 20 minutes. At a time when it's said that people's attention spans are shrinking as they dash around from link to link, never stopping very long at any one site, why are you convinced that doing long-form journalism on the Web is viable as a business strategy?

Storm: The data tells me it's true.

This is one of the things that used to drive me crazy when I was at MSNBC. Microsoft, its half owner, is a very data-driven, metric-centric culture. They look at numbers, so that is built into my DNA now. So that's what I do: look at our numbers on the dashboard. I can see how our publication is evolving—time spent on the site, where traffic is coming from, whose blog posts, who's spreading it for us. I have visibility in a way that is totally profound. I know so much about how our publication is and is not working, because the data are right in front of me. I think data can also be evil. A lot of people run around

I want people to come into our site and say, 'What? I don't understand.'

and say, "We need page views, we've just got to have video" Sometimes they don't interpret the data correctly. Sometimes data can be used in a way that is not good.

For me, though, it's wonderful to have the ability to see how many people are watching our 21-minute video about a young African man's journey to get to Europe with the help of smugglers. What percentage do you think watch 21 minutes from start to end on our site? The answer is 65 percent. That is an astonishingly high completion rate on the Web. When you think about it, it goes back to quality. The only reason they're watching it is because it's just a great story. We develop the character in a way that you start to care for him, you see yourself in the character, and you're hooked. You have to know: does he make it? And then, once he makes it, you say, "Holy smokes, he's thinking about going back for real." That is what we're looking for, that universal, robust, in-depth coverage of an issue that people can relate to—immigration. A lot of people migrate; a lot of people leave their families in

search of "a better life." In Kingsley's case, it's still up for discussion whether his life is better or not.

Ludtke: We're going to link to your Web site and these projects you've mentioned so that people can see some of these stories themselves. Can you describe some of the common threads that you see weaving together the various stories MediaStorm.org has published?

Storm: That's a really hard question, because I often get asked to describe what MediaStorm is, and it's going to sound weird, but one of my goals is for people not to be able to describe it. When people come to the homepage, it's not really clear right away what it is. A lot of news sites look exactly the same; they all have the identical template, design and aesthetic quality. I want people to come into our site and say, "What? I don't understand." They have to explore, and that's the idea behind the promos on the homepage; touch a project and see a little piece of the story. Every story is different on our site; we don't have a specific editorial focus. There are not certain topics that we care more about than others. What I want people to do is try to start explaining the site, but then they get frustrated and say, "You should just go see it. It's really good. It's worth seeing." Those are the words I'm hopeful people will use. Those three sentences. "It's really good, and it's worth your time. Go see it." I think everyone will look at stories and take away different things from them. There is no quick slogan. We've been called "the new Life magazine," or "the Life magazine of the Internet." That is a pretty awesome description, and I appreciate that people see it that way. There is a certain element of that that is accurate in terms of our aspirations. We're trying to do stories that show life and help people better understand the complex world that we're in. It is complex. I think the way in which we approach these stories helps to make those ideas more understandable and more accessible. ■

Video News Reporting: New Lessons in New Media

‘What would it take to create good video journalism for online audiences, inexpensively and in an idiom that looked neither too homemade nor too much like TV?’

BY NICK PENNIMAN

In the fall of 2007, I spent a week doing what I would recommend to none of my friends: ceaselessly surfing YouTube. My goal was to find good, original video reporting. Not repurposed content from the news networks or indie channels, but pieces that had been produced for the Web.

At the end of the week, I felt jittery, nauseated and in need of a long jog. YouTube, the world’s TV channel, seemed to be nothing more than a grand wasteland. Instead of tuning out, though, I became obsessed. What would it take to create good video journalism for online audiences, inexpensively and in an idiom that looked neither too homemade nor too much like TV?

The result is the American News Project. We’re one of the only shops I know of that’s exclusively dedicated to creating original, independent video journalism for the Web. [See the interview with Brian Storm on page 20 for another example.] We went live in June 2008 at <http://americannewsproject.com>, and since then we have aired more than 120 video reports that have garnered millions of views on thousands of Web sites throughout the world.

How have so many viewers found their way to our reports? We created a

customized, embeddable video player in each of our reports and encourage people to take our content—for free—and show it anywhere they can. And so they do. A few of our pieces have even been rebroadcast on traditional

tanks and lobbyists (and the pseudo think tanks funded by lobbyists) that hold sway over major policy decisions in Washington, D.C., engaged members of Congress in “big think” discussions about politics and policy, and even

saved a woman’s home that was headed for foreclosure.

The concept that helps organize our editorial thinking was best stated by my friend and mentor Bill Moyers when he said the job of journalists is to “uncover the news that powerful people would prefer to keep hidden.” But it’s also that concept that, in part, makes our jobs particularly hard and has taught us most of our more difficult lessons:

Backpack journalism has limitations. Much is being made about the incredible potential of one-man-band

(or backpack) journalism—in which one person researches, reports, shoots, edits and narrates each piece solo. Yet our experience tells us there are very few people who are great at all of these tasks. I’ve hired really talented people—producers and documentary filmmakers who have worked for Frontline, CNN and National Geographic. Yet despite their know-how, it’s hard for one person to embody all that’s necessary for video backpacking. Good shooting is an art. Good editing comes



American News Project’s Danielle Rose Ivory produced this video report, “Fed Lends Two Trillion Without Oversight.”

television (CNN and ABC), and dozens more have popped up on satellite networks, such as Free Speech TV.

Working as collaboratively as possible with others who appreciate the value of video, we’ve forged editorial partnerships with operations such as The Huffington Post and the McClatchy newspaper company. In our pieces, we’ve investigated troop malfeasance in Iraq, exposed the lack of transparency and accountability in the financial bailout, shined a light on the think



This scene of Tennessee’s coal ash disaster appears in a video news story, “Kingston and Coal Lobby’s Grip on the EPA,” by Davin Hutchins.

from great visual storytellers who are also technically adept. Good narrating is part dramatic reading, part DNA (vocal tone, etc.). Add to all of this meticulous researching skills, a lively and natural interviewing style, an understanding of how Washington works and how to get out in front of news stories, and it’s clear that these skills stand apart from one another and sometimes actually can work against each other.

Although many journalism schools are training even their print-oriented students to shoot and edit, we’ve found that the true backpacker who has a perfect balance of skills is a rare breed and that the field of TV/film is still divided among the skills sets. As a result, we spend more time than we originally expected teaming up staffers on pieces and having them bolster and train each other. Though

backpack reporters will no doubt evolve in strength and numbers, there are few who can do it all.

Meaty stories don’t lend themselves to video. It’s hard to get exciting visuals out of the behind closed doors sausage-making in Washington, D.C.. Mostly we engage in muckraking journalism, reporting on the all-too-frequent intersection of money, power, politics and policymaking—a topic that is not inherently visual. There’s a reason—not a great reason, but a reason—why so much TV news is junked up with stories about disasters and celebrities. Burning buildings, car wrecks, Paris Hilton, and Brangelina are easy to produce and make for good viewing experiences. Lobbyists, policy wonks, and Capitol Hill hearings don’t.

Also, most people in the mix of policymaking either don’t have time

to sit down and conduct on-camera interviews or actively spurn coverage—especially with new independent outlets or when they fear that the resulting piece may be critical of them. Whistleblowers and anonymous sources simply don’t like cameras. So once we have our reporting in hand, we do our best to make our stories more entertaining—with dynamic shooting, youthful music, and edgy narration that make our pieces fun to watch.

Video is an arduous medium. This means it’s essential to think far ahead of the news curve. Even with all the new technologies—HD cameras that shoot directly onto hard drives, laptops with keen editing software, and relatively instantaneous Web distribution, making quality video reports takes time. It takes time to research, time to schedule on-camera interviews, time to set up shots, time to shoot B-roll, time to acquire other visual elements, time to create graphics, time to write scripts, to narrate, to create a rough cut, then a fine cut, then a final cut, then encode, and then publish. We can turn a short piece around in a day if we need to. But, even then, we still get beat on some stories by the text reporters who are often publishing their pieces almost immediately after an event has occurred.

When we’re not trying to crank out day-of stories, it takes us about 10 days to produce a two to eight minute video. We’ve had to kill about a quarter of our pieces because the news moved on before we made it to the Web. As such, we have to constantly think way ahead of the news curve and anticipate what the news might be in two or three weeks. Or we have to make sure we’re doing the stories that no one else would consider doing.

There isn’t money to be made doing this. My operation is a nonprofit with an annual budget of about one million dollars, 75 percent of which goes directly to my eight employees’ salaries and benefits. We’ve received about three million video views since we launched in June. That is, three million that we can easily calculate—there are oth-

ers, because some of our pieces have appeared on TV networks. We don't sell ads on our videos. But, had we, we would have made about \$100,000 so far. That's obviously not enough to keep our operation afloat. Long conversation made short: Either online ad rates must significantly increase, or we all need to be actively working on forging hybrid nonprofit-for-profit models for journalism.

Something special is stirring in the new media world, and the American News project is only one small element in the grand mix. As one of our

advisory board members notes, online video reporting is forging a new idiom for journalism. It won't look like anything we've ever seen before on TV or in films and might help revolutionize what TV and films look like in the future. At times, it will be too sloppy for some who've grown accustomed to TV's polished pieces; for others who like to feel as if they've stumbled across something raw and elemental, it might not feel wild enough. At times, even the best reported stories won't get viewed because the eyeballs will be glued to the spectacles of disaster and celebrity.

But for the new viewers, and creators, a fresh future is stumbling to life. And I'm certain that, three or four years from now, if I repeat my YouTube immersion experiment I'll emerge not only satisfied with what I find but compelled to continue to spur on video's evolution, which right now has the feel of a revolution. ■

Nick Penniman is the director of the American News Project. He served as Washington director of the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy, as publisher of the Washington Monthly, and editor of TomPaine.com.

Using Social Media to Reach Young Readers

In reporting on a case of a police informant who'd been murdered, the Tallahassee Democrat relied on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and text messages to get its reporting to young readers.

BY JULIA LUSCHER THOMPSON

When 23-year-old Rachel Hoffman, a recent college graduate, agreed to become a confidential informant, she could not have known she would soon become a household name in Tallahassee—and on the Web. On the night when she went to buy Ecstasy, cocaine and a gun from two men, her wire failed, police lost track of her, and she was killed in the botched drug sting.

Those of us at the Tallahassee Democrat knew we had to get to the bottom of Hoffman's story and hold local government and law enforcement accountable for any of their actions that might have contributed to her death. We also realized that her story would be of great interest to the community and her college-aged peers in particular, most of whom don't read the daily newspaper. So we had to

find different ways of reporting and bringing the story to them. With that in mind, over time we set up a Facebook group, a Twitter account, a YouTube channel, and a project page on our Web site that is dedicated to the Hoffman case.¹

Attracting a Young Audience

"Immediately we saw so much interest online and in the story chats," lead reporter Jennifer Portman said of this case that quickly transitioned from that of a missing person to one in which a young woman was murdered while working for police. "Her friends were checking in with our Web site all the time. The morning she went missing, the first place her boyfriend checked was Tallahassee.com."

Police initially blamed Hoffman

for violating protocol but refused to release details about the case because it was part of an ongoing investigation. Then, shortly after a grand jury issued a scathing report about the Tallahassee Police Department's handling of the case, a judge sealed pretrial evidence. All of this meant that law enforcement sources we might normally turn to in covering a murder were now evasive or silent. As Portman explained, "We had to talk to her friends, including her best friend and her family members, to start filling in some of those blanks of what had happened that night."

Hoffman's boyfriend and one of her close friends spoke with Portman on the condition they remain anonymous as sources; their information helped provide a turning point in our coverage of the case. They were able to tell Portman about Hoffman's last night,

¹ Readers can access all of the social media tools the Tallahassee Democrat used to distribute information about the Hoffman case at <http://tallahassee.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=hoffman>.

and they also shared with her details of what they regarded as police negligence that those in law enforcement refused to admit. To dig for other relevant information, our reporters reached out to Hoffman's friends and family through Facebook, sometimes using the social network to find sources.

When she was murdered in May, Hoffman had recently graduated from Florida State University (FSU), and most of the students were heading out of town for the summer. As the college students—some 65,000 of them—returned to Tallahassee in August, we increased our efforts to get this important story out in ways comfortable to them, which meant on the Web. Our hope was that our public service journalism would energize our young audience.

"Rachel Hoffman is someone that so many of those students can relate to," Portman said. "She looks like them, she talks like them; they could so closely identify with her."

Using Social Media

Facebook groups about Hoffman had already been created by her friends. So we used those groups as our starting point by inviting their members to join our new Facebook group, which we dedicated to keeping people updated with developments in the case and as a place for discussion about media coverage of it. This group has grown to have more than 600 members and, as we found out, some might not have known about the story if not for our newspaper using these social media tools.

Scott Ellington, 29, a self-employed software developer and FSU grad, was one such reader. He stumbled upon our Facebook coverage via the HoffmanCase Twitter account that the newspaper set up. As Ellington saw the



The Tallahassee Democrat's Facebook page, "Rachel Hoffman case: Uncovering the truth," is at www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=47350501912.

Twitter updates, he was intrigued by a story with local impact that affected a young person. "She had an education, and she came from a well-to-do family," Ellington said. "I'd say that reflects a lot of young people in this town."

After following the updates on Twitter, Ellington also joined the Facebook group. "I'm not a news junkie by any means," he said. "I like to filter my information so I don't get a lot of stuff that I don't care about." When asked how Hoffman's case had made it through his filter, Ellington paused

maybe in government that led to the death or was part of it."

Although Hoffman's case resonated with Ellington, he said that he wasn't willing to work for the information. He wouldn't go to a Web site just to find out about it, he told us, but he did read the information and follow the links to stories provided through the Facebook group and Twitter account. "It's just a treat rather than having to manually open up a Web site," he said.

We also uploaded Hoffman-related videos to a YouTube channel

to expose them to a wider audience, and those linked back to our site. We've used text message alerts to keep people updated with developments in the story and streamed live video of events and news conferences related to the case on Tallahassee.com. "This story really fit nicely into these new platforms because of who Rachel was, because she was 23 years old," Portman said. "She was constantly texting, and she was plugged in."

Hoffman's boyfriend sent our newspaper's Executive Editor Bob Gabordi



before finding words to explain the connection: "A lot of people in my generation take a lot for granted when they think about mortality. They just think they're insulated from this type of thing happening," he said. "Also, it's like you have an incompetence

a message on Facebook shortly after we expanded our coverage there. "I was Rachel Hoffman's boyfriend at the time she was killed. I want to thank you personally for all you have done. I know there have been a lot of people who have gotten mad at you for keep-

ing this on the front page. I honestly don't think all the facts that are out so far would be available if it weren't for you and your staff. Thank you for looking at the big picture: A young woman was murdered while working for [the] Tallahassee Police Department. As opposed to, she was just a drug dealer [so] she deserved to die."

A journalist from another newspaper recently asked me if I had any reservations about using social media in our journalism. I assured him that our journalism hadn't changed, only our methods of delivering it. And to keep what we do at the newspaper—and this important story—vital and fresh, we had to find these ways of reaching our potential young readers.

In part, because the Democrat's editors and reporters kept a persistent watchful eye on what happened that night, several police officers have been disciplined. One officer was fired, four others were suspended, and two—including the chief—were reprimanded. And a new law is being proposed—"Rachel's Law"—to provide better protection statewide to confi-

Videos about this case are at www.youtube.com/RachelHoffmancase.

dential informants. Hoffman's parents have also filed a wrongful-death suit against the city of Tallahassee.

"As a relative of Rachel Hoffman, I think that the media coverage of this case has help[ed] keep it alive," Rebecca Shillings wrote on the Facebook group's wall. "Thank you for keeping her memory alive and helping to ensure this doesn't happen again."

By keeping this story in print and online and reaching as many new people as possible, Hoffman's story has made people much more aware of how law enforcement operates in this city. "She's put a face on what is a gray area of law enforcement that

needs more scrutiny," Portman says.

By now, the Tallahassee police internal affairs investigation and the Florida Attorney General's review of the agency's confidential-informant procedures have been released, resulting in the police punishments. Our newspaper's lawyers continue to fight for the release of pretrial evidence, and our reporters and editors are still looking for ways to deepen coverage of this case and, at the same time, engage

readers as interactive partners.

"This is a serious situation, and I think that our coverage helped," Portman said. "That we were tenacious and tried to reach out to all kinds of readers however we could, gave this story and this issue the heightened importance it deserved. We didn't let it go away, even if, at times, it would have been easier to do so." ■

Julia Luscher Thompson, a 2006 graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, is the digital communities editor for the Tallahassee Democrat and Tallahassee.com.

The Web: Fertile Ground for Investigative Projects

'Digital journalism could not be the sole domain of breaking news and blogging, and it had to be more than the repository of electronic reprints.'

BY MAUD BEELMAN

What would a big newspaper investigation look like if conceived primarily for the Web? What would we do differently? Would the medium affect our reporting? And could we do an equally good job in both digital and print with the resources we had?

These questions were on our mind when The Dallas Morning News's idea

for the investigative series "Unequal Justice" arose. This project, reported by Brooks Egerton and Reese Dunklin, grew out of an earlier story Egerton wrote about two men in Dallas—one African American and poor, the other politically well-connected and white—who received dramatically different sentences for probation violations from the same judge.

Though we couldn't yet answer our questions, we did know that if journalism's future is on the Web, then investigative reporting had to stake out its position. Digital journalism could not be the sole domain of breaking news and blogging, and it had to be more than the repository of electronic reprints. We believed the Web offered fertile ground for investigative projects;

The multimedia presentation of “Unequal Justice” can be found at www.dallasnews.com/unequaljustice.

talented journalists could creatively pursue a story using digital tools and then engage readers with multimedia presentations showing what they’d found. Armed with this belief, we set out to see if we were right.

“Unequal Justice: Murderers on Probation” revealed how killers could get the lightest possible sentence in a state legendary for its tough-on-crime image. The reporters spent months researching murder cases throughout Texas; they examined court records and built databases to augment the state’s faulty official files. This helped us identify the series’ major themes and select the cases that best illustrated them. We also decided that the strongest online elements would be the killers’ and victims’ families talking on camera about crime and justice in Texas.

I figured a multimedia investigative project would be more labor intensive than a print one. (And, by the end, it was about 50 percent more work.) We were learning as we went, which meant finding our way from the start along with other colleagues at the newspaper, including photographers,

videographers, graphic artists, and Web designers. While we typically work with them closely throughout regular investigations, this time the collaboration would have to be deeper, with more give-and-take on reporting and editing approaches, if we hoped to ensure success.

What we did not anticipate were the benefits a multimedia approach would bring to our overall reporting and how it would enhance our investigation and storytelling in print as well as on the Web.

Visual Evidence

A lot of what we needed to do with this project involved reconstructing past events. This meant that dynamic visuals were limited. Another challenge involved our key interview subjects; either they were camera-shy survivors, imprisoned killers available for only a limited time, or murderers on probation, who we thought might be reluctant to talk. It seemed that most of our footage would be traditional face-to-face interviews, which might be boring.

So the reporters requested crime scene photos, access to physical evidence that the police had maintained, audio of 911 calls, and video of police interrogations. We thought this would provide visual material that could be spliced in between the main interviews. Even the best journalists don’t always seek to review this kind of primary source material, since often it is summarized and incorporated into official records, such as police reports, court filings, and depositions that are quicker and easier to get. But once the reporters actually saw or heard the evidence, they realized how much it strengthened their reporting.

One case, for example, involved a boyish, 19-year-old dropout and former gang member who was acquitted in the fatal stabbing of a gay waiter twice his age. The prosecution had argued it was a consensual liaison and that the teen lashed out in a moment of “gay panic.” The waiter was stabbed 38 times; his mother said he looked like a saltshaker. The teen claimed he killed in self-defense to thwart a rape and told the court that the two men struggled in the waiter’s bedroom before falling onto the bed, where the stabbing occurred.

Yet crime scene photos showed bookcases and nightstands just feet from the bed, with knickknacks and framed photos undisturbed. Police reports didn’t delve deeply into such details, and the prosecutor in the case was initially reluctant to talk. Seeing the pictures enabled the reporters to visualize the crime scene, ask smarter questions, convince the prosecutor and jurors to discuss the case and enrich the story with details that called the verdict into question. The reporters also were able to press the teen about his version of events, leading to an animated on-camera exchange in which he acknowledged he had become enraged by the waiter’s pass. “You’re out of here, David. That’s what I thought in my head,” he told us.

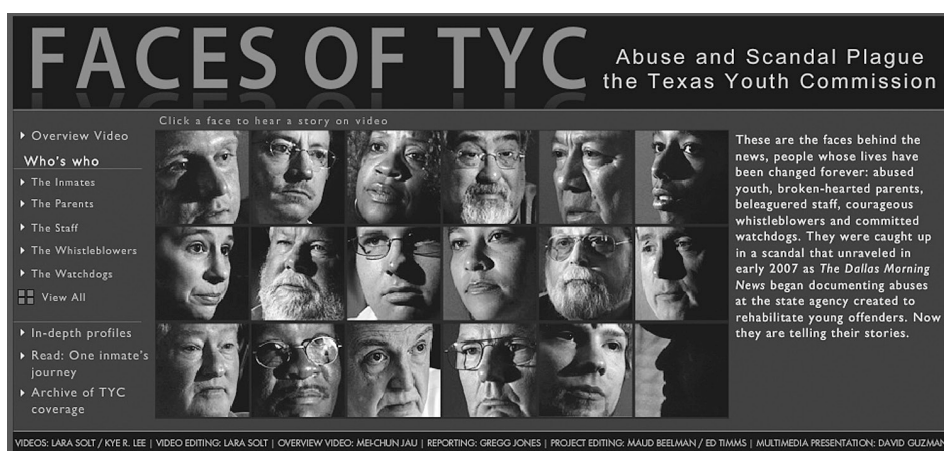
Approaching the investigation from a multimedia perspective not only made for a more complete and interesting story, but it enhanced accuracy and provided transparency. On our Web

site, visitors heard 911 calls and the tone of voice of a father who shot and killed his 18-year-old during an argument about the son's girlfriend. We made it possible to see what the crime scenes looked like then and now by shooting new visuals from the murder sites that complemented photographs from the day of the killings. Online users could watch survivors talk about the painful consequences of unequal justice and judge for themselves whether killers on probation exhibited remorse or ruthlessness. As one young killer, Jason Chheng, told us on camera, pulling on his Marlboro and chuckling about how he had remained on probation despite repeated violations, "The justice system is all screwed up."

In addition to watching the videos, shot by our staff news photographer Kye Lee, Web users could examine the findings of our computer-assisted analysis of killers on probation via an interactive graphic. And they could peruse detailed case summaries on the 56 killers who received probation in north Texas from 2000 through 2006.

Connecting to Readers

We've also found that even limited multimedia elements can enhance and elevate print investigations. A team of reporters, led by Doug Swanson, spent most of 2007 investigating and writing about the Texas Youth Commission (TYC), the state's juvenile justice agency. Sexual and physical abuse of young inmates at TYC had become so commonplace that prison administrators traded sex for birthday cake, and kids were incarcerated well beyond their sentence if they didn't acquiesce. The reporting exposed crimes and cover-ups that resulted in the firing or resignation of the entire TYC leadership and freedom for many young inmates. It convinced the state legislature to enact sweeping reforms, and it was the talk of the Texas power elite.



"Faces of TYC" can be viewed at www.dallasnews.com/tyc.

Even so, the wrongdoing we'd uncovered was not resonating with average readers in quite the same way. It was clear to me that we needed to find another way to connect our readers to the human toll of our hard-core investigation. That led us to create "Faces of TYC," a multimedia video package by reporter Gregg Jones and photographer Lara Solt in which the key stakeholders—young inmates, parents, staff, whistleblowers and watchdogs—talked about the consequences of this tragic scandal. In-depth profiles and the prototypical story of one young inmate accompanied the videos. The multimedia package also served to anchor online our TYC story archive.

For both multimedia projects, our

photo department created something we call "the overview video," a summary of the best on-camera interviews and multimedia elements that works like a movie trailer. We posted the overview videos for both "Unequal Justice" and "Faces of TYC" on YouTube in advance of publication to increase interest in our work.

These investigative projects, while early efforts, gave us many of the answers to questions we once had. What makes multimedia projects work also enriches our reporting. The online project gives our findings greater reach and resonance, and Web users can access primary source information to verify or question our findings. Now we not only seek project ideas that lend themselves to a multimedia approach, we're on the lookout for even more imaginative ways to use the Web for investigative reporting and to engage readers. Stay tuned! ■



A murderer talks on a YouTube "overview video" that The Dallas Morning News posted in advance of publication to generate interest in the "Unequal Justice Project" in print and online.

Maud Beelman is deputy managing editor for projects and enterprise at The Dallas Morning News. Projects reporter Reese Dunklin contributed to this article. "Unequal Justice" won the 2008 Online Journalism Award for investigative reporting, and "Faces of TYC" won the 2007 Sigma Delta Chi Award for Public Service in Online Journalism.

Using Multimedia to Tell an Investigative Story About Innocence

‘Two departments within our newspaper—editorial and new media—had to work closely together to construct the project.’

BY CHRISTINE YOUNG

I first heard about the murder of Blue Eyes from Major Betty Baker, a feisty, God-fearing Salvation Army officer with a gravelly voice and a thick Scottish brogue. Every weeknight at about 10 o'clock, Baker and a driver would traverse the city in a converted ice-cream truck, passing out snacks and hot chocolate to the people on the streets.

I was interviewing Baker in the spring of 1989 for a journalism school project when she mentioned Blue Eyes, who had left her Buffalo home at the age of 15 with a pimp. She had been on the streets six years the last time Baker saw her, which, Baker said, was shortly after 2 a.m. November 21, 1987.

She said Blue Eyes was depressed and wanted to quit the streets.

Five hours after Baker saw her, Blue Eyes's half-naked body was found displayed over a metal rack, face down, her skull crushed. Baker believed she and her canteen driver, John Lancaster, were probably among the last to see her alive.

Around the time I met Baker, coincidentally, I also met a detective, Paul Clermont, who worked at the precinct one block from my apartment. He was preparing for a trial involving the murder of a young prostitute, and I soon realized it was Blue Eyes. I told Clermont I had just met a woman who had seen her at 2

a.m., only hours before her body had been discovered.

“Don't tell me that,” Clermont said, explaining the prosecution's case hinged on the theory that Blue Eyes had been killed at about 11 p.m. If she were alive at 2 a.m., Clermont said, he had arrested the wrong man.

I double-checked with Baker, who was certain of her memory. She dug out her 1987 nightly journal and showed me the 2 a.m. entry, “Saw B.E.”

I went back to Clermont and told him this and about the canteen driver, Lancaster, whom Baker had said worked for the Salvation Army only briefly and who had left New York the day after the murder. At the very least, Lancaster should be able to corroborate or dispute Baker's story.

Over the next several weeks I contacted Robert Beecher, the lawyer representing the 31-year-old security guard charged with Blue Eyes's murder. There was no physical evidence against Lebrew Jones, who had an IQ of 66 and no criminal record; he was arrested following 20 hours of questioning without a lawyer.

In May 1989, only weeks before Jones's trial started, I had moved to New England to begin a broadcasting career. I was uneasy about Jones's fate but felt confident that if he were innocent, the information I had provided would prove it.

Later that summer, Beecher called me with the news that Jones had been convicted. After the verdict, the judge had asked Jones for his date of birth.

“I didn't do that murder,” Jones had replied.

Those five words would haunt me for two decades.



Video and words about the case involving Lebrew Jones and his murder trial can be found at www.recordonline.com/lebrewjones.

Displaying the Evidence

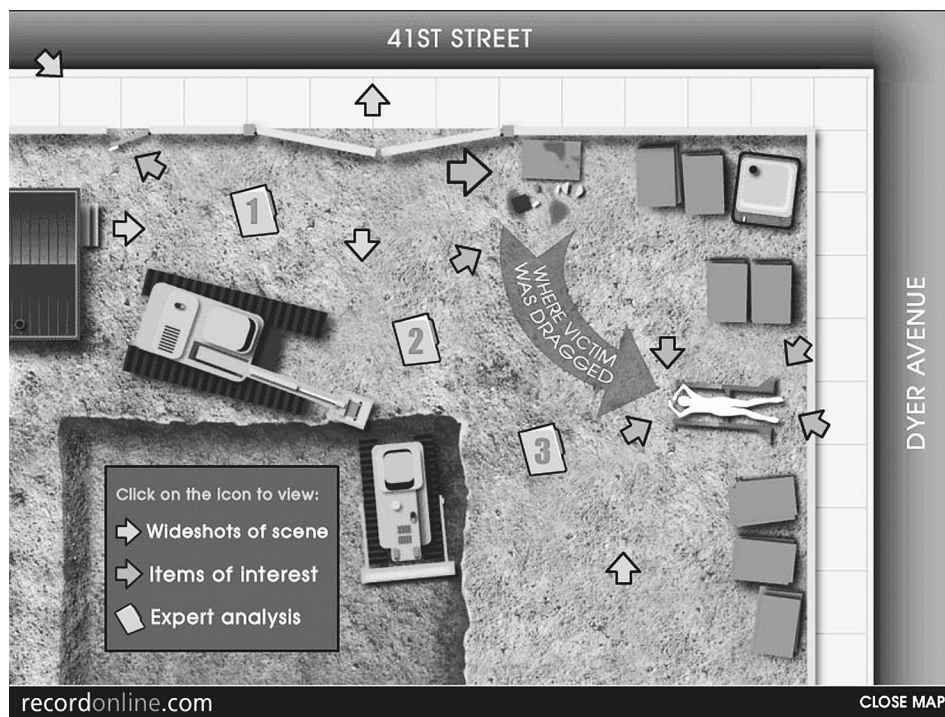
During the next 15 years, I pursued a journalism career, first in television, then with a newspaper and, for a while, both at the same time. That last experience—deciding what aspects of a story to write for the paper and what should be told using video—was my introduction to multimedia storytelling.

I collaborated on many projects with John Pertel, a videojournalist who in 1992 had also become my husband. In late 2005, our family moved to New York, and my husband and I began working for The Times Herald-Record in Middletown. The paper had not ventured into producing video, and John became its first videographer/multimedia editor.

In the fall of 2006 I did an inmate search and found, to my amazement, that Jones was incarcerated only 12 miles from our new home. I went to see him on Thanksgiving morning. During most of the following year, John and I gathered information and shot video for what would become an elaborate multimedia presentation about this case. I am still in awe at the richness of the material we were able to accumulate.

For example, Jones is the eldest son of the late Rufus “Speedy” Jones, a drummer for Count Basie and Duke Ellington. With the help of jazz writer Scott Yanow, I found a number of DVDs and VHS tapes featuring his stunning performances. During an on-camera prison interview, Lebrew demonstrated his own drumming finesse, taught by his father, using his fingers on the table. Later, John interspersed this jailhouse performance with a video of Speedy doing a drum solo, with a result so poignant it brought tears to my eyes.

Jones’s lawyer gave us a VHS copy of Lebrew’s videotaped statement to investigators, the crime scene photos, the evidence list, and the crime-scene sketch. This sketch became the template for an interactive crime-scene map we created on our Web site, enabling viewers to examine close-ups of the evidence and get a sense



Users click on map icons to reveal photographs of the crime scene and evidence related to the murder and to listen to experts, such as a forensic psychologist, analyze what happened and why.

of the area by clicking on wide shots taken from various angles. Folders within the map offered on-camera analysis by a criminal profiler who had conducted an extensive study of prostitute homicide.

We went to Asbury Park, New Jersey, and interviewed Betty Baker, who at 82 still had VHS copies of television news stories featuring her Salvation Army work during the 1980’s. We got permission from the news outlets to use the video, which showed Baker at work on the canteen and a seedy Times Square with silhouettes of prostitutes soliciting johns.

I filed a FOIA request with the New York City Police Department that eventually yielded only six pages but led me to Lois Hall, Blue Eyes’s mother.

That’s when I knew I had the soul of the story.

Tracking Down Sources

During my first call to Lois, she told me she had always believed the wrong man was in prison for her daughter’s murder. She also said Blue Eyes’s name

was Michaelanne, not Michelle, as police and prosecutors had called her, and her nickname was Micki.

We traveled to Buffalo and got Lois on camera as she held dozens of photos of Micki at different ages and read aloud from notes Micki had written as a child. But Lois had something even more compelling—home movies of Micki taken shortly before she was killed.

Suddenly, Blue Eyes was no longer just a slain prostitute. She was Micki Hall, a living, laughing, vibrant young woman, a daughter so beloved that her mother had never been able to bury her ashes.

As details of Micki’s life emerged, we shot more video in Buffalo—at the housing projects where Micki had grown up and at the apartment building where Lois said a pimp named “Cain” had kept Micki locked up before taking her to Manhattan. We interviewed Micki’s sister, Cindy Tirado, who said she had spent time with Micki in New York City. Tirado described living in a rundown New Jersey motel, riding with Cain each night through the Lincoln Tunnel to work the streets.

Later, we would go to New Jersey and New York with the camera, retracing those recollections.

Collaborating in Our Newsroom

The design and programming aspects of this project presented its own set of challenges. Two departments within our newspaper—editorial and new media—had to work closely together to construct the project.

This was not the first time that our new media staffers had developed multimedia projects for the newsroom, but this one involved more people and interaction than ever before. To get this project onto the Web, editorial needed help from those in new media for their programming and Flash development expertise. Patrick Mullen, new media's director, believed this story would attract enough unique visitors over the long haul to warrant lending us his Flash programmer, Vinny Kaprat, for a considerable amount of time.

Our supervising editor, Chris Mele, had an enormous task. In addition

to guiding me through the writing, he coordinated the print and online versions and acted as liaison between editorial and new media. It was also his job to keep Executive Editor Derek Osenenko apprised of our progress.

During the week preceding publication, we ran an online promotion featuring the most compelling aspects of the case. John took shots of our printing press rolling out papers to push the upcoming Sunday special section and those went up on the Web site. The new media department worked hard to optimize the project for search engine placement, and Online News Editor Erik Gliedman continually promoted the report on the front page of recordonline.com.

Since the project launched, we've received tremendous feedback along with plenty of recognition from our journalism peers. Most gratifying, however, is what our reporting has done for Lebrew Jones and Lois Hall. Jones is now represented pro bono by the Innocence Project and the Manhattan law firm of Davis Polk & Wardwell. Micki Hall's fingernail clippings have

recently been found and are being tested for DNA; Jones is hoping the results will prove his innocence.

Lois regards the project as a tribute to Micki, whom she long believed had been forgotten. Last year she met Jones during a tearful encounter at the prison, and she is convinced of his innocence. The two have since forged a warm friendship, a unique bond, born of unspeakable violence and a monstrous injustice. ■

Christine Young has worked for almost 20 years in both newspapers and television and for coverage of this story received the 2009 Excellence in Criminal Justice Reporting Award from John Jay College of Criminal Justice at The City University of New York, and the 2007-2008 New York State Associated Press Association writing award for best multimedia package. For other stories, Young has received an Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Silver Baton, National Headliner Award, Clarion Award, and an Edward R. Murrow Award.

Reliable News: Errors Aren't Part of the Equation

In the transition to digital journalism, accuracy—as an indicator of quality—must maintain its place at the top of the list of essential ingredients.

BY CRAIG SILVERMAN

For more than 100 years, one of the most recognizable slogans in journalism has been “All the News That's Fit to Print.” Lately, The New York Times motto is being challenged by the familiar phrase, “do more with less.” This new saying was, in fact, the theme of the World Editors Forum scheduled for March, but the event had to be cancelled “due to the impact of the global financial downturn on newspaper companies.”

News organizations are shedding employees. Those that remain are

expected to pick up the slack and also push ahead with digital initiatives. Included in the exodus are valuable copyeditors—the people in whose encyclopedic brains reside a lot of what prevents errors from surfacing in stories. The few, the proud—and disappearing—magazine fact checkers are also being told to grab their World Almanacs and Book of Facts and move along.

Accuracy is a huge journalistic challenge. When reporters are asked to take on more work while the news-

room's same fallible processes and error-prone technologies remain in place, the result will undoubtedly be a further downward slide in quality. More errors will be followed by more apologies and more corrections. And this is happening at a critical time for journalism—a time when consumers are being asked by journalists using digital media to lend support to their newsgathering mission.

How much will accuracy in news reporting be worth to them?

The Orlando Sentinel already con-

fronted this issue. Following a round of staff reductions in the fall of 2007, Manning Pynn, the Sentinel's public editor, highlighted how the paper's accuracy had been affected. "In the past three months, the newspaper has corrected more than a third more errors of its own making on average than it did during the relatively placid prior five months," he wrote.

The cause was obvious. "When the Sentinel tightened its financial belt back in June, it lost a wealth of seasoned veterans, many of them editors," Pynn wrote. "Those journalists not only wrote headlines and captions. They also scrutinized the work of reporters—correcting spelling, straightening out syntax, double-checking facts—before publication. With fewer people to do that now, less of that important work gets done, and the result is more published errors."

Pynn also found a link between quality and financial survival. "Every business's success depends on the reliability of its products or services," he observed. "If their reliability declines, people are less likely to buy them. Newspapers are particularly susceptible to that phenomenon."

Quality: What Does It Mean?

Four years of researching and writing about press errors and corrections have led me to a surprising conclusion: A file cabinet is a beautiful thing. Allow me to explain. Open more than one drawer and a file cabinet tends to tip over. Solution: Allow only one drawer to be opened at a time. The humble file cabinet comes to mind whenever I read a correction of a misspelled name, incorrect date, or other highly preventable error. If we could develop simple ways of preventing journalistic missteps, we'd all be better off.

In the digital age, we have plenty of tools that make us more productive and others that supposedly help us to eliminate mistakes. Yet it turns out that some of those tools—such as the spell

checker—introduce as many errors as they might help us to correct. For example, the Daily Post in Liverpool, England published a correction noting that, "The computer spell checker did not recognize the term WNO (Welsh National Opera). A slip of the finger caused it to be replaced with the word 'winos.'"

So it's left to another error-prone tool—the human brain—to recognize

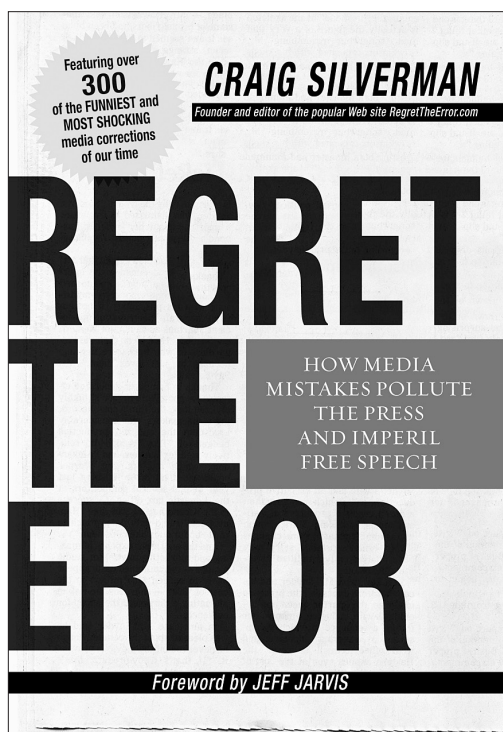
few corrections published—amounts to a woeful lack of quality control for journalism. Yet the word "quality" still surfaces often in discourse about our profession. "High-quality journalism is threatened, and it may not be able to continue unless we can convince people that they need to support high-quality journalism on the Web with their own dollars and cents," Philip S. Balboni, a cofounder of GlobalPost.com, an international news Web site, told *The Boston Globe* in January.

In a February chat with *New York Times* readers, executive editor Bill Keller said there is "a diminishing supply of quality journalism and a growing demand. By quality journalism I mean the kind that involves experienced reporters going places, bearing witness, digging into records, developing sources, checking and double-checking, backed by editors who try to enforce high standards."

Eliminating Errors

How the words "quality" and "journalism" fit together presents a different kind of puzzle for those who are not journalists. The American Society for Quality, for example, puts forth two definitions of quality: "the characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs" or "a product or service free of deficiencies." And Six Sigma, which certifies if something is of quality, measures its presence by using a formula that calculates the number of defects per million opportunities.

When these definitions and measuring tools are applied to journalism, the quest for quality would begin with the elimination of the vast majority of preventable factual errors. In a 2004 speech, John Carroll, a former editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, compared errors made in the newspaper to industrial pollution: "Like a factory on a river, daily journalism is an industry that produces pollution. Our pollution comes in the form of errors. America's river of public discourse—if



that "winos" has no business being there. It's our last line of defense, but one too seldom used these days. We know this because accuracy studies of American newspapers conducted during the past seven decades have found that between 40 and 60 percent of news stories have some type of mistake, such as a misspelled name or a quote taken out of context. And when mistakes happen, a landmark 2007 study by Scott Maier at the University of Oregon revealed that fewer than two percent of news stories identified as factually errant resulted in published corrections.

Too many mistakes—with far too

I may extend this figure of speech—is polluted by our mistakes.” His bottom line and mine: Errors are a sign of a low quality product. By correcting errors, Carroll said, “A good newspaper cleans up after itself.”

Yes, but quality journalism ought first to be dedicated to preventing them. And that is not what is happening today. For help figuring out how to do this, John R. Grout, an associate professor at the Campbell School of Business at Berry College in Georgia, is a logical person to turn to. Grout is an expert in poka-yoke, the Japanese discipline of mistake proofing, in which the goal is to create processes and products that eliminate potential for error. Poka-yoke is used in nuclear power plants, aviation, manufacturing and health care.

What about journalism? “It’s a new application for me,” Grout told me when I spoke with him as part of my research for my 2007 book, “Regret the Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech.” As he put it, “My concern is that a lot of it [journalism] is creative, where you are creating something one time and one time only Still, there’s a whole set of other aspects where the process is very repeatable and routine.”

In no time at all, Grout was imagining a digital tool that would highlight proper names, dates, ages, genders and other verifiable facts as they were entered on a page. The system would check them against a central database maintained and updated by the news organization. It could, for example, alert reporters that it’s Edgar *Allan* Poe, not Edgar Allen Poe. This system would also make sure that spelling and facts are consistent in the headline and article. It could even require reporters input source material for facts and quotes, thereby forcing reporters to record their source material and enabling an editor to perform a quick fact check.

The Human Factor

For Grout, coming up with a design solution was a natural direction in which to head. Still, the human factor needs to be addressed, so I turned to the American Society for Quality in the hope of finding someone who’d applied quality techniques to an editorial process. I was referred to Grace Duffy, coauthor of “The Quality Improvement

As new models of Web-based journalism emerge, verification strategies and new models to prevent errors are essential. Keeping errors to a minimum will be key to the success of digital journalism.

Handbook,” who has the highest quality ranking in her field, Certified Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt. Best of all, she’d developed quality processes for highly sensitive projects that required documentation.

If spelling someone’s name wrong ranks as a terrible mistake for journalists—and, for the record, it is—then writing documentation for a safety console at a nuclear reactor clearly prepares one to offer some lessons. Her first one: Quality must be made a part of an organization’s culture through establishing clearly defined incentives. “If the culture says there is no excuse for errors and says I will do my very best because the audience deserves it, then you will find people giving that extra bit of checking,” she said. But if the system rewards other things, then “it might be worth it to a writer not to find errors, because they might be more rewarded if they meet a deadline or get a scoop.”

For accuracy to rise to the top, the editorial process has to be broken into smaller steps to highlight how errors occur. Once identified, they can be eliminated or at least reduced by developing new processes and train-

ing programs. Another key aspect of quality is data collection; mistakes are essential data, and they need to be tracked and logged so that a clear picture of where, why and how they occur emerges. Some news organizations have corrections databases that track the details of every known mistake. Unfortunately, such organizations are the exception.

When I asked Duffy if it is good policy to discipline reporters and editors who make errors, she replied: “Establish expectations clearly before creating sanctions Don’t just fire people or beat them about the head—give them time to work through the concept.”

Even when accuracy is espoused, policies need to be put into action in a consistent and measurable way. Only then does quality become a tangible part of an organization—something that can be measured, improved upon, and clearly communicated to staff and the public. Can such quality techniques work for journalism? “There’s no doubt at all,” Duffy said, as long as the impetus to do so exists.

As new models of Web-based journalism emerge, verification strategies and new models to prevent errors are essential. Keeping errors to a minimum will be key to the success of digital journalism. By doing this, Web news operations will convince the public to turn to and support their publication as this factor is likely to play a determinative role in which Web sites consumers will turn to for reliable information. ■

Craig Silverman is the author of “Regret the Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech,” published by Union Square Press in 2007 and now available in paperback by Sterling Publishing.

21st Century Muckrakers: Investigating Medical and Health Issues

If data talked, oh, the stories they could tell. Today, enterprising reporters are “listening” to what data can tell them. By harnessing technology’s tools, they dig with increasing speed and thoroughness through stacks of numbers and reams of documents, and what they find forms the foundation for their investigative efforts. Once absorbed, the data create a trail to the men and women (and companies) whose motivations and actions bring to storytelling life what numbers can only sketch. When reluctance to cooperate is encountered, data step in again to refresh memories and prod the story forward.

For centuries, those seeking to expose malfeasance have followed much this same data-driven course, albeit with less precision and more effort. In this collection of stories, journalists describe contemporary watchdog methods. With their coverage they’ve informed people’s medical judgment and protected their health, whether jeopardized by misleading pharmaceutical campaigns or by the lack of mandated oversight by government officials and agencies.

All of this requires time, human capital and resources, all of which are endangered by newsroom cuts and pressures to produce more with less. When data mining can’t begin because public documents are withheld, costly legal action may be needed to pry them loose. Or copying costs might be prohibitive for reporters who are working on their own. Absent support from a news organization, secrecy can triumph. As Joe Mathews, a former Los Angeles Times reporter, wrote in “The Morgue: A reporter’s elegy for his dying paper” in *The New Republic*, “With fewer watchdogs, you get less barking. How can we know what we’ll never know?”

So when a major news organization eliminates its science, technology and environment unit as a cost-cutting measure, as CNN did in the waning days of 2008, is there reason for concern? (Four of the world’s largest science and environmental journalism groups felt there was and sent their first-ever joint letter protesting the cuts.) Expertise of this kind continues to be shed at newspapers and broadcast outlets. (To find out what it’s like to win a George Polk Award and be told at the same time that the investigative unit you work with is being eliminated and you no longer have a job, read Roberta Baskin’s story on page 62.) Can independent journalists afford to do this kind of intensive reporting? (To get a glimpse of this possibility, read Loretta Tofani’s story on page 59. Having won a Pulitzer for her investigative work in the early 1990’s, she now despairs of being able to do this kind of reporting again.) Will emerging digital entities fill this essential reporting gap? Or perhaps citizen journalists and agitated members of social media communities—helped along by foundation-supported reporting tutorials and grants—will unearth these kind of problems.

While answers await, we can only hope that what we’ll never know won’t harm us. ■—Melissa Ludtke

Diving Into Data to Tell Untold Medical Stories

‘The U.S. press seemed to accept as established truth that cholesterol lowering is vital and that statins are the closest thing to wonder drugs. I’m not any smarter than my colleagues, I worried. Maybe I’m just wrong.’

BY JOHN CAREY

News Analysis & Commentary

HEALTH CARE

IS HEART SURGERY WORTH IT?

Physicians are questioning whether bypasses and angioplasties necessarily prolong patients' lives

BY JOHN CAREY

YOU START BREATHING hard after climbing stairs, and your chest hurts. You go to your doctor. Some reveal that arteries feeding your heart are severely narrowed. Your doctor sends you to the hospital for coronary bypass surgery or angioplasty to restore the blood flow to your heart. Despite the trauma of surgery, you're glad the blockage was caught in time, saving you from a potentially fatal heart attack.

There's just one problem with this happy tale of modern medicine: More and more doctors are questioning whether such heart procedures are actually extending patients' lives. One of them, Dr.

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45 | What Google's leap means for rivals



Nortin M. Hadler, professor of medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of *The Last Will Proven*, is urging the U.S. medical Establishment to rethink its most basic precepts of cardiovascular care. Bypass surgery in particular, he says, "should have been relegated to the archives 15 years ago."

That is an extreme view that is disputed by cardiac surgeons. "The reason thousands and thousands of bypass surgeries have been done is that [the procedure] is successful," says Dr. Timothy J. Gardner, co-editor of *Operative Cardiac Surgery* and a cardiovascular surgeon at Christiana Care Health System in Wilmington, Del.

Nevertheless, the data from clinical trials are clear: Except in a minority of patients with severe disease, bypass operations don't prolong life or prevent future heart attacks. Nor does angioplasty, in which narrowed vessels are expanded and then, typically, propped open with metal tubes called stents. "People often believe that having these procedures fixes the problem, as if a plumber came in and fixed the plumbing with a new piece of pipe," explains Dr. L. David Hillis, professor of cardiology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. "But it fundamentally doesn't fix the problem."

With doctors doing about 400,000 bypass surgeries and 1 million angioplasties a year—

PROFIT CENTER
Hearts are hospitals' bloodline

TOP: ISTOCKPHOTOS

medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was claiming that heart bypass surgery is worthless and possibly barbaric. Look into it, he suggested. Preposterous, I thought. We've all heard so many stories of lives being saved by heart surgery. But the clinical evidence showed Hadler is right. We did a big takeout explaining how—and why—medical outcomes with bypass operations are usually no better than with other treatments, such as regimens of drugs, diet and exercise.

That story opened a wider door to the community of medical skeptics. I followed up with a cover story, "Medical Guesswork," in May 2006 describing the weak evidence for the benefits of many medical procedures and treatments, from now-discredited tonsillectomies to spinal surgery.

The next year was taken up by other topics on my beat of covering science, technology, medicine, health and the environment from our Washington bureau. I did stories about food safety, climate change, and solar power, among others. But for our next medical project, Neil and I agreed, we needed to tackle the question of drug effectiveness. But how? The idea that drugs are not very effective was dismissed as being a story by one BusinessWeek editor: "Not surprising enough. Everyone knows that," he told us.

I didn't set out to question the importance of lowering cholesterol, the subject of my BusinessWeek cover story "Do Cholesterol Drugs Do Any Good?" (January 28, 2008). Like most reporters, I had assumed that keeping "bad" (LDL) cholesterol in check is one of the most important steps people can take to stay healthy. So it was a surprise to pore over the actual clinical trials data and discover that the evidence is weaker than most people think.

Arriving at that conclusion, however, took a long time, with some outside nudges and lucky breaks. The initial seed was

planted back in 2003 when Dr. Allen Roses, then a research vice president at GlaxoSmith-Kline, admitted the dirty little secret about drugs at a scientific meeting—that the large majority work only in a minority of people. I called my editor, Neil Gross, and said, "Wow, there's got to be something big we can do on the lack of effectiveness of many drugs, now that industry itself has made this admission."

Still, the idea percolated for several years, appearing occasionally as a factoid in smaller stories. Then Neil spotted another surprising medical assertion. Dr. Nortin Hadler, professor of

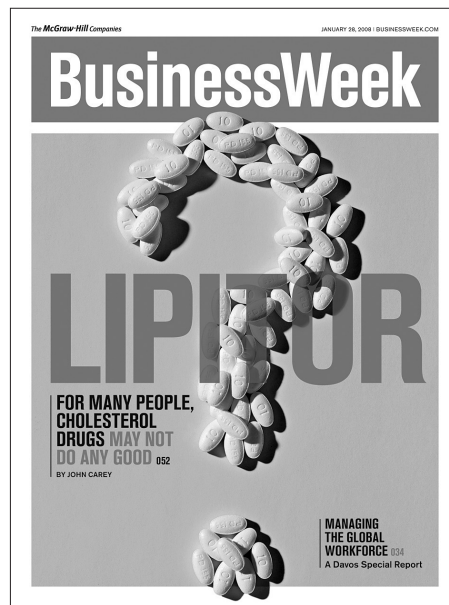
Digging Into Data

But one reader of the “Medical Guesswork” story urged us to look at a statistic called “number needed to treat” or NNT. The NNT simply describes how many people have to take a drug for one person to benefit. I poked around and found that, yes, NNTs are surprisingly high even for many “good” drugs. Beta-blockers, for instance, are seen as essential in treating congestive heart failure. Yet 24 people must take them to prevent one hospitalization from heart failure (thus, an NNT of 24), and 40 people must take them to prevent one death (NNT of 40).

The poster child for this problem of high NNTs, I decided, is a diabetes drug called Avandia. The drug does a great job controlling blood sugar. But after reading stacks of scientific papers and having long conversations with critics like Hadler and Dr. Robert Ewart, professor of family medicine at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, I became convinced that the drug’s control of blood sugar doesn’t translate into anything clinically meaningful for diabetics, such as fewer heart attacks or kidney failures. Avandia’s NNT is close to infinite.

Along the way, I also learned the sobering lesson that you can’t trust the published conclusions in many scientific papers, because the conclusions are not supported by the actual data.

Avandia hit the headlines in May 2007 after a study linked the drug to a higher risk of heart attacks. I figured that we had our news peg. The press is missing the real story—the fact that the drug simply doesn’t work, I told Neil. I pitched a story focusing on Avandia and the concept of NNT but also mentioning that blockbuster cholesterol-lowering drugs like Lipitor don’t work all that well



either, with NNTs over 100.

Could we sell the idea? The only people whose opinion really mattered were Editor in Chief Steve Adler and Executive Editor Ellen Pollock. I traveled up to New York from our Washington bureau to meet with them and Neil. They weren’t impressed with the tale of Avandia. Most readers wouldn’t have much interest in a diabetes drug, Steve said. But many of them are taking Lipitor or other cholesterol-lowering

drugs in the same family of so-called statins, he observed. We could do a major public service—and make a big splash—by exposing the limitations of those drugs.

Examining Statins

Gulp, I thought. Knocking down Avandia would have been easy. Taking on the statins was much harder. After all, it was clear that statins do have benefits in people already at risk for heart disease, such as those who have suffered heart attacks or are diabetics. It would be a difficult and nuanced story, I told Adler. “No problem,” he said.

I wasn’t so sure, even as the stack of papers from medical journals rose on my desk. But, fortunately, the pieces began to fall in place. I found more and more doctors, researchers and patients who no longer worship at the altar of lowering LDL cholesterol. There was also compelling new research that offered an explanation for the conundrum of why statins help those at risk for heart disease while doing little for otherwise healthy people who have elevated LDL cholesterol levels. The research showed that, in addition to lowering cholesterol, the drugs have another biochemical effect. They reduce the inflammation that may help cause heart disease.

We also got help from an unexpected source, Lipitor’s maker, Pfizer. The giant drug maker started to run full-page ads touting the benefits of Lipitor for those not at high risk for heart disease. The ads said that in one key three-and-a-half year clinical trial, “three percent of patients taking a sugar pill or placebo had a heart attack compared to two percent of patients taking Lipitor.” Bingo, I thought. By Pfizer’s own admission, 100 people have to take the drug for more than three years for one to benefit, an NNT

of 100. Everyone whose ears I bent about those numbers was surprised, especially considering that drug makers usually dismiss a 1 in 100 side effect as completely insignificant.

I wrote a draft. Then, with some trepidation, I asked Pfizer to comment on the story's details. The company scheduled an interview with a top scientist, then canceled at the last minute, saying it would only respond in writing. When I finally got the response, I was surprised and gratified that it didn't challenge our interpretations.

One mystery remained. Why hadn't the story already been done? The fact that cholesterol-lowering statins are less effective than most people think wasn't exactly new or deeply hidden. Top scientists had been making the case in scientific journals and other fora for years. But other than a few stories about cholesterol skeptics in the British press, the media had completely ignored the topic. The U.S. press seemed to accept as established truth that cholesterol lowering is vital and that statins are the closest thing to wonder drugs. I'm not any smarter than my colleagues, I worried. Maybe I'm just wrong.

The story sat on a shelf for a couple of weeks, while Neil and I fretted about what we might be missing. Then we had a stroke of luck. Results came out from a clinical trial called Enhance. Patients who were given both a statin and another drug that lowered their cholesterol further by a different mechanism showed no more benefit (on a measure of artery narrowing) than those given the statin alone. That was tantalizing evidence that cholesterol-lowering alone isn't always important. We had our news peg. We rushed to add the Enhance results to the story and to get the story into the magazine that week. Then we braced for the response.

We need not have worried. The vast majority of letters and comments that poured in from doctors, journalists and ordinary people were positive. The story won the country's top science writing award. I even heard later from people at Pfizer that company executives had wanted to write an angry rebuttal only to be told that there was nothing they could say because we got it right. And one of the story's key conclusions, that doctors should largely ignore cholesterol and

instead prescribe statins only to the smaller group of people at high risk for heart disease, was later supported by the results of a clinical trial, called JUPITER. The trial showed that people with high levels of inflammation (a key measure of risk) had fewer heart attacks while taking statins than those on placebo—even though they all had low levels of cholesterol to start.

The experience leaves me with a few simple-minded lessons. Question conventional wisdom. Examine the actual data in scientific papers rather than simply believe the conclusions or the press releases. Do the harder story, not the easy one. And work with great editors. Thanks, Neil and Steve. ■

John Carey is a senior correspondent in BusinessWeek's Washington bureau who has covered science, technology, medicine, health and the environment since 1989. His reporting about statins was recognized with the 2008 AAAS Science Journalism Award for magazine reporting; he has also received awards from the Deadline Club, the American Institute of Biological Sciences, the Overseas Press Club, and the Aviation/Space Writers Association.

Investigative Reporting on Medical Science: What Does It Take to Break Through the Commercial Spin?

'... it is almost impossible to get the story right when the fundamentally commercial goals for which the study has been done are covered up with so much industry-sponsored expertise.'

BY JOHN ABRAMSON

When it comes to real-time reporting on medical science, journalists (as well as many experts and even medical journals) have been largely relegated to the role of cheerleading for the industry, unable to fulfill their rightful role as critical investigators providing a balanced view. The most recent example is the reporting of the JUPITER trial,

which purported to show that people with normal cholesterol but elevated C-reactive protein levels benefit from being treated with the statin drug, Crestor.

My award for the most accurate coverage of this story goes hands down to ersatz (though some—surely including himself—would say uber-)journalist Stephen Colbert, who described the

study as “a great breakthrough in the battle to find things to prescribe to people who don't need them.” The rest of the coverage trailed far behind.

The Reporting Trail

About a week before reports of the JUPITER trial blanketed the media, a staff writer for a major newspaper

sought my comments on the still embargoed New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) article about the study. The authors reported that treatment of people with normal cholesterol but elevated levels of inflammation (as measured by a C-reactive protein test) with the statin drug Crestor reduced the risk of heart attack by 54 percent, serious cardiovascular complications in toto by 47 percent, and death by 20 percent. The article concluded that:

... the rates of a first major cardiovascular event and death from any cause were significantly reduced among the participants who received [Crestor] as compared with those who received placebo.

Clearly this story was going to have enormous impact on preventive medical care. I asked the writer if I could share the embargoed NEJM article with my colleague Jim Wright, who holds a medical and doctorate degree and is the managing director of the Therapeutics Initiative at The University of British Columbia, arguably one of the best centers for critical


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Rosuvastatin to Prevent Vascular Events in Men and Women with Elevated C-Reactive Protein

Paul M Ridker, M.D., Eleanor Danielson, M.J.A., Francisco A.H. Fonseca, M.D., Jacques Genest, M.D., Antonio M. Gotto, Jr., M.D., John J.P. Kastelein, M.D., Wolfgang Koenig, M.D., Peter Libby, M.D., Alberto J. Lorenzatti, M.D., Jean G. MacFadyen, B.A., Børge G. Nordestgaard, M.D., James Shepherd, M.D., James T. Willerson, M.D., Robert J. Glynn, Sc.D., for the JUPITER Study Group

drug research in the world. Jim and I reviewed the NEJM article individually and together and arrived at a very different overall impression of the import of the study's actual findings. We then presented our analysis to the journalist in a conference call.

Yes, there were significantly fewer serious cardiovascular events in the people treated with Crestor. But in terms of the actual benefit, 170 people had to be treated for a year to prevent one event at a cost of \$270,000 for the Crestor alone. This dollar figure did not include the cost of screening many more people with a C-reactive protein test and the extra doctor visits and lab work to make sure there were no adverse effects of treatment

with Crestor.

Nonetheless, fewer people with cardiovascular disease meant fewer people requiring expensive treatment and therefore savings, right? Wrong: The more important finding—which got short shrift in the NEJM article and none in the media coverage that followed—was that there was no difference in the overall rate of serious illnesses (called “serious adverse events”) that occurred in the Crestor and placebo groups. In other words, there weren't fewer sick people requiring hospital treatment in the Crestor group (they just had different kinds of serious illness), and therefore the savings realized on less cardiovascular care would be used taking care of

Silenced Words: An Op-ed That Couldn't Find a Home

John Abramson, Jim Wright, and Merrill Goozner, author of “The \$800 Million Pill: The Truth Behind the Cost of New Drugs,” coauthored an op-ed about the JUPITER trial that was rejected by The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal. Excerpts from it follow:

During the campaign, President-elect Barack Obama promised to make health insurance more affordable by preventing disease. It could work, but only if the money is spent on prevention programs that offer real value for money ...

[Yet] experts—most with financial ties to drug makers—are heralding the results of the JUPITER trial as

a paradigm-shifting, walk-off home run breakthrough. Physicians will likely begin testing the C-reactive protein (CRP) level of tens of millions of Americans. Aging baby boomers will soon have another number to worry about, and millions more relatively healthy people will begin taking statins to lower their CRP.

But how much disease would this strategy really prevent? The short answer is: None.

There is an even more troubling ethical and scientific problem with this study. If prevention of disease, rather than selling more drugs, was the primary goal of JUPITER, then all of these people hypothesized to be at increased risk of cardiovascular disease because of their elevated CRP

levels would have been provided with lifestyle modification counseling—known to reduce the risk of future cardiovascular disease. Not offering lifestyle counseling to the people in the study was unethical, because it withheld the most effective therapy. It also rendered the findings of the study meaningless—the study design created an artificial situation in which people at increased risk were deprived of the first and most effective line of defense. Why wasn't lifestyle counseling offered? We can only speculate that it would have diluted any benefit of drug therapy and weakened the case for wider use of the sponsor's drug. ■

other illnesses.

There was also the finding that more people taking Crestor developed diabetes, which would not have been included in the “serious adverse event” category because rarely does an adult who develops diabetes require hospitalization.

The 20 percent lower death rate among people treated with Crestor was certainly noteworthy. However, a closer look showed that 400 people had to be treated with Crestor for a year to prevent one death, at a cost of about \$580,000 for the drugs alone, not including all of the blood tests and doctor visits that would be necessary to treat all 400 people with Crestor.

But there was an even more troubling ethical and scientific problem with the study. The people in the study were hypothesized to be at increased risk of heart disease because of their elevated C-reactive protein levels. In addition, 41 percent had metabolic syndrome (a complex of risk factors that derive largely from being overweight and underactive), and 15 percent smoked cigarettes. Without doubt, the

best way for these people to decrease their risk of heart disease is to make positive changes in their lifestyle—routinely exercise, eat a healthy diet without unnecessary calories, and stop smoking. Previous randomized trials have also shown that participation in comprehensive lifestyle modification programs significantly decreases the risk of cardiovascular disease as well as diabetes. But counseling on the importance of healthy lifestyle changes wasn’t even included in the study protocol.

So not including lifestyle counseling for everyone in the study wasn’t just an ethical breach (withholding optimal therapy in the context of a clinical trial) but it was a scientific breach (at best the results showed what happens when people with elevated C-reactive protein levels are provided with substandard medical care).

We discussed these issues at length with the reporter but to no avail. When published, his article, like the others in major newspapers, did not address the fact that there was no decrease in serious illness overall or that optimal

therapy had been withheld. Instead the breakthrough nature of the study was universally proclaimed.

What Got Published

What follows is a sampling of what major newspapers reported about the JUPITER trial:

The New York Times opened its front-page story with “A large new study suggests that millions more people could benefit from taking the cholesterol-lowering drugs known as statins, even if they have low cholesterol, because the drugs can significantly lower their risk of heart attacks, strokes and death.”

The Wall Street Journal and Los Angeles Times reported that “an eagerly anticipated study ... found that statin drugs ... can halve the risk of heart attacks and stroke in seemingly healthy patients as well.”

Page One coverage in **The Washington Post** had a similarly enthusiastic opening: “A highly anticipated study has produced powerful evidence that a simple blood test can spot seemingly healthy people who are at increased risk for a heart attack or stroke and that giving them a widely used drug offers potent protection against the nation’s leading killers.”

Here are two examples of editorials about the study:

The Boston Globe used the headline “Breakthrough at the Brigham,” the hometown hospital where the lead author does his research, on its editorial. Then it heaped on adulation—“game-changing” and “paradigm shifting”—and concluded that Crestor’s “benefit was significant.”

The New York Times editorialized: “A large new study seems to suggest that millions of people with low cholesterol could benefit from taking the cholesterol-lowering drugs known as statins. That would be a boon for some drug companies, but whether it would be good for all patients remains an open question.”

Notice the question is not whether

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heartwire

AHA 2008: JUPITER Hits New Orleans: Landmark Study Shows Statins Benefit Healthy Individuals With High CRP Levels
from Heartwire — a professional news service of WebMD

Michael O'Riordan

ADVERTISMENT

INFORMATION FROM INDUSTRY

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A first-day story—reported on a WebMD news service—describes the release of the JUPITER trial findings at the American Heart Association meeting that took place in November 2008.

there is any overall benefit, but whether all patients would benefit from taking a statin. (I guess, in some eyes, we've all become patients.)

Moving Against Message

Jim and I, with considerable input from Merrill Gozner, former Chicago Tribune economics correspondent and author of "The \$800 Million Pill," wrote an op-ed piece, hoping to get a fair description of the study's results into play. But our efforts were unrequited: Our piece has the distinction of having been rejected by The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal. [See excerpts from this op-ed in box on page 41.]

The misreporting of the JUPITER trial is by no means an isolated event. John Carey, a BusinessWeek reporter, describes in this issue of Nieman Reports the fear and trembling that he felt as a journalist challenging the sacred cow of preventive medicine—driving down cholesterol in people without heart disease. [See Carey's story on page 38.] He persevered, and his award-winning cover story showed how doctors, patients and journalists were led down a faux path for years with the idea that the best way to decrease the burden of heart disease is to lower cholesterol with statins. He deserves great credit for his courage and for explaining the devil in the details with grace and simplicity: The much heralded 36 percent reduction in heart disease risk achieved by treating people who have high blood pressure and at least three other risk factors with a statin translates into needing to treat 100 such people for three years in order to prevent a single heart attack. Not such a breakthrough as we were all led to believe at the time.



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CLINICAL DIRECTIONS ▶

The JUPITER Trial: Will You Change Your Practice?

On November 9, 2008, we published an [article](#) and an accompanying [editorial](#) on the results of JUPITER, a large randomized trial in which patients without hyperlipidemia who were receiving rosuvastatin had significantly fewer cardiovascular events than did patients receiving placebo. In Clinical Directions, a new interactive feature, we invite you to respond to questions raised by the results of the trial, to contribute your own thoughts, and to read the comments of your peers. Polling and commenting closed on November 26, 2008.

FROM THE EDITORS EXPAND VIEW

The JUPITER Trial: Will You Change Your Practice?

November 9, 2008

In patients with hyperlipidemia, treatment with statins reduces cardiovascular risk, even in people without a history of cardiovascular disease.¹ However, nearly half of all first cardiovascular events occur in people whose low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels are below current thresholds for lipid-lowering therapy.^{2,3} Therefore, recent research has sought to refine our ability to identify people who are at risk and to find interventions capable of reducing that risk.

[READ MORE](#)

QUESTIONS

Do you believe, on the basis of the JUPITER trial results, that the approach to laboratory screening of apparently healthy adults should be changed?

Yes, the trial results indicate that the approach to laboratory screening should be changed. 49%

No, the trial results do not provide a basis for a change in the approach to laboratory screening. 51%

Do you believe, on the basis of the JUPITER trial results, that the therapeutic use of statins in apparently healthy adults should be changed?

Yes, the trial results indicate that

Closed for Comments
as of November 26, 2008

Soon after the JUPITER trial results were published in The New England Journal of Medicine, physicians were asked to comment and respond to questions about whether the findings would lead them to change their practice.

Carey's article in BusinessWeek also probably marked the beginning of the decline of the "lowering cholesterol with drugs is the best way to prevent heart disease" theory. But the hype couldn't be exposed in real time,¹ only through the rearview mirror, after the positive effect on marketing of statin drugs had been well established.

There's a structural impediment to good medical reporting that needs to be illuminated: The fundamental purpose of medical science has been transformed from a public good supported primarily with public funding into a commodity produced primarily by commercial sponsorship. Eighty-five percent of the clinical trials, like the JUPITER trial, which inform doctors and the public about optimal medical care, are now funded by industry. Pharmaceutical companies own and guard the primary data from their clinical trials as proprietary information, like the recipe for Coke. And regardless of what the drug companies and their

paid experts claim, the fundamental purpose of those studies is to maximize return on investment and return those profits to shareholders.

Researchers from Massachusetts General Hospital's Department of Psychiatry found that when the authors of a study have financial relationships with the manufacturer of the drug being studied, the odds are almost five times greater that the results will come out in favor of the sponsor's drug compared to studies of exactly the same drugs that are noncommercially sponsored. And when the authors have financial ties to the sponsor and the study is commercially sponsored, the odds of a positive outcome go up to 8.4.

The JUPITER study is an excellent case in point. It was sponsored by AstraZeneca (the maker of Crestor), the authors had financial ties with the sponsor, and the lead author is a co-owner of the patent on the test for C-reactive protein. Most of the stories about JUPITER informed readers

¹ A year before Carey's article was published, Jim Wright and I had a commentary published in The Lancet showing that the cholesterol guidelines that compel doctors to put women and people over 65 who don't have heart disease or diabetes on statins simply and unambiguously misrepresented the results of clinical trials to justify their recommendations. Our commentary, exposing the lie of the guidelines that were and still are responsible for millions of Americans being put on statin drugs, received virtually no press coverage. —J.A.

about these conflicts, an important step in improving reporting but in no way sufficient to protect readers (including doctors) from the commercial bias that remains hidden in the details.

With great respect for an excellent journalist, Carey appears now to be looking at the results of the JUPITER trial through the windshield, not the rearview mirror. Not surprising, perhaps, since it is almost impossible to get the story right when the fundamentally commercial goals for which the study has been done are covered up with so much industry-sponsored expertise. My advice to medical journalists charged with reporting developments in clinical medicine includes these guiding principles:

- Understand that the fundamental mission of commercially sponsored clinical trials is commercial.
- Search for the ways in which the commercial objective might have trumped dispassionate science—in the study design, analysis and presentation.
- Realize that identifying the financial ties isn't enough. Readers won't understand the extent to which the fundamental nature of the results can be spun, as in JUPITER.
- Recognize that presenting the comments of one or two experts who don't have financial ties to interested drug makers isn't enough. The majority of the reflection on the import of the findings should be from nonfinan-

cially conflicted experts.

For better or worse, good medical reporting now requires an investigative approach. Given the strained circumstances under which journalists need to report today, this approach can sound like “mission impossible,” and it might be. But readers need to know that, too. ■

John Abramson, trained as a primary care physician, is a clinical instructor at Harvard Medical School, author of “Overdosed America: The Broken Promise of American Medicine,” and serves as an expert consultant to plaintiffs’ attorneys in litigation involving the pharmaceutical industry.

Changing the Drumbeat of Typical Health Reporting

At HealthNewsReview.org ‘... we are on the lookout for those stories that include unsubstantiated claims made in the course of reporting about health.’

BY GARY SCHWITZER

“The level of health care investigative reporting has never been better in this country even in small- and medium-sized newspapers. But the once- or twice- or three-times-a-year stories don’t make up for the daily drumbeat of stories. Health care reporting in this country is a disgrace day in and day out. The daily drumbeat is a disgrace. ‘There are no breakthroughs’—that should be the next paragraph in the story when anyone makes such a claim.” —Don Barlett

This was the message Don Barlett, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter, delivered to an attentive gathering at the Association of Health Care Journalists conference in 2005. Well received as his words might have been with this crowd, the “drumbeat” of news reporting of claims of breakthroughs, cures and progress in medical research and clinical care has not gone away. In fact, such reporting—notable for its lack of *any* investigative muscle—abounds in what is published and broadcast daily in U.S. journalism. In “Selling Sickness: How the World’s Biggest Pharmaceutical Companies Are Turning Us All Into Patients,” authors Ray Moynihan and Alan Cassels described the reporting on one such story as “sycophantic ... flaccid.”

Still, some terrific in-depth health care stories, investigating key questions, do appear, though less frequently than is necessary and possible. The dissonance between what health

coverage Americans receive and what they deserve is, in part, related to the direction in which those deciding on what the news is choose to go. When news reporting is seen as trumpeting new treatments, tests, products or procedures, and it is done without applying watchdog oversight, then what the news consumers get will be along the lines of what Barlett described. When reporting about health is seen, instead, as the exploration of evidence, cost-effectiveness, comparative treatments, medical technology assessment, access to medical care and disparities in care, then the news we read, see and hear will be very different.

Because I believe in the value gained when reporters take the road of exploring evidence, I’ve led a three-year effort at HealthNewsReview.org that demonstrates to journalists and the public how coverage of health care and reporting on the claims of researchers should be scrutinized. Our project is grounded in the premise that news

The screenshot shows the HealthNewsReview.org website. At the top, there are navigation links: HOME, ABOUT US, CONTACT, and SITE MAP. The main header reads "HEALTH NEWS REVIEW.ORG" with the subtitle "Grades for Health News Reporting". Below this, there are links for "FIND REVIEWS", "SIGN UP FOR EXTRAS", and "RSS". The page is divided into two main columns: "LATEST STORY REVIEWS" and "FIVE STAR STORIES".

LATEST STORY REVIEWS (Search all 716 reviews)

- Today's Matters of the Heart: Dr. Nancy's Personal Wake-Up Call** (Today, February 4, 2009, Rating: ★)

A 6-minute segment almost completely devoid of evidence and data, riding the single personal anecdote of the network's medical editor. Disease-mongering. Incomplete story on heart CT scans....
- Boytox: Botox for Men** (TIME, January 26, 2009, Rating: ★★★)

Not serious health journalism. Pure infotainment with more "tainment" than info. It probably won't lead any reader to do anything stupid or dangerous - a low bar to pass over, but there it is....
- Keep That 1876 Journal Handy, It Just May Help Treat Diabetes** (THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, January 20, 2009, Rating: ★★★)

An engaging piece, detailing some of the behind the scenes

FIVE STAR STORIES

- Stem Cell Research: The Quest Resumes** (TIME, February 9, 2009, Rating: ★★★★★)

This is a first-rate piece of magazine journalism - a strong example of how journalists can educate readers about the importance and difficulties of scientific research....
- Study adds to evidence of vaccine safety** (AP Associated Press, January 26, 2009, Rating: ★★★★★)

The story does a reasonable job in describing the study. Although there are some lapses in the

On the right side, there is a "JOIN THE DISCUSSION" section with a play button icon and the text "Give your opinions, review our reviews and exchange ideas". Below that is a "PUBLISHER'S NOTE" featuring a photo of Professor Gary Schwitzer and the text: "First Health Journalism Award to Milwaukee Journal Sentinel".

“Does the story ...”:

- adequately discuss costs?
- avoid disease mongering?
- evaluate the quality of the evidence?
- quantify the potential benefits?
- quantify the potential harms?
- establish the true novelty of the idea?
- establish the availability of the approach?
- use independent sources and identify conflicts of interest?
- compare the new idea with existing options?
- appear to rely on a news release?

reporting on health issues has a major influence on how the public thinks about these critical issues and, in turn, on how people regard their own well-being and treatment options.

Journalist Trudy Lieberman has written about the connection she sees between the work of journalists and the perception left with consumers: “What the heck, you may be asking, do journalists have to do with the soaring costs of pharmaceuticals or a \$100 million device called the ‘particle accelerator’ that uses protons to bombard cancerous tumors? Journalists, after all, don’t create those products or determine their price tag. We do, though, indirectly help market them by the kinds of stories we write, which can stimulate demand. Stories touting the benefits of the latest gee-whiz drug, coupled with ads by the drug maker, are powerful stuff.”¹

HealthNewsReview.org is not supported by advertising; in fact, it carries none on its Web site. Its sole source of support is the Foundation for Informed Medical Decision Making, a nonprofit

organization founded by Dartmouth Medical School’s Jack Wennberg and colleagues to ensure “that people understand their choices and have the information they need to make sound decisions affecting their health and well-being.”² On our Web site, we have a list of independent experts³ who certify that they have no commercial ties to the pharmaceutical industry and have made themselves available to speak with journalists. (Others willing to do the same have made transparent their financial ties.)

Rating Stories

At HealthNewsReview.org we grade news reporting from 60 leading news organizations; we are on the lookout for those stories that include unsubstantiated claims made in the course of reporting about health. Three reviewers—all of whom must agree to forego any direct support from drug or device manufacturers—evaluate each story by applying 10 standard criteria. Each begins with the phrase

After a story is graded, we send an e-mail to the person who wrote it and provide a direct link to our entire review. This offers reporters the opportunity to understand what they could have done to improve the quality of their reporting—and the hope is that some of this will be applied on subsequent stories.

The majority of stories we’ve reviewed reflect a kid-in-the-candy-store portrayal of the U.S. health care system. By this we mean that everything about the news is made to look promising and risk-free, and whatever the new drug or treatment or device is, it comes without any hint of a societal price tag.

On the issue of cost, journalists generally perform poorly, as they do with quantification of benefits and harms. Of the first 700 stories we reviewed, 61 to 70 percent of them failed on those three criteria.⁴ However, between 2006, our project’s first year, and 2008, it’s been uplifting for us to see that the average scores have improved on seven of the 10 criteria. To us this means that perhaps our important feedback mechanism is making

¹ See Lieberman’s article, “As Health Care Gaps Grow, Coverage Shrinks,” from the Spring 2006 issue of Nieman Reports at www.niemanreports.org.

² Information about this foundation can be found at www.fimdm.org/about.php.

³ www.healthnewsreview.org/independentexperts.php

⁴ A more detailed analysis of review findings can be found in a Public Library of Science article Schwitzer wrote at <http://medicine.plosjournals.org/perlserv/?request=get-document&doi=10.1371/journal.pmed.0050095&ct=1>.

some difference as reporters absorb these observations—and awareness is leading to positive change.

Screening Tests: A Particular Concern

Our review process has picked up, however, a troubling trend. In many news reports—including some done by major news organizations—a crusading advocacy seems to exist when it comes to promoting screening tests. And this happens even when such guidance conflicts with the best medical evidence. (We've written several articles about this topic, including one on our Web site, www.healthnewsreview.org, that offers a good summary of the evidence and our argument.) While the intent of such stories might be good, many reporters don't seem to realize that in promoting screening tests outside the boundaries of evidence there is a good chance they cause more harm than good.

Not only does such reporting shed the journalistic pursuit of providing information that has been verified,

as much as it is possible to do so, in most cases it is just plain wrong. As the saying goes, "It ain't what people don't know that bothers me; it's what they know that just ain't so." The be-

**One thing we've noticed
is how easy it is for
journalists to become
marketing arms of
industry.**

lief underpinning these stories is that screening of (nearly) any kind makes sense for everyone. But that "just ain't so." These pro-screening crusades often promote costly approaches, such as CT scans of the heart or of the lungs or of the full body, which convince many new "worried well" people to enter the health care system, costing them and

all of us dearly.

If even the most rudimentary investigative effort was made with stories about screening tests—examining them along the lines posed by our 10 questions—then the information that gets out to the public via news organizations would be very different than is happening today. One thing we've noticed is how easy it is for journalists to become marketing arms of industry. But our experience also tells us that this doesn't have to happen when journalism—as best practiced—remains foremost in the mind of reporters. An ounce of investigation, it turns out, can yield a pound of pride in news coverage when the story a reporter writes does not sound like an echo chamber for the industry's message. ■

Gary Schwitzer, the publisher of HealthNewsReview.org, is an associate professor at the University of Minnesota School of Journalism & Mass Communication. He also writes a blog about these topics at <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/schwitzer/healthnews>.

Examining Water Supplies in Search of Pharmaceutical Drugs

'Secrecy, it turned out, was our biggest enemy, but not for the reasons investigative reporters typically encounter'

BY RICHARD T. PIENCIAK

An investigative reporting project sometimes begins with a whispered tip from an informed insider or a stack of leaked documents from someone with an ax to grind. Frequent topics include corruption, faulty regulations, laws that aren't enforced properly, or the failure to protect the rights of the downtrodden. How about one where the key is sitting in plain sight, even if it is invisible to the human eye, waiting to be discovered—a subject like pharmaceuticals in our

drinking water?

The genesis of The Associated Press (AP) project, "PharmaWater," can be traced to reporting our national writer Martha Mendoza did in 2005 about dangers associated with birth control patches. She'd noticed that in Europe special disposal packets are required to prevent estrogen from seeping into the environment. When Mendoza mentioned this to one of her journalist friends, she was informed about several studies involving traces of pharma-

ceuticals being detected in water. A while later this friend, who wrote for a small community newspaper, retired and urged Mendoza to keep looking into this troubling topic.

In the fall of 2007, I rejoined the AP in the newly created position of national investigative editor. Against a landscape of tighter budgets and shrinking investigative-enterprise units at newspapers and other media outlets, AP executives had formulated a plan to expand the news agency's

investigative reporting effort throughout the United States. The challenges and opportunities sounded terrific, especially to a guy who'd spent 13 satisfying years working for this wire service in the 1970's and 1980's. Five senior reporters—including Mendoza, who'd won a Pulitzer Prize, been a Knight Science Journalism Fellow, and was a longtime investigative reporter—were assigned full time to form the AP National Investigative Team; they'd work solo, in tandem, and with other AP staffers.

I asked each team member for a list of project possibilities. Among her many ideas, Mendoza proposed an in-depth examination of trace concentrations of pharmaceuticals in our waterways. She'd already come across more than a dozen articles in scientific journals—mostly obscure ones and most of them from Europe—which documented the adverse effects that pharmaceutical drugs in water were having on fish and other wildlife.

Her idea caught my attention. As a reporter or editor, I'd covered toxic dumps, polluted waters, dioxin contamination, Three Mile Island, environmental dangers at Ground Zero, and unprotected chemical plants as open targets for terrorists. Mendoza let me know that scientists were calling pharmaceuticals in water “a potential sleeping giant” and, before long, our team had embarked on a long, exciting journey that would culminate with our issuing a wake-up call to America.

Gathering Information

The PharmaWater team consisted of three reporters. Mendoza was joined by Los Angeles-based Justin Pritchard, who'd won a George Polk Award for a series detailing disproportionate on-the-job death rates in the United States among Mexican-born workers, and Boston-based Jeff Donn, who possesses a doctorate in French literature from Princeton and a deep background in science and medical stories.

Newsgathering was partitioned: Mendoza would concentrate on individual scientists and ongoing research projects, Pritchard's focus would be



Carla Wieser, fishery biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, takes a blood sample from a carp in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, near Boulder City, Nevada, to study effects of pharmaceuticals in water on fish. November 2007. Photo by Jae C. Hong/The Associated Press.

on treatment technologies, and Donn would delve into the science community. Each read the literature and called around to learn about testing and test results. To keep us on track—coordinate our efforts and assess the worthiness of this project—we had weekly conference calls lasting upwards of three hours. We shared written updates and used a wiki for, among other purposes, the posting of summaries of every known study. We created databases and spreadsheets.

In all, during the months leading up to publication of our first three-part series in March 2008, the team reviewed hundreds of scientific reports, analyzed many federal drinking water databases, visited numerous environmental study sites and treatment plants, and interviewed more than 230 officials, academics and scientists. To do this, Donn went to New York and Philadelphia—two cities with major pharmaceutical discoveries in their watersheds; Pritchard journeyed to a treatment plant in Fountain Valley, California, where reverse osmosis is used to remove a wide range of pollutants, including pharmaceuticals, but at a heavy financial cost. And Mendoza

A Water Trail of Antibiotics in India

Margie Mason, an AP reporter then based in Hanoi, Vietnam and now a Nieman Global Health Fellow, contributed to the PharmaWater story with reporting about the large amount of antibiotics being spewed from drug factories in India. As reported in her story, “World's highest drug levels entering India stream,” when researchers tested treated wastewater from a plant where about 90 Indian drug factories dump their residues, it was found that “the supposedly cleaned water was a floating medicine cabinet—a soup of 21 different active pharmaceutical ingredients ...” As a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Global Health fellow, Mason will spend time this summer doing additional reporting on antibiotic resistance. Her AP story can be read at http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090125/ap_on_re_as/pharmawater_india. ■

traveled to Lake Mead in Nevada to watch as scientists stunned seven-pound common carps, scooped them up, and deposited them into 50-quart Coleman ice chests for transport to shore and then to aquatic toxicologists in laboratories across the country.

To be sure, some of the latest environmental research about source water was being discussed publicly—if not widely—in specialized forums. For example, Mendoza and Pritchard attended the 6th International Conference on Pharmaceuticals and Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals in Water, in Costa Mesa, California. Even with such discussions going on among scientists, obtaining actual test results proved to be quite difficult. And no one was talking openly about pharmaceuticals in drinking water.

We had hoped that agencies like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and U.S. Geological Survey or industry associations of water purveyors had comprehensive test results for all major U.S. cities that we could use. No such luck. The data didn't exist or were being kept under wraps.

Pushing Past Secrecy and Fear

Secrecy, it turned out, was our biggest enemy, but not for the reasons investigative reporters typically encounter—well, except for post-9/11 terrorism concerns. I'd always believed that we'd have tough issues to deal with as we got ready to write and publish. We all knew, and discussed many times at length, how critical it would be to balance the importance of our findings against the need not to scare the bejesus out of everyone. In our presentation of the facts, we'd make every effort to be evenhanded and nonalarmist. What none of us expected, however, was the level of resistance we encountered in the reporting process.

We learned that the American Water Works Association Research Foundation (it has since changed its name to the Water Research Foundation) had been involved with testing across the country, but the foundation's executive director declined to name the 20 different drinking water treatment plants where pharmaceuticals had been detected in water that was eventually used by more than 10 million people. He said the foundation had assured secrecy to participants of its study. Citing confidentiality agreements, he

As with industry association folks, several local water utilities and city governments acknowledged they had tested the water but would not reveal results. In some places, officials wouldn't speak to us at all. Repeated calls were met with repeated brushbacks.

added, "It's a hard topic to talk about without creating fear in the general public." We'd hear that refrain often during the ensuing months.

We decided to collect data ourselves and began by surveying the nation's 50 largest cities, along with the nation's largest water providers, which added another dozen major utilities to our list. We also called on at least one smaller community water provider in each of the 50 states. Even though the AP has reporters in every state to whom such calls could have been assigned, the three PharmaWater reporters divvied them up along with the e-mails. We wanted to be absolutely certain that our questions, and the answers, were apples and apples.

Some of our initial interviews left us unable to confirm even that the water in specific cities had been tested. From there, deeper reporting problems emerged: As with industry association folks, several local water utilities and city governments acknowledged they had tested the water but would not reveal results. In some places,

officials wouldn't speak to us at all. Repeated calls were met with repeated brushbacks. For example, New York City water officials declined repeated requests for an interview and waited more than three months before participating in the AP survey, supplying information only after being informed that every other major city in the nation had cooperated. We shamed them into talking to us.

Even before New York City officials reluctantly spoke with us, Donn had discovered that the New York state health department and the U.S. Geological Survey had detected heart medicine, infection fighters, estrogen, anticonvulsants, a mood stabilizer, and the active ingredient in an antianxiety medication in the city's watershed upstate. Ultimately, the city's Department of Environmental Protection informed us that it does not test its downstate drinking water.

In Emporia, Kansas, Ron Rhodes, the city's water treatment plant supervisor, explained why he wouldn't disclose whether his community's source water or drinking water had been tested for pharmaceuticals. "Well, it's because of 9/11," he said. "We want everybody to guess." When we asked how it would endanger anyone if the public knew whether Emporia's water has been screened for minute concentrations of pharmaceutical compounds, he replied, "We're not putting out more information than we have to put out. How about that?"

In conversations with other water officials, we heard much the same. Philadelphia officials balked at first, then relented, but not before a city water department official declared: "It would be irresponsible to communicate to the public about this issue, as doing so would only generate questions that scientific research has not yet answered. We don't want to create the perception where people

would be alarmed.”

Security-conscious officials in Arlington, Texas, gave us information in drips and drabs. First, they said they’d detected drugs in the city’s source waters but wouldn’t say which ones, or in what amounts, or whether any such drugs had survived the treatment process. Next, the mayor told us a trace amount of one pharmaceutical had survived the treatment process and had been detected in drinking water. He declined to name the drug, saying identifying it could prompt a terrorist to intentionally release more of it, causing significant harm to residents.

Three months later, after we’d filed public records requests—and after assurances from the Texas Attorney General that the terrorism concerns were not well founded—the secret was revealed: Drinking water in Arlington had tested positive for the antianxiety medication meprobamate. The public announcement was made in June 2008; the water samples had been taken in October 2006.

What Reporting Revealed

One year after publication of the first set of PharmaWater stories—which checked in at about 17,000 words—it is rare to find anyone who hasn’t at least heard something about this story. Most people now know the nation’s drinking water supplies are contaminated with minute concentrations of pharmaceuticals, most often excreted down sewers as the unused portion of the medicines we take with increasing regularity. And while science has not yet been able to determine the extent of any possible long-term dangers, the AP findings are sobering:

- At least 46 million Americans consume water contaminated with prescription and over-the-counter drugs. That number is no doubt a gross undercount—most cities and water suppliers do not test. (Our first series, published in March 2008, had tallied 41 million; a follow-up survey six months later added five million.) This year we are working



Duane Moser, an assistant research professor with Desert Research Institute, collects water samples from the Las Vegas Wash in Henderson, Nevada. October 2007. *Photo by Jae C. Hong/The Associated Press.*

on comparing the communities now contained in our results with a new research project that will probably document an additional 10 million or so.

- In the wild, scientists have found reason to blame pharmaceuticals in the water for severe reproductive problems in many types of fish—razorback suckers and male fathead minnows with lower sperm counts, male carp now called feminized fish, and female fish developing male genital organs. There are problems with other wildlife: kidney failure in vultures, impaired reproduction in mussels, and inhibited growth in algae.
- In the laboratory, there are growing indications that small amounts of medication have affected human embryonic kidney cells, human blood cells, and human breast cancer cells. The cancer cells proliferated too quickly, the kidney cells grew too slowly, and the blood cells showed biological activity associated with inflammation.
- Our follow-up series, in September 2008, revealed that hospitals and long-term care facilities annu-

ally dump an estimated 250 million pounds of unused or outdated pharmaceuticals and contaminated packaging. Again, we had to gather this data and do the calculations; up to half of that total could be the drugs themselves.

Publication of our initial stories—with graphics, charts, rollover maps, scores of photos, video and interactive multimedia showing how drugs travel from human ingestion to the kitchen sink—prompted reaction we could not have anticipated. What we’d discovered became front-page news worldwide, on all media platforms, and especially on the Web. Our reporters did TV and radio interviews. A full-length piece appeared in JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association. The president of the Society of Toxicology wrote, “The public has a legitimate right to know and the AP story ... will lead us more quickly to the answers we need to have.”

Within hours of our project hitting the wire, the first of what would be several congressional hearings on pharmaceuticals in water was announced by the U.S. Senate Committee on

Environment & Public Works. When Senator Barbara Boxer opened the session, she drew attention to the prior secrecy and lack of oversight with a stinging admonishment of the EPA's top water expert: "The Associated Press did your work—and they're telling us what's in the water."

The attention our reporting received—combined with praise we've heard for the stories' fairness and accuracy—has been gratifying. But we've just begun—with PharmaWater

and other national investigative efforts. At this writing, we are pursuing research about how much U.S.-based pharmaceutical manufacturers contribute to the drug inventory in the environment. President Obama has called for more study and focus on this issue, and the scientific community shows signs of increased concern about the possible links between drugs in our water supplies and emerging medical problems such as increases in the incidence of early puberty and

antibiotic resistance. We have little doubt that the PharmaWater story will be with us at the AP for many years to come; regrettably, our reporting tells us these issues will be front and center with most Americans, too, for many decades. ■

Richard T. Pienciak is the national investigative editor at The Associated Press. He is an author and former assistant managing editor at The (N.Y.) Daily News.

Investigating the Pharmaceutical Industry on a Blog

'... evidence itself often emerged as the centerpiece, which has a strong impact on the audience when they see for themselves the incriminating paper trail.'

BY ED SILVERMAN

Two years ago, I began a grand experiment on the Internet—I launched a blog called Pharmed to focus on the pharmaceutical industry, which I had been following for more than a decade for The Star-Ledger in New Jersey. There were several reasons I did so: The newspaper was looking for ways to embrace and exploit the Internet, and I was interested in getting ahead of the curve by finding new ways to cover my beat.

The gambit worked. Nowadays, reporters meet some of their best sources online. Take the case of the disgusted sales representative. I encountered this person after posting an item on Pharmed, which I ran full time with up to 10 newsy posts every day. Some were grabbed from other media, providing links to the original story; other stories, I generated myself. The blog's audience was diverse, although they were drawn to it by an interest in news about the pharmaceutical industry. Comments often developed into informative discussions and heated

debates among people both in and out of the business.

One day, a person commented about a Pfizer item. These remarks clearly demonstrated that this person had inside information about sales practices, so I asked this anonymous commenter to send me a private e-mail in hopes of learning more. A few days later, an e-mail arrived, and we began a correspondence that led, in time, to telephone conversations. Still, for weeks I didn't know this person's true identity, and for a while I was unable to verify many details I was being told about allegedly illegal marketing activities for an HIV medicine.

Eventually, I gained this person's trust. And that's when the documents began to arrive in my e-mail box—dozens of them. Some were internal e-mails and memos, others were company manuals and presentations from meetings. More time was spent on the phone digesting all this material and then placing it in chronological order to tell a complicated story about

employees who stretched rules that appeared to violate Pfizer policy and, more importantly, a corporate integrity agreement with federal authorities.

In some ways, this approach to investigating a story was similar to what I'd done when I reported on these same topics for The Star-Ledger—meet sources, gain their trust, research information received, then flesh out the story. What made this different was not so much how I reported the story but how I was able to tell it. On my blog, once I had verified that the documents were authentic, I used them—in their entirety—to illustrate the marketing violations, which Pfizer acknowledged were being investigated.

Each post in my three-part series contained a few introductory paragraphs that offered a brief, narrative setup explaining the background and significance. After that, I let the reproduced documents do the rest; their mere presence was powerful enough to convince visitors to my blog of the problems my story highlighted.¹

¹ One of Silverman's stories in his series about Pfizer and AIDS drugs can be read at www.pharmed.com/2008/02/new-aids-drugs-may-fail-after-inaccurate-test.

The Value of Quick Hits

This story describes just one way that Pharmalot altered my approach to investigating and disseminating news. I was no longer confined to the conventional structure of a news story that relied heavily on narrative, despite the importance it has in explaining context and fleshing out an interesting tale. Instead, evidence itself often emerged as the centerpiece, which has a strong impact on the audience when they see for themselves the incriminating paper trail.

I also tried to write stories in a way that they can be told over the radio. By doing this I returned to a more conversational style that connects with people in a way that the dispassionate newspaper tone often fails to do.

Most of the stories on Pharmalot were 300 to 500 words in length, and they rarely appeared as part of a longer series, as the piece about Pfizer did. I did examine other issues and spent days, even weeks, compiling substantive posts (exceeding 1,000 words) that have resembled the sort of in-depth piece that would appear in a Sunday newspaper. But most of time I investigated topics on a piecemeal basis.

Let me explain. When I wrote for the newspaper, a major story might later yield some interesting follow-ups. But often, what I might consider equally interesting tidbits rarely merited additional stories. The exception was a big event being closely followed by a huge audience. Most subjects, though, rarely warranted such an approach. Instead, those new pieces of information were destined to remain lodged in a notebook, just as colorful anecdotes sometimes get left on the cutting-room floor.

It turns out that Pharmalot was

a natural home for stories that one might not find in a newspaper. During 2008, for example, I spent a great deal of time closely following an ongoing investigation by the Senate Finance Committee into undisclosed conflicts of interest by academic researchers who simultaneously receive sought-after National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants and payments from drug makers for consulting, speaking or research. More than 30 professors, many at

A quick hit can satisfy enough appetites for those hungry for more information about a juicy story. Having this flexibility to post about an e-mail here or a medical study there made it possible for me to stay in the game and attract readers and sources who cared about the topic.

prominent universities, are targets of this investigation. Not surprisingly, this has been a long-running, national story in the mainstream media.

Through old-fashioned digging and sourcing, I broke the story of one high-profile professor, Brown University's Martin Keller, who is under investigation.² I was also able to get other scoops by looking for sources who would provide information about other professors; these blog posts shared with readers my reporting on important developments. For instance, after one national newspaper broke the story about the committee investigation into a Stanford University psychiatry professor, I continued to post more items that raised questions about his grant, specifically about how Stanford and the NIH handled the alleged conflict of interest being probed by the Senate committee.

By posting a few relatively short items—each given prominent space—I

was able to convince additional sources to cooperate with me. Meanwhile, despite the initial widespread attention paid to this story about this Stanford professor, most in mainstream media largely stepped back from continuing coverage. And just one other blog spent any time doing investigative reporting. As a result, I broke the story that, under pressure from the NIH, Stanford reassigned the grant to another professor.

To an extent, I have to confess that I relied on my tabloid instincts in such situations. A quick hit can satisfy enough appetites for those hungry for more information about a juicy story. Having this flexibility to post about an e-mail here or a medical study there made it possible for me to stay in the game and attract readers and sources who cared about the topic.

Pharmalot, however, closed earlier this year, after I reluctantly took a buyout. Like other newspapers, The Star-Ledger was experiencing such severe financial conditions that at one point the owners said closing down was a possibility. It was a difficult decision, in part, because the blog had grown so popular—more than 11,000 daily visitors and 330,000 monthly page views. The size of the audience made it clear that there is tremendous interest in my approach to coverage. And in case you are wondering, I accomplished this without having to leave the house very often. ■

Ed Silverman was editor of Pharmalot (www.pharmalot.com) which was owned by The Star-Ledger in Newark, New Jersey. He covered the pharmaceutical industry for the newspaper for more than 11 years before launching Pharmalot and now works for Elsevier Business Intelligence.

² To read this blog post—including links to a deposition and e-mails relevant to the story, go to www.pharmalot.com/2008/07/grassley-targets-browns-keller-over-grants.

Digging Through Data and Discovering a Profitable Handshake

The Boston Globe's Spotlight Team set out to determine why the state's health care costs are so high and ended up revealing a hidden deal between powerful forces.

BY MARCELLA BOMBARDIERI AND SCOTT ALLEN

Anyone who spent much time in the medical community in Boston heard the grumbling: that Partners HealthCare—parent company of Massachusetts General Hospital and Brigham and Women's Hospital—was the richest, the biggest, and the most eager to corner the market in every part of greater Boston. To those of us who covered medical issues at The Boston Globe, the whispers seemed, frankly, a little whiny. The Brigham and the General were two of the most prestigious hospitals in the world, their trauma centers ready to accept victims of any tragedy, their researchers churning out important discoveries.

Then, a little over a year ago, the Globe's Spotlight investigative team embarked on a project with the goal of finding out why Massachusetts has the most expensive health care in the United States. In part, this project was spurred by the establishment of the state's universal insurance program in 2006—regarded as a possible model for national health care reform. Its success was going to rise or fall on the state's ability to curtail the growth of medical costs.

Our reporting and editing team ranged from four to six people at various times, and we began our investigation by educating ourselves

thoroughly in health care finance. We canvassed experts, vacuumed up studies, and plumbed the depths of consolidated financial statements, all the while keeping in mind that we needed to find a way to tell this financial story to readers who would

doctors, which is the biggest private employer in the state. As we talked with sources, several people who had a range of different vantage points on the overall health care industry told us, though rarely on the record, that Partners is paid more by insurers than

comparable hospitals in the same city and region. With this additional money, Partners, we were told, plows its extra cash into expansion projects that, in turn, add to the cost of health care and threaten to destabilize smaller hospitals.

Perhaps those disgruntled whisperers had a point.

Deciphering Data

With the luxury of time that our Spotlight Team is fortunate to have, and our own willingness to train ourselves in health policy nuance, we were able to push past the usual defenses Partners successfully put forward to deflect past critiques.

When asked about its market share, Partners' customary response is 22 percent. But that figure only holds up when the market is defined as *all* of eastern Massachusetts; when we focus on Partners' primary market, the four counties in and around Boston, and include hospitals that are not owned by Partners but are staffed by Partners-affiliate doctors, the company controls

VIDEO: BIRTH OF A HEALTH COST CRISIS

Partners HealthCare was supposed to save money. Instead, the company became a leading driver of medical price inflation in Massachusetts. (By Jared Novack)



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not want to feel buried in the minutia of spreadsheets. For example, one approach we considered was to focus on the absurdity of a medical arms race that seems to put an MRI machine on virtually every corner.

Yet the road kept leading us back to Partners, a chain of eight hospitals (with Massachusetts General and Brigham being the largest) and 6,000

37 percent of patient discharges. Partners also typically claims that its profits are a small fraction of other well-known hospitals. Yes, their profit margin is low, but that's because they deliberately keep it that way by using the rest of their surplus—up to one billion dollars a year—to expand.

As we dug into reporting on Partners, our biggest obstacle was not having the data we'd need to show how much Partners is paid relative to other hospital companies. The rates insurance companies pay hospitals for everything from 15-minute office visits to brain surgery has been held as a trade secret for decades. We wouldn't have launched this project if we didn't have some reason to believe we could obtain the information from confidential sources. But, once launched, this turned out to be much harder than we'd thought. Instead of the weeks we'd hoped for, it took us months of cajoling sources—and during those months, our team had nightmares about what we'd do if we weren't able to secure this data.

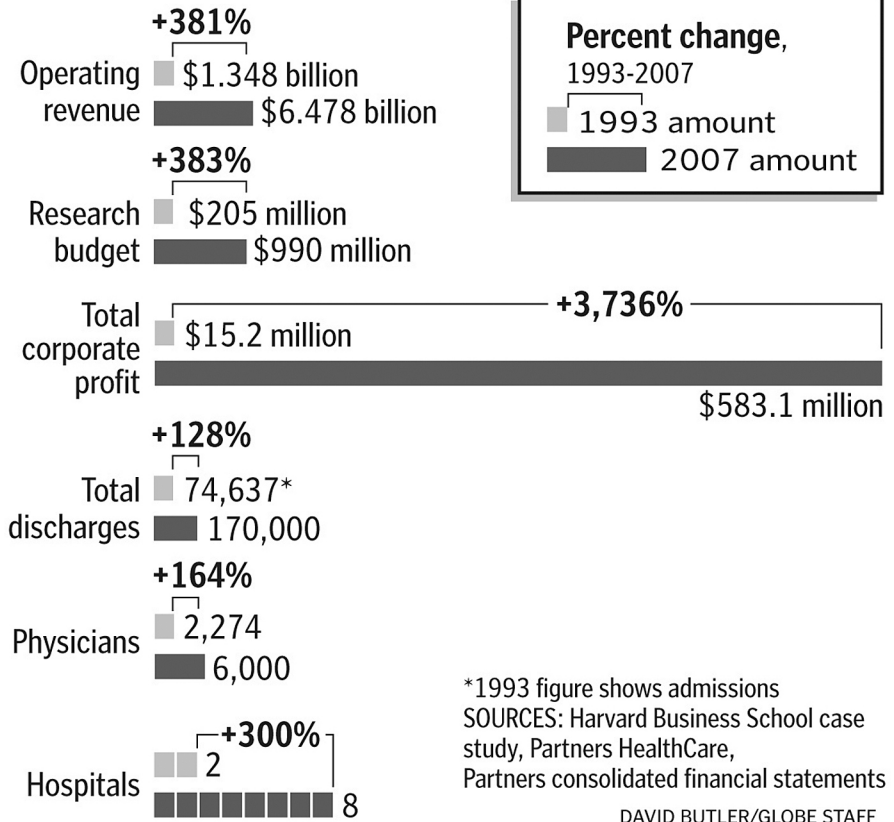
Ultimately, we obtained a rich database that had been assembled, but not yet published, by a Massachusetts agency created under health care reform. With this data, we were able to document the astonishing differences in payments made to Partners compared with other nearby hospitals and doctors. Partners' flagships, the Brigham and Massachusetts General, are paid on average 30 percent more than similar teaching hospitals and as much as 60 percent more than community hospitals.

Eye-popping as these figures were, for our storytelling purposes the numbers could not stand on their own. Grateful patients and their doctors at Partners had the same instinctive response when we showed them the numbers: Isn't the care just better at Partners?

Often, the answer turns out to be no, particularly for the ordinary procedures that make up the bulk of hospital business. Our timing was fortunate, because it would have been impossible to document this only a

Partners then and now

Partners HealthCare has grown dramatically since Massachusetts General and Brigham and Women's Hospital announced their merger in 1993.



few years ago. We benefited from the burgeoning of a transparency movement in which government and private groups have pushed data about hospital performance into the open and onto the Internet. The federal government has a Web site called Hospital Compare that scores hospitals on how often they meet routine standards, such as giving aspirin to a heart attack patient. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts also gives hospitals mortality scores for everything from hip replacements to coronary bypass surgery.

Because some hospitals see sicker patients than others, capturing which is really doing a better job is very difficult, and all of these methods

of quantifying and comparing are controversial and imperfect. So we consulted experts on quality measurement from academia, government and the medical and insurance industries, and they helped us to settle on ways to use the data that were cautious and fair but also added value to the chaotic jumble of numbers found on different Web sites.

One method we chose was to assemble 42 mortality scores from several sources covering a six-year period, then average scores and group hospitals into five statistical tiers. Turned out that neither Brigham nor Mass General made it into the top category; Brigham was in the second highest group and

Mass General in the broad middle.

Crunching the data was crucial to nail down our conclusions, but our goal was not to publish our own hospital guide. So we devoted only a few paragraphs to such numerical analysis and mostly let it infuse the larger tale. These findings backed up what we'd been hearing from many respected health care quality experts; in general, expensive teaching hospitals are not better than community hospitals for routine care and, more specifically, routine care at the Brigham and Mass General tends to be good, but not extraordinary. It makes sense to treasure teaching hospitals for their sophisticated trauma centers and brilliant surgeons, but 85 percent of what these hospitals and doctors do is routine medicine such as delivering babies and repairing hernias.

Exposing a Costly Arrangement

Our project depended on experts who were willing to spend hours explaining the intricacies of hospital billing, contract negotiations, accounting practices, and health care statistics.

Along the way, some ended up giving us old-fashioned news scoops, including leads to what would be one of the more incendiary revelations to come out of our investigation.

According to officials directly involved in the talks, Partners and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, the state's dominant insurer, made a pact in 2000 in which Blue Cross gave Partners a much higher rate increase than it otherwise would have in exchange for Partners' promise to demand equally high payments from other insurers. Since then, health care costs in Massachusetts have grown at twice the pace they did in the late 1990's, and Blue Cross has increased its payments to Partners by 75 percent. Partners and Blue Cross both say they did nothing improper and that hospital rates had been too low.

This handshake deal—never put in writing for fear of legal ramifications, according to our sources—is now under investigation by the Commonwealth's attorney general. And publication of our story about this deal and its ramifications in December 2008 prompted Governor Deval Patrick to convene meetings of senior administration of-

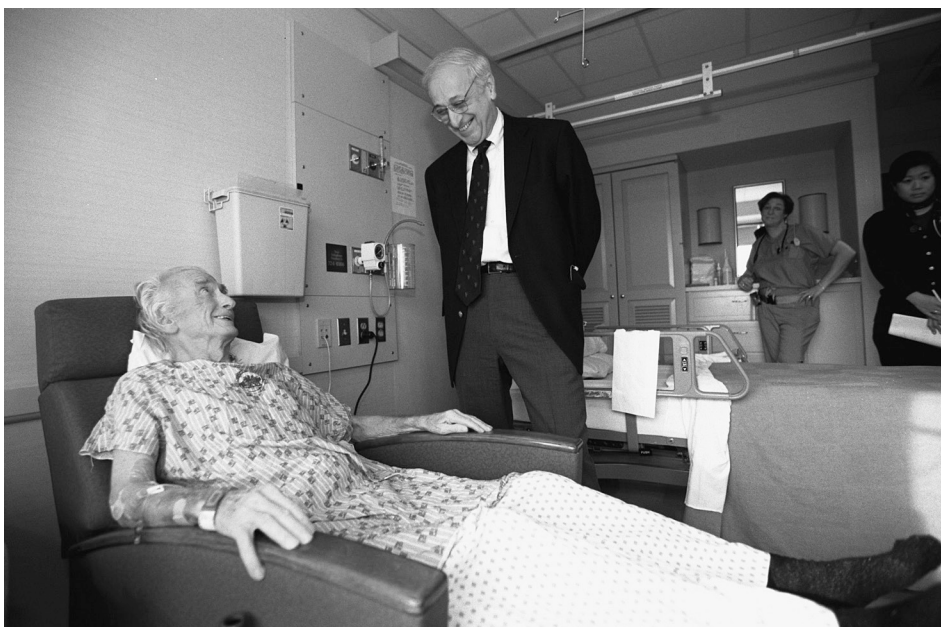
ficials and health industry leaders to discuss how to contain costs. He also threatened new regulation to block excessive insurance premiums.

Understanding this incredibly complex industry required that we learn how to use the lingo of business, law, politics and medicine all at once. It also required a willingness on our part to accept shades of gray in characterizing what has happened. Partners, after all, employs thousands of devoted and skilled clinicians, and its outsized power is to some extent the fault of lax government oversight and rivals who failed to compete effectively.

The back-and-forth we've had with Partners has been particularly intense. Partners' leaders are some of the country's top medical and managerial talent. They have a deep wallet to pay political operatives, public relations consultants, and policy analysts who churn out PowerPoint presentations challenging what we've reported. They've tried to convince us on numerous occasions that we simply don't understand; sometimes they employ obvious putdowns such as, "I don't know how many statistics classes you've taken, but" They've run numerous full-page ads in the *Globe*, complained to our editor and publisher, and posted detailed critiques of our work on their Web site.

Yet, at the *Globe*, we continue to examine the practices of both Partners and Blue Cross. By the time we finish with this project, we will have spent at least a year working on it and published five or six major pieces. The slow pace of this complicated work has been frustrating, but the willingness of our editors and publisher to make this investment has been a great gift. ■

Marcella Bombardieri, who previously covered higher education, and Scott Allen, who has covered medicine as a reporter and editor for a decade, are members of The Boston Globe's Spotlight Team.



Dr. Samuel O. Thier, former CEO of Partners HealthCare, visited a patient during rounds. He led the company's successful effort to demand higher payments from insurance companies, which he believed were severely underpaying hospitals. *Photo by Pam Berry/The Boston Globe.*

Toppling the ‘Big Three’—Medical Care, Behavior and Genes

‘Unnatural Causes’ mixes reporting of research rarely featured in traditional news coverage with visual storytelling in the hope of sparking a health equity movement.

BY MADELINE DREXLER

Fruits and vegetables, daily exercise, and high-tech medical care won't necessarily keep you healthy. What will, more likely, is a decent income, a good education, strong community ties, feeling safe from bias and crime, being able to control your day and your destiny, and other so-called “social determinants of health.” Put simply, health and disease are stamped not by lifestyle, but by life. The epidemiological evidence, building over decades, is clear.

“Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?”—a winner of the 2009 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards for broadcast journalism—digs deep into medical and public health research to portray both the layered complexity of the social determinants of people's well-being and the personal tragedies that follow when policymakers all too often fail to factor in such critical information.

Yet the four-hour, seven-part series, broadcast by PBS in the spring of 2008, goes further. It was conceived not merely as a prime-time educational feature but as a spark plug for social change. Its long afterlife as a tool for health activists—with more than 12,000 screenings since its original airdate and a growing list of citizen and government initiatives inspired by the film—has made it a

touchstone in the unfolding debates about how to improve America's deep health inequities.

Consider some facts:

- African-American women with a college degree have higher rates of delivering low birth weight infants and infants who die at birth than do white women who are high school dropouts.
- The longer your parents owned a home when you were growing up,

well-being, research shows that individual behaviors—such as exercise, cigarette smoking, alcohol abuse, eating habits—exert a comparatively small effect on health status, despite what we might believe from the daily doses of health reporting that we receive. The strongest predictor of health is class position, whether measured by income, schooling or occupation. The behavioral choices we make reflect the choices we have—and those choices, in turn, hang on larger social, political and economic structures.

“Unnatural Causes” documents this challenging idea through story after story depicting the bodily toll of racism, poverty, joblessness, crime, job stress, cultural dislocation, and other societal ills. It brings stacks of scientific data to life—deftly cutting between bar charts, functional medical imagery, atmospheric street shots, and intimate family scenes.

One of the more gripping segments, titled “Bad Sugar,” describes the stunning prevalence of diabetes in the Tohono O'odham and Pima Indian tribes of southern Arizona. For the past 40 years, the Tohono O'odham people have suffered the highest rates of Type II diabetes in the world; 50 percent of adults are diagnosed with the disease. Yet for centuries, diabetes was unheard of in the tribes, which thrived

the less likely you are to catch colds as an adult.

- The higher your income, the less your body releases the potentially damaging stress hormone cortisol.

Biology, in other words, is socially patterned. Though America's hyper-individualistic culture insists that we are each solely responsible for our

self-sufficiently on tepary beans, cholla buds, local game, and crops irrigated by rain and ground water.

What changed? Everything. Beginning in the late 19th century, the U.S. government dammed the Gila River to divert its life-giving water to white farmers, ranchers and miners, and later to Sunbelt swimming pools, golf courses, and artificial lakes. As a result, the Native Americans, unable to grow food or develop economically, starved. To make amends, the U.S. military showed the tribes with free commodity surplus items: white flour, cheese, refined sugar, lard, canned goods. Decades of federal cynicism served up a diabetic's nightmare.

So much for the primacy of personal choice. At the end of the segment, Tohono O'odham artist and activist Terrol Dew Johnson—a passionately engaged young man with diabetes—tries to strike an upbeat note (and unwittingly supplies the film's title): "I still see hope; I don't have to die of diabetes," he says uncertainly. "I'll die of some natural cause"

Awareness and Action

Unnatural causes of death are rooted in injustice; they aren't inevitable. So compelling is this truth for Larry Adelman—codirector of California Newsreel and the film's creator and executive producer—that well before the cameras started rolling, he envisioned the series as the seed of a national health equity movement. What Adelman terms the "Big Three"—medical care, behavior and genes—now dominate the way we think about health and how this subject is usually covered by the press. He and his colleagues drew up a plan to topple those pillars of conversation.

They recruited scientific advisors to critique the film's rough cuts. They established an outreach advisory board—a brain trust of public health leaders and advocates—to work on

crafting messages and building a public engagement campaign. And they created a wealth of companion materials to sow the ground for action: community action toolkits, discussion guides, policy primers, backgrounders, quizzes and handouts. Such tools would be used in trainings, public dialogues, town hall meetings, policy forums, and media outreach.

Spreading the News

During the past year, more than 400 outreach groups and other organizations have convened thousands of events centered on the series. Nine states and 138 county public health departments have highlighted the film in public discussions and internal trainings. The film has been leveraged in health campaigns and programs by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Service Employees International Union, the Isaiah/Gamaliel Foundation interfaith network, the Black Women's Agenda, and scores of other groups. Several local PBS stations have produced companion TV shows alongside the national broadcast. Last year, the Alameda County (Calif.) Public Health Department published a comprehensive report on health inequities that borrowed the film's title, "Life and Death from Unnatural Causes." ■—M.D.

Has it worked? "There isn't anybody I talk to in public health who hasn't heard of this film," said Richard Hofrichter, senior analyst at the National Association of County and City Health Officials and a scholar on the history of public health movements. "It's had an impact that I don't think can be measured—the conversations, the startled responses. Once you have an insight about something, it can't be undone."

Hofrichter explained why he believes this film succeeds: "How is public consciousness raised? Through posing contradictions, asking uncomfortable questions, tracking back and asking: Why are things the way they are? What

this film supplies is an overarching narrative. You want to get away from a laundry list of health policies. You want to be able to see within *any* policy what the health impact is."

Another measure of success has been the film's reach with its findings. "Screenings have already surpassed the metrics we set for the series," Adelman said. "We never anticipated it would be used so widely or that the health equity movement would grow so quickly." [See accompanying box about the film's use in public health settings.] "The real subject of a film like "Unnatural Causes" is not what's depicted on the screen—it's the audience. You want to engage them, you want to provoke critical thinking, and most of all you want to redirect their locus of attention off the screen and back upon themselves and their own situation."

Health policies do matter, and Adelman and his colleagues clearly support a range of reforms that their film—and the research they based it on—indicates would benefit both health and justice: living wage laws, progressive tax structures, investment in public schools and low-cost housing, paid family leaves and sick days, increased job autonomy, nutritious food for all—and, yes, universal health care.

Asked about his next film project, Adelman said he has none. For now, he is focusing all his energy on a national health debate. "We hope that the film ages quickly—that it will be eclipsed by events," he said. "My fear is that five years from now, it will be just as germane as it is today." ■

Madeline Drexler is a Boston-based journalist, specializing in science, medicine and public health. She was a 1996-1997 Knight Science Journalism Fellow and is the author of "Secret Agents: The Menace of Emerging Infections," published by Penguin in 2003.

Blogs, Watchdog Reporting, and Scientific Malfeasance

‘Bottom line is that it takes time and money to do the kind of muckraking that newspapers have always excelled at, and I’m not sure the blogosphere can reliably reproduce this all-important function.’

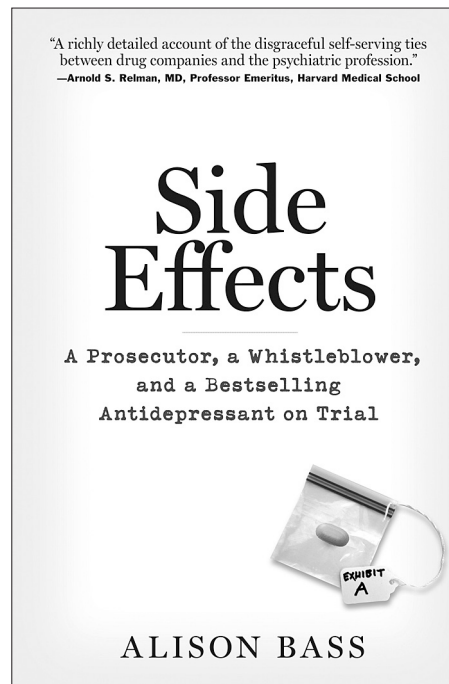
BY ALISON BASS

One afternoon, when I was a reporter for The Boston Globe, a cryptic message found its way to my desk. A woman who called the paper had left her phone number and a message having to do with the misappropriation of funds from the state mental health agency. As the paper’s mental health reporter, I received the tip.

It was late in the day and, having just filed a daily story, I almost didn’t return the call. But I did, and a person identifying herself as Donna answered. She sounded wary at first but warmed as we chatted; she knew my byline and told me she liked reporting I’d done on recent cutbacks in services for the mentally ill. She let me know that she was the assistant administrator of research for Brown University’s department of psychiatry and had in her possession documents proving that her boss, the chief of psychiatry at Brown, was collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health for research that apparently wasn’t being done.

And Donna Howard had other allegations to share with me that day. She also suspected that researchers in Brown’s psychiatry department were misrepresenting data for two clinical drug trials, including one study on Paxil for treating depression in adolescents. As we spoke that day, I remember typing quick notes with my phone cradled to one ear and thinking to myself that this can’t be true.

She agreed to meet with me the next day at a Burger King halfway between Providence, Rhode Island, where she worked, and Boston.



Everything she told me that morning was backed up by extensive documentation and confirmed in interviews with other sources. During the next several months, I wrote a series of front-page articles for the Globe about research and billing transgressions by Brown’s chief of psychiatry.

More than a decade later, Algonquin published my nonfiction book, “Side Effects: A Prosecutor, a Whistleblower,

and a Bestselling Antidepressant on Trial,” which tells the story of two women (Howard being one of them) who exposed the deception behind the making of the blockbuster drug, Paxil. My book lays bare the long-standing complicity between prominent academic psychiatrists and the pharmaceutical industry and reveals disturbing flaws in the way drugs are tested and marketed.

Blogs and Investigative Reporting

“Side Effects” could not have been written without the investigative reporting I did for The Boston Globe, which brings me to a major point of this essay: The best muckraking of recent decades has been done by reporters who worked for metropolitan dailies with the resources to support their reconnaissance. Other news outlets, including public radio and broadcast and cable television, rarely do their own skunk work and, with a few exceptions, piggyback instead on stories that newspapers unearth.

Now, however, such investigative verve has largely disappeared from newsrooms around the country because financially strapped newspapers no longer have the capacity to fund this kind of intense, beat-driven work—outside the political arena, at least.¹ At regional newspapers like the Globe, health and science reporters are, for the most part, too busy filing dailies, posting online updates, and trying to

¹ See article “The Ties That Bind: Newspapers and Nonfiction Books,” by Melissa Ludtke, in the Winter 2008 issue of Nieman Reports, at www.niemanreports.org.

avoid layoffs to take the time needed to meet with kooky-sounding anonymous sources at Burger King.

Some optimistic media observers say the crucial watchdog role of newspapers is being subsumed by blogs, and there are certainly a few blogs that have made a splash in the investigative arena. I'm thinking here of Talking Points Memo, Pharmalot, and Smoking Gun as well as some local news blogs like voiceofsandiego.org and the New Haven Independent. [See article about voiceofsandiego.org on page 11.] I also write a blog, <http://alison-bass.blogspot.com>, where I report and comment on health care issues. As a long-time journalist, doing this keeps me abreast of important developments in health care, and I get to think aloud about the ramifications of these developments. And my blog has led to invitations for me to write opinion pieces for bigger news outlets. On a number of occasions, my blog—and other independent ones such as Health Care Renewal and Furious Seasons—have inspired others to investigate and write about scientific malfeasance. Indeed, I find independent-minded blogs often work best in tandem with the mainstream media, which take their findings and amplify them for a larger audience.

There are, however, a variety of constraints on bloggers' ability to do investigative reporting. As a freelance journalist who pays my bills by teaching journalism at Mount Holyoke College, I have neither the time nor the resources to do the kind of digging I was encouraged to do at the Globe. In writing my book, for example, I filed several FOIA requests with the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to retrieve public information about the way that agency worked with the pharmaceutical industry in vetting new drugs. The FDA—under the secrecy-obsessed Bush administration—responded by demanding that I pay hundreds of dollars in upfront

copying fees before they would fulfill my requests, money I didn't have. Fortunately, I obtained most of the information I needed from other



sources who had requested similar documents over the years and had deeper pockets than I.

Bottom line is that it takes time and money to do the kind of muckraking that newspapers have always excelled at, and I'm not sure the blogosphere can reliably reproduce this all-important function. In one particularly worrisome sign, the best and most reliable blog about the pharmaceutical industry—Pharmalot, a blog that regularly broke investigative news—went out of business on January 5th because its indefatigable pharmaceutical industry reporter, Ed Silverman, took a buyout from the financially strapped Star-Ledger in Newark, New Jersey. [See Silverman's article on page 50.] Had the Star-Ledger truly valued the blog's investigative mission, it could have hired another reporter to continue what had become an internationally respected brand. Instead, this blog's dissolution leaves a big gap in the independent coverage of the pharmaceutical industry, one that other news-oriented blogs, such as the health blog of The Wall Street Journal, do little to fill. Pharmalot's demise augers ill for the future of investigative-minded blogs.

Watchdogs on Capitol Hill

It is interesting to note that in one corner of the health care arena, a small team of government investigators has taken up some of the watchdog slack. During the past year, aides for Senator Charles Grassley, a ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, have uncovered extensive financial ties between prominent doctors and the pharmaceutical and medical device industries. Their findings—that some doctors repeatedly failed to disclose the millions of dollars they were being paid to promote industry products—have appeared in newspaper stories and in blogs around the country. As a direct result of these probes, the National Institutes of Health has finally begun

enforcing its own conflict of interest policy, and a number of universities, including Harvard Medical School, have said that they will stiffen or at least review their conflicts of interest policies for faculty researchers.

Such government investigations, however, are inevitably short-lived. Grassley's team is conducting these probes for the express purpose of bringing attention to the problem with the hope of crafting—and passing—legislation that would require the public disclosure of such conflicts. As has been proven throughout our history, our democracy cannot depend solely upon government to root out malfeasance, especially since wrongdoing sometimes involves government officials. This job, like it or not, has fallen to the press and, until America's newspapers invent a new business model to replace the dwindling revenue from print advertising and cover the cost of aggressive reporting, this critical mission remains in peril. ■

Alison Bass is the author of "Side Effects: A Prosecutor, a Whistleblower, and a Bestselling Antidepressant on Trial," published by Algonquin Books in June 2008.

Investigating What Harms People—As an Independent Reporter

A Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter writes about ‘hurdles to obtain meager funding or to overcome editors’ reluctance to support the stories’—and offers suggestions.

BY LORETTA TOFANI

The common wisdom is that journalism’s non-profit foundations will allow serious investigative reporting to thrive. My recent adventure in writing the investigative prize-winning series, “American Imports, Chinese Deaths” with small grants for my travel expenses—without any salary or stipend—makes me dispute this idea. Although nonprofits offer hope for investigative reporters, the current system needs improvement.

I reported and wrote this series as a freelancer after a 25-year career as a staff writer at The Washington Post and The Philadelphia Inquirer. I brought to the series my skills as an investigative reporter—I won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting in 1983—and my experience as a foreign correspondent in China. I also brought my sense of outrage and my pleasure in reporting a great story. The six stories were published in 2007 in The Salt Lake Tribune.¹

The series won this year’s Investigative Reporters and Editors’ Gold Medal, the Society of Professional Journalists’ Sigma Delta Chi Award for investigative reporting, The Michael Kelly Award given by the Atlantic Media Company, and numerous local and regional awards. It also was



Chen Faju, 31, and coworkers from the Yue Yuen industrial park were in the Dongguan People’s Hospital for chronic anemia and myelodysplastic anemia, a result of brushing toxic glues for years onto the soles of New Balance and other sport shoes sold in the United States. Chen’s 2007 medical record advised that she be removed from a job “working with organic chemicals.” A manager from Chen’s workshop, Du Masheng, said toxins are not used anymore at the factory. *Photo and caption by Loretta Tofani.*

a finalist for the Shorenstein Center at Harvard’s Goldsmith Award for Investigative Reporting and for the Daniel Pearl Award for Outstanding International Investigative Reporting.

As with most investigative stories, the reporting obstacles were high. But I found it much easier to overcome them than the hurdles to obtain meager funding or to overcome editors’ reluctance to support the stories. Perhaps something can be done about this in the future.

Selling My Story Idea

In 2005, every few months I visited a different large newspaper to discuss my five-page story proposal and accompanying photographs. Editors already had read the proposal. It explained that millions of Chinese factory workers were paying the real price of cheap American imports, with their health and their lives. In virtually every industry, factory workers were getting fatal diseases or limb amputations. I proposed to go to China to interview dozens of dying workers or amputees—I already had interviewed some—and obtain their medical records. Then I’d use shipping documents to

¹ <http://extras.sltrib.com/china>

show the thousands of U.S. companies that were importing goods causing the fatal diseases or amputations. [To find out how a Chinese medical reporter investigated a similar story, see Ran An's article on page 74.]

The stories, I explained, would raise a moral and a policy question: Since U.S. workers are protected from fatal diseases and limb amputations while making our products, shouldn't Chinese workers making our products also be protected?

By the end of the year, editors at three large newspapers had declined. At one of the newspapers, midlevel news editors felt that similar stories already had been done: Wasn't that what the Nike story was about? No, I said, this was different. Workers were dying from carcinogens they used while making American products. It was a human rights issue, not a money issue, and American companies and U.S. trade policy were responsible. Plus, I added, I would bring to the story the skills of an investigative reporter, telling it not only with interviews but also with a wide range of documents. I'd describe a system and show why it wasn't working. Their eyes glazed over.

But the top editors at that paper and another large newspaper clearly liked the idea. Money was the problem, they said. At a third, it was money and something else. "That's a pretty plum assignment to give someone who's not on staff, isn't it?" the managing editor asked.

Undaunted, in 2006 I applied for several stipends given by foundations that support journalism. I did not get one. Currently, proposals for investigative stories must compete with many other types of projects for stipends. The Alicia Patterson Foundation Fellowship (\$40,000) and the Kaiser Media Fellowships in Health (\$55,000) are two sources of stipends.

After failing to receive a stipend, it might have been the end. But an editor friend suggested I apply for a travel grant from the newly formed Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. Jon Sawyer, its founder, quickly decided that the center would fund my international travel to report the stories—as long as a newspaper would commit to publishing them. Com-

ing after more than a year of dead ends with editors, I tremendously appreciated the Pulitzer Center's willingness to commit. The newspaper that agreed to publish my stories, Sawyer explained, would be responsible for paying me. That turned out to be an important sentence.

So, proposal in hand, I visited a newspaper that I had not approached since taking a buyout in 2001: my old newspaper, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. The *Inquirer* had had a proud tradition of investigative series. Many were responsible for the paper's 17 Pulitzer Prizes in 15 years under editor Gene Roberts. Drastic cost cutting had made those days a bittersweet memory by the summer of 2006.

The newspaper's top editors liked the idea of the series and the Pulitzer



Zhu Qiang lost his arm in a machine in Dongguan, China while making plastic bags for American supermarkets and department stores. The machine had a strong suction, and it pulled his arm into the machine while he was doing his job, throwing bits of dirt and plastic pellets into it. The machine did not have a guard/safety device, as required in the United States.



Ho Yongjiang cut off his thumb in an old band saw while making furniture in a Chinese factory for export to companies in California and New York; the band saw did not have a safety guard.

Photos and captions by Loretta Tofani.

Center's travel money. They offered to pay me a freelance rate, about \$500 per story. I accepted, although I felt perplexed. In years past, as a staff writer at that paper, I had earned about \$90,000 per year. Looking back, I think my strong desire to report and write the series made me reluctant to negotiate for money that the newspaper clearly did not have. I also rationalized it, thinking that someday I might want to write a book on U.S.-China trade.

On August 1st, *Inquirer* editors made their commitment official. "The Philadelphia *Inquirer* is committed to this project," wrote then managing editor Anne Gordon in a letter to the Pulitzer Center. "Our goal is to help Loretta produce a series that we will publish in our paper and on our website."



Wei Chaihua, inside the hospital, was dying of the lung disease silicosis, a result of making Char-Broil gas ovens for the United States. Wei did not know which company was importing the gas ovens he helped make, but I found the answer in shipping documents.

Getting My Stories Published

During the next year, I made five trips to China, spending nearly four months there. I interviewed dying workers, gathered their medical records and factory inspection reports. For my travel expenses, I used the Pulitzer Center's grant of \$13,000 as well as another grant, of \$4,500, from the Center for Investigative Reporting's Dick Goldensohn Fund, in memory of the late investigative reporter.

Between trips to China, I did reporting in the United States, obtaining shipping records so I could match the factories of specific dying Chinese workers with specific products for U.S. companies. I also gathered medical journal articles on occupational diseases in China, wrote the stories, and set up my next trips. Throughout it all, I conferred by telephone with my editors at the *Inquirer*, Avery Rome and Karl Stark of the national/foreign desk.

By July 2007, I had finished re-

porting and writing five stories. Rome and Stark, after reading them, said they were strong. Later that month, Rome called with the news: the new *Inquirer* editor, Bill Marimow, who months earlier had replaced Amanda Bennett, would not publish the series. He had a policy, Rome said, that investigative stories should only be written by staff writers.

I said I had been a staff writer at The Philadelphia *Inquirer* for 14 years.

Rome said she was sorry.

I thought about warnings Jon Sawyer had given me during the preceding months that a new editor might not feel invested in the previous editor's commitment to publish the series.

I called Sawyer from my home in Utah to tell him the news. "I have a Plan B," I announced. "I'm calling Tom Baden (then managing editor) at The Salt Lake Tribune tomorrow."

Baden was sympathetic but noncommittal. He asked to read the stories. He said he'd get back to me after he and editor Nancy Conway read them. Within days, Baden and Conway agreed to publish the stories. They gave me a great editor, Lisa Carricaburu, who suggested a sixth story: the Utah angle.



Li Xueping lost three fingers while making kitchen and bathroom equipment for shipment to Restoration Hardware in the United States. The metal-cutting machine he operated did not have a safety guard, as required in the United States.

Photos and captions by Loretta Tofani.

I gladly complied. During the following two months, I sat in the Tribune newsroom, working with graphics and photo editors, and with Carricaburu as she suggested changes, trimmed and polished.

In the end, The Salt Lake Tribune paid me \$5,000 for my 14 months of work. I did not press the Tribune editors for more money. I knew, from all the unfilled seats in the newsroom, that they did not have it. I was relieved and grateful that the editors agreed to publish the stories.

Next time, though, I want to be paid fairly. I also think this model—in which a nonprofit organization pays only a reporter's travel expenses and a newspaper pays a small fee for a year of work—cannot be sustained.

A Funding Proposal

Most newspapers cannot fairly pay experienced freelancers for time-consuming investigative stories. So I think foundations—especially those representing newspaper families—should consider providing one-year salaries or stipends specifically for experienced investigative journalists who have well-researched proposals. Currently there are stipends available for budding foreign correspondents

with project ideas and for science and medical writers with project ideas. Why not investigative reporters?

Those who select the winning proposals should include editors who understand the various genres of investigative reporting: not just the 40-inch story of official wrongdoing, but also the investigative series that has as its focus human beings who have been hurt by a bad system. The latter type, heavily represented among stories that have won Pulitzers for investigative reporting, is an endangered species in this age of the quick Internet story. The awards should not be limited to staff writers but should include experienced freelancers as well. I also suggest that senior journalists be eligible for the awards, not just midcareer journalists.

Currently there is a diaspora of accomplished investigative reporters, some of them Pulitzer Prize-winners, who have taken buyouts because their papers no longer can support investigative reporting. Although many are not working for newspapers, they continue to focus on problems in society, conceptualize investigative stories, and even dream of reporting them. I have discussed ideas with many of them. With proper pay from nonprofit foundations, these accomplished re-

porters can provide important stories to newspapers. Some may be willing to work on a story with a newspaper's less-experienced reporters, so that younger reporters develop or improve upon the unique set of skills used in investigative reporting.

I also think newspaper editors should be more open—as The Salt Lake Tribune was—to showcasing such work. Ideally, freelance reporters and newspaper editors should discuss the stories at an early stage, before reporting begins, rather than after the stories have been completed. Reporters can make it easier for editors to accept their stories by making sure all sources are named and on the record and by giving editors the actual documents cited in the stories.

In this way, serious investigative reporting once again can grace even small- and medium-size newspapers, the newspapers' watchdog role may thrive, and American readers will have some hope of changing policies and institutions that do not serve the public interest. ■

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Revealing How Dentists Profit By Abusing Children

In 'Drilling for Dollars,' a local TV reporter presented shocking visual and audio testimony about a situation in which children were being needlessly treated and harmed because of corporate greed.

BY ROBERTA BASKIN

When I walked off the news set after reporting on Small Smiles, a chain of Medicaid dental clinics for children, the makeup artist was sobbing. "How could they?" she said. A producer sitting outside the editing room was in tears. Each was reacting to the wretched screams of

children during dental treatments—screams they'd heard as my story aired.

This story about Small Smiles began for me in May 2007. I had returned to WJLA-TV, an ABC affiliate station that I'd left 17 years earlier to do investigative reporting at the networks.

The news director, Bill Lord, encouraged me to return to my "local roots" and enthusiastically assured me that there would be time and resources to do the kind of digging that could hold the powerful accountable and make a difference in the Washington, D.C. community. Although I worked on

other projects, the Small Smiles investigation became my benchmark.

Like hundreds of other investigations I've reported during the past 30 years, this one began by answering a random phone call. Deborah McDaniel, a dental assistant, was enraged. She had just tried to log an official complaint with the Maryland State Board of Dental Examiners against her former employer, Small Smiles, the largest dental chain for children in the country. Incredibly, she said the board wouldn't allow

her to file a complaint because the patients weren't her children, and she no longer worked there. She'd been fired from the Langley Park, Maryland facility the day before. It was one in a chain of nearly 70 clinics scattered across the country delivering dental care to half a million children annually. McDaniel angrily explained that she was let go for loudly complaining about a dentist drilling teeth on the wrong child. "I'm a mother," McDaniel vented. "There's no way I would bring my children there. They tie the little ones down on papoose boards and do unnecessary baby root canals for the bonus money."

Unnecessary baby root canals? Bonus money? Through her emotional tirade, McDaniel described business tactics that she believed encouraged unnecessary dental work on defenseless children. Profits made while the children suffered.

McDaniel explained that production goals were set each day by corporate headquarters in Colorado. If the dentists exceeded them, the staff received big bonuses. She had no doubt this encouraged thousands of dollars a month in unnecessary work. She told me corporate contests were held among the clinics. Performing the highest number of baby root canals was the goal, because Medicaid reimbursed top



Roberta Baskin delivered the "Drilling for Dollars" story on WJLA-TV.

dollars for them. The Langley Park Small Smiles clinic won the contest and had a trophy to show for it.

Some of what she told me in that phone call made me skeptical and, because I've always valued personal contact with a major source, I wanted to meet McDaniel right away. I asked her to bring whatever documentation she could provide to support her charges. She brought the Small Smiles Policy Manual, a 100-page manifesto of corporate thinking.

This was the critical document, and it certified her credibility. The manual was filled with red flags. Parents weren't allowed to sit with their children during treatment. Young children were routinely strapped to papoose boards, immobilized with Velcro straps. And she showed me a bonus check for beating production goals while acknowledging that she, like other dental staff, conducted x-rays on children even though they weren't certified, a clear violation of Maryland law.

McDaniel agreed to speak on camera and, in the course of the interview, she described how some children, isolated from their parents, would sweat profusely. Sometimes they threw up. If that happened, the dental assistants were taught to flip them over on the papoose board, suction out their mouths, and

flip them back so the dentist could continue working. Sometimes the children wet their pants. Hair dryers were kept handy to dry kids off before sending them back out to their parents. McDaniel explained that the rooms had radios blasting to obscure the sound of screams.

I wanted corroboration for what sounded like a "Little Shop of Horrors" and, after much agonizing, two more former employees agreed to talk on camera. Others, still on the job, spoke to me on background. Their stories about how children were treated were remarkably similar.

Visually Documenting the Story

Getting video of what we'd learned presented a special challenge. Yet from the beginning my producer, Sandy Bergo, and I knew we needed to get inside the clinic to see the dentists in action. Privacy concerns are always paramount when shooting in medical areas, so we rejected the idea of using hidden cameras. We also knew that Maryland is a "two-party consent" state, requiring agreements from both parties to videotape undercover. There were other obstacles. Releases would be needed from parents for any shooting we did. Many were Hispanic and didn't speak English. We would need to translate releases into Spanish and gain the trust of parents, and many of them wouldn't like being publicly identified as being on Medicaid.

As we were figuring out our approach to filming, serendipity intervened. I heard the local Fox station had been invited to the opening ceremony of a new Small Smiles clinic to do a feature story. So we called the clinic and asked, "How about us?" They agreed.

My cameraman and longtime friend, Pete Hakel, a 39-year veteran of

WJLA-TV, is disarmingly funny and so nonchalant that he can slip away and shoot most anything without raising alarms. When we went to the clinic, he did just that, and captured crying children strapped to papoose boards, others not properly shielded during x-rays, and a four-year old boy having his nose pinched in an attempt to force open his mouth. These scenes were so graphic that we debated what would be acceptable to show on air.

I took my video around to several pediatric dentists to get their reaction. They were shocked, even describing what they saw as “torture.” I was told papoose boards are rarely used, and some pediatric dentists don’t even own one because they know how to keep children calm.

McDaniel had told us about the morning staff meeting during which the staff was briefed on the day’s production goals. She described them as pep rallies. So on our second day of shooting, Pete arrived two hours early and, incredibly, was allowed to roll tape on the lead dentist chastising the staff for not meeting the previous day’s production goals. When I interviewed the lead dentist, he candidly admitted that their team sometimes would do six or more baby root canals on a child in one sitting. I already knew the clinic would be reimbursed \$214 in public Medicaid funding for each one.

What Happened Next

Our news director prefers that investigative reports are told in fewer than three minutes, but our first report on this story aired at a full eight minutes.¹ The report’s length—and its disturbing

content—created a sense of urgency. The impact of our “Drilling for Dollars” investigation was broad and swift. I’d alerted the inspector general at the federal Department of Health and Human Services, who subsequently opened an investigation that is still in progress. Maryland’s attorney general began a criminal investigation. And by the end of the first week, half a dozen insurance companies put the



Cameraman Pete Hakel captured a child crying during dental work at the Small Smiles clinic.

Small Smiles clinics in Maryland and the District of Columbia off-limits to their patients while they conducted their own investigations. Ultimately, the Langley Park Small Smiles clinic shut down. Small Smiles also launched an internal investigation and, although they would not agree to be interviewed on camera, the company claimed to have made improvements that included ending contests for clinics that exceeded production goals.

How was it that Small Smiles could be so profitable just treating Medicaid children? Earlier in 2007, a 12-year old Maryland boy died from untreated

tooth decay.² The infection traveled to his brain, causing an abscess. In the aftermath of his death, a shocking statistic had emerged. Four out of five dentists refuse to treat Medicaid children because it’s just not profitable enough. Government reimbursement rates are far less than what private insurers pay. Small Smiles made up for that in volume by maximizing the amount of work they could do per visit. This strategy proved to be so profitable that the company’s goal was to continue opening three new clinics every month. As I dug more deeply into the finances of the company, I discovered The Carlyle Group was a major investor along with an Arab bank in Bahrain called Arcapita, which invested \$460 million in the enterprise.

We did a dozen Small Smiles follow-up reports during the next year; in some of those, I identified similar problems across the country. Our efforts earned the Scripps Howard Foundation National Journalism Award and a local and national Emmy for investigative reporting. In January of this year, we were given an Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award, one of the highest honors in broadcast journalism.

But this winter has been bittersweet. WJLA-TV decided to shut down the investigative unit—and thus end my job at the station. The station’s owners described such reporting as “a luxury” they can no longer afford.

I disagree. Is it a luxury when our reports convince companies to reform bad business practices? Is it a luxury when regulatory agencies suddenly are

¹ To read the script and see the video of this story, go to www.wjla.com/news/stories/1107/469955.html.

² The Washington Post reported this story on February 28, 2007 in a story, “For Want of a Dentist,” which can be read at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/27/AR2007022702116_pf.html.

motivated to enforce laws already on their books? And is it a luxury when the most vulnerable among us, those without access to power—like the children at these dental clinics who are victims of corporate greed—are given an opportunity to be heard?

My reporting has led to recalls of dangerous products, banned hazardous chemicals, put people in prison, and resulted in congressional hearings and changes in law. It is work that takes time and demands resources, but it pays long-term dividends as news organizations earn the trust of viewers who realize their well being is valued. Investigative reporting should not be part of the equation when determining a news organization's bottom line. But

there's plenty of evidence—and not just at local TV stations—that these dividends are being sacrificed in favor of short-term profits.

As for me, I've been a muckraking journalist for 30 years, and I'm not about to stop. I'll continue to tell stories that need to be told, possibly on television and on other emerging platforms. I'll also continue to help other reporters succeed with their investigations by offering research, resources, contacts and strategy, as well as my active involvement with many journalism organizations. It's incumbent on all of us to explore creative ways to strengthen essential, in-depth watchdog reporting by developing fresh revenue streams that

bypass the current broken business model. For more than two centuries, the work by members of the free press to hold those with power accountable has stood as one of the pillars of our democracy. When did that become a luxury? ■

Roberta Baskin, a 2002 Nieman Fellow, has won more than 75 journalism awards and serves on the boards of the Journalism & Women Symposium, Images & Voices of Hope, International Communications Forum-America, the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards Committee, and the Nieman Foundation's Advisory Board. "Drilling for Dollars" won a 2009 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award.

What Happens When No One Is Watching?

When Congress relinquishes its oversight role of the Food and Drug Administration, the press reduces its watchdog role when it comes to drug safety.

BY MORTON MINTZ

Until nearly a half-century ago, reporting on unsafe and ineffective medicines—their manufacturers, their prescribers, their government regulator, their victims—was rare. In a chapter I wrote, “Drug Success = News; Drug Failure = Non-News,” for a 1965 book,¹ I documented a stenographic pattern of reporting about the drug industry not unlike what happened during the run-up to the Iraq War.

- In 1952, the publisher of a drug industry weekly, *F-D-C Reports*, usually referred to as “The Pink Sheet,” was able to say that the industry had been enjoying a “sensationally favorable” press.

- In 1963, at a national symposium on communications and medical research, Arthur J. Snider, science editor of the *Chicago Daily News*, said: “My concern is that the record would show that 90 percent of the stories we have written about new drugs have gone down the drain as failures. We have either been deliberately led down the primrose path or have allowed ourselves through lack of sufficient information to be led down the primrose path.”
- In 1964, in *The Saturday Review*, John Lear wrote: “It is encouraging to record the interest now expressed in drug marketing problems by such newspapers as *The Wall Street Journal*. But it may be asked where

were the potent organs of the daily press when the drug makers were pulling political and economic strings to prevent the facts from being exposed. When *The Saturday Review* began reporting the worst abuses in drug marketing in 1959, only two newspapers were willing to assume responsibility for wider dissemination of [our magazine's] independently obtained information. One of those two was the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; the other was *Advertising Age*.”

I couldn't know then that in a few years that pattern would start to break apart, in large measure because of a story I reported for *The Washington*

¹ Mintz's book, “The Therapeutic Nightmare,” was updated in 1967 and renamed “By Prescription Only.”

Post. Even when I was handed this assignment by an assistant city editor, Sy Fishbein, I didn't have the faintest notion of its potential consequences. Nor did I understand at the time why he would assign it to a reporter who'd never written a word about prescription drugs, the pharmaceutical industry, or the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Turns out that after another Post reporter had passed on a tip that an FDA medical officer, Dr. Frances Kelsey, had fought hard within FDA to keep the baby-deforming sedative/tranquilizer thalidomide off the market, Fishbein wanted an interviewer with a capacity for outrage, which I had. The tip had come from an aide to Estes Kefauver, who'd been fighting a long, losing battle to drastically strengthen the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938. Building on findings in investigative hearings by his Senate antitrust subcommittee, he proposed amendments to require that a manufacturer provide the FDA with substantial scientific evidence—based on well-controlled clinical trials—which demonstrated both a medicine's safety and its effectiveness in its intended use. His amendments also proposed mechanisms to prevent the price gouging that was rampant even then.

Only a few weeks before my story ran, his Senate foes, mostly Republican friends of the pharmaceutical industry, gutted the amendments. They did this in a secret meeting he'd known nothing about.

My story was published in the Post on July 15, 1962. Here is the lede:

This is the story of how the skepticism and stubbornness of a government physician prevented what could have been an appalling American tragedy, the birth of hundreds or indeed thousands of armless and legless children. The story of Dr. Frances Oldham Kelsey, a Food and Drug Administration medical officer, is not one of inspired

prophesies nor of dramatic research breakthroughs. She saw her duty in sternly simple terms, and she carried it out, living the while with insinuations that she was a bureaucratic nitpicker, unreasonable—even, she said, stupid. What she did was refuse to be hurried into approving an application for marketing a new drug.

In a talk at a gathering of Washington, D.C. Nieman Fellows in 2005, I told them about the chain of events leading up to this assignment:

In September 1960, the U.S. licensee of the German investor

'The story dealt a lasting blow to a notion, widely if foolishly held, that science and technology always or nearly always produce benign results,' I reminded these journalists.

and manufacturer of thalidomide—a sedative or tranquilizer, depending on dosage—applied for FDA approval to sell it in the United States. Not until April 1962 did it become widely known that in numerous other countries, the mothers of several thousand “thalidomide children” had taken the drug during the first trimester of pregnancy.

I interviewed Dr. Kelsey three months later. I finished the 2,400-word story at around 2 a.m. on Saturday, July 14th and, several hours later, my family set out by car for Cape Cod. My spies told me afterward that the managing editor thought the piece was too long, but the news editor had said, 'I can get it in.' He did.

Seventeen days later, a Senate subcommittee led by Hubert

Humphrey held an FDA oversight hearing at which it came out that in a promotional stunt, the licensee, the William S. Merrell Company, had contrived to give away 2.5 million so-called 'experimental' thalidomide pills to physicians, causing 10 American infants to be born with seal-like flippers rather than arms and legs.

As I went on to say in that 2005 talk, “the story transformed Capitol Hill.” Suddenly, Congress became a tiger, rushing to toughen the drug law by passing what came to be called the Kefauver-Harris Amendments of 1962. It refused only to enact the proposals for competitive pricing, these being far more repugnant to the industry than efforts to assure safety and efficacy.

“The story dealt a lasting blow to a notion, widely if foolishly held, that science and technology always or nearly always produce benign results,” I reminded these journalists.

One reason for that “lasting blow” was that whistleblowers in the FDA began to come out of the woodwork. At last, they'd found a reporter for a major news organization who would pay attention to their intimate knowledge of agency leaders rushing to approve drugs despite inadequate evidence of safety and efficacy.

Reporting on the Pill

Another example of where watchdog reporting of the FDA was essential involved the emergence of birth control pills. I wrote about 40 stories for the Post about this topic, plus articles in *The New Republic* and *Columbia Journalism Review*, as well as a 1969 book, “The Pill: An Alarming Report.”

My first story for the newspaper, co-reported by the late Nate Haseltine and published in December 1962, was headlined, “Safety of Birth Control Pill Questioned.” As the story revealed, the case that its safety had been established was suspect—for good reason.

In May 1960, Dr. William H. Kessenich, director of the FDA's Bureau of Medicine, had sent Commissioner George P. Larrick a document that would become the basis for the agency approving the pioneer pill later that year. It was this approval that would open the floodgates for oral contraceptives that would be taken by hundreds of millions of women worldwide. But how good was the underlying science?

"... the evidence establishes the safety ... for use in conception control" of G.D. Searle & Company's Enovid [the brand name of this birth control pill], Kessenich concluded. Yet in the same document he acknowledged that the "entire series of clinical cases"—the foundation of his and the FDA's conclusion of "safety"—was one that a subsequent FDA commissioner, Dr. James L. Goddard, would tell a national TV audience was not enough.

Only 132 women had received Enovid *continuously* for a year or more. Half of them had taken the tablets for 12 to 21 *consecutive* menstrual cycles; the other half had taken them for 24 to a maximum of 38 *consecutive* cycles. The italicized words in the previous sentences are important operative words; brief or occasional ingestion of powerful chemicals insufficiently assures safety for a person who might take the pill for up to 29 years, the duration of the typical childbearing age span. I should emphasize here that the issue was not whether Enovid was safe but whether the evidence of safety warranted its release to the market.

At this time, Julius N. Cahn was the one-man staff of a Senate Government Operations Subcommittee led by Senator Hubert Humphrey. Cahn obtained the Kessenich document from FDA files, and the subcommittee published it early in 1963. Its publication received almost no attention in the press or, for that matter, in the medical community. But this document and other hasty, scientifically unwarranted FDA drug approvals, did arouse interest on Capitol Hill. "From the mid-1960's through much of the 1980's Congress played an integral role in drug safety," wrote Daniel Sigelman in a 2002

article in *The American Prospect*. "Lawmakers meticulously probed the regulatory histories of dubious drugs, uncovered FDA weaknesses, and ordered corrections."

Sigelman, counsel to the Congressional subcommittee, found that Eli Lilly, in the case of the anti-arthritis drug Oraflex, and Hoechst AG, in the case of the antidepressant Merital, had known of but failed to report many deaths of patients on these drugs. It was thanks to the digging of this subcommittee that Lilly and Hoechst were criminally prosecuted. And I was privileged to cover all or nearly all of those oversight hearings, even if at many of these hearings I was alone at the press table much of the time.

Congressional Oversight Slips Away

In the late 1980's, Congressional oversight of the FDA and the drug industry began to decline at a time when the Democrats still controlled the House. By 1992, it spiraled sharply downward with passage of a highly dubious law allowing the industry to pay so-called user fees as a way to speed FDA approval of new drugs. Oversight collapsed utterly in January 1995, when the Republicans took control of the House, and drug and tobacco industry campaign contributions took control of them. Speaker Newt Gingrich called the FDA the "leading job killer in America" and denounced its then commissioner, David Kessler, who wanted to regulate tobacco, as "a thug" and "a bully."

In my 2005 talk, I explained how the collapse of Congressional oversight had appalling consequences and described some excellent watchdog reporting, its lack of impact in some quarters, and a surprising resurgence of interest on Capitol Hill:

In the decade ending in the fall of 2002, 13 dangerous drugs were withdrawn from the market after causing many hundreds of deaths and many thousands of injuries. Just seven of the unsafe drugs caused more than 1,000

deaths.

How and why had FDA hurried them to the market? Why had withdrawals been slow? David Willman of the Los Angeles Times investigated. He found that the FDA had become a partner rather than a watchdog of the pharmaceutical industry. But unlike Willman, who in 2001 won a Pulitzer for his reporting, House leaders had no interest in investigating the FDA's role in approving even one of the drugs that caused needless deaths and injuries or in determining what led up to \$13 billion in legal claims and costs. Least of all did they want to investigate why and how the FDA had become a partner of an industry that has more lobbyists than Congress has members, that was filling the campaign coffers of friendly lawmakers to overflowing, and that held out the prospect of high-paying jobs for overseers who wouldn't oversee.

As chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Billy Tauzin had FDA oversight jurisdiction but didn't exercise it. During 15 years, he took in campaign contributions totaling more than \$218,000 from the drug industry. In January 2005, the Louisiana Republican became president of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America. His annual pay package was reportedly worth at least two million dollars.

Vioxx—a drug approved by the FDA—has caused an estimated 88,000 to 139,000 heart attacks and strokes. But it and related painkillers such as Bextra and Celebrex were not a problem for Tauzin. Nor for his successor, Joe Barton. The FDA, Barton has declared, should make no more rulings on the effectiveness of drugs; rather, it should confine itself to measuring whether they are "safe, pure and packaged safely."

James C. Greenwood of Pennsylvania served under Tauzin as chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation. Thus he too had jurisdiction over the FDA. Of his 2003-04 donors, The Washington Post reported, 10 identified themselves as drug company presidents; six are vice presidents, and another six are executives. In January 2005, he left the Hill to become president of the Biotechnology Industry Organization.

Early last year [2004] in startling contrast, Charles Grassley broke from the Republican pack. The chairman of the Senate Finance Committee undertook tough oversight of the FDA, notably including its handling of childhood antidepressants and Vioxx and related painkillers. Moreover, Grassley served notice that he'd protect the FDA's internal whistleblowers, such as medical officer David Graham, who had called Vioxx a "profound regulatory failure" by an agency "incapable of protecting America against another Vioxx."

Where Is the Watchdog Press?

I believed then—and still do—that it's all very well to criticize the FDA and the likes of Gingrich, Tauzin, Barton and Greenwood. But does the press deserve a pass? No, it does not. For a full decade, it failed to inform the public of the prolonged, corrupt pre-Grassley abdication of Congressional oversight of the agency responsible for the safety of their medicines and of its causes, consequences and implications. Failed, that is, to connect the dots.

Perhaps I missed some reporting that shed light on this, but in that time I didn't see a story in which Tauzin or Barton or any House Speaker or Senate majority leader, was asked why there had not been an oversight investigation of the seven drugs that caused the deaths of a thousand Americans. Or a story on why these deaths seemed to matter not at all to them, while the death of a comatose woman, Terry Schiavo, was made so prominent. And where was a story in which Senator Mike Enzi was asked why the health committee he chaired hadn't done the kind of FDA oversight

that the finance committee undertook when Grassley was its chair?

Congressional oversight is a core constitutional function—indispensable to the proper workings of a democracy. During the years of its absence from Capitol Hill, I tried repeatedly to persuade The Washington Post to report on the collapse of Congress's oversight and its consequences, not only of the FDA, but also of the executive branch more broadly.

In 2005, my final attempt ended with a national desk editor telling me, disdainfully, face-to-face, "Oh, Mort, I get those story ideas all the time." ■

Morton Mintz, a 1964 Nieman Fellow, is a senior advisor and frequent contributor to the Nieman Foundation's Watchdog Project. During his 30 years as a reporter at The Washington Post, he broke the thalidomide story in 1962 and then went on to report extensively on unsafe and ineffective medicines and medical devices, including the disastrous Dalkon Shield IUD.

An Online Database Reveals Health Hazards

Using the Environmental Protection Agency's data, The Center for Public Integrity finds reason to be concerned about some pesticides found in familiar products.

BY MICHAEL B. PELL

Project manager Jim Morris dropped a box of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) records next to my desk. It was December 2007, two weeks after I'd started work at The Center for Public Integrity as a computer-assisted reporter. This box contained thousands of reports of pesticide exposures involving people, pets and wildlife.

"What can we do with these?" he asked.

Not much, I thought, since what he'd handed me represented only a fraction of the EPA's pesticide exposure archive. Even this amount would have buried us in paper, making analysis all but impossible. Morris said that he'd asked for the records in an electronic format months earlier, but he'd been told that the information was available only on paper. At the time, he hadn't argued the point. But the records obviously had been printed from some

sort of database, so we concluded that if we could acquire all of the data in its original electronic form, we could look for meaningful trends.

Morris, a veteran environmental reporter, first heard of the EPA's pesticide exposure data system while writing an investigative article about the health effects of the pesticide chlorpyrifos—better known by its trade name Dursban—for U.S. News & World Report in 1999. Despite

assurances from Dursban's manufacturer, Dow AgroSciences, that the widely used bug-killer was perfectly safe, the EPA banned it for residential use in 2000. In his article, Morris relied on the EPA exposure reports—and the agency official then in charge of interpreting them—to tell the story of a product that showed signs of harming people and animals with alarming regularity. He'd resolved then to one day go after the entire EPA database, believing there were other dangerous products on the market that weren't being adequately regulated.

Analyzing Government Records

In January 2008, the center moved to acquire the database, called one of the “Ten Most Wanted Government Documents” by the Center for Democracy and Technology.¹ An employee in the EPA's Office of Pesticide Programs told me that these records were “kind of” available in an electronic format, but that the database was old and would be difficult to work with. The employee suggested that I tell her what I was looking for, and the EPA would conduct the analysis for me. Morris and I quickly rejected this idea and filed an FOIA request for the data. To our surprise, and to the EPA's credit, the agency responded in about two months, even though it had to remove thousands of names and other confidential information from the database.

After familiarizing ourselves with the more than 300,000 records in the database, one fact became

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‘Safe’ Pesticides Now First in Poisonings

By M.B. Pell and Jim Morris | July 30, 2008

Two-and-a-half-year-old Amber Nickol McKeown had head lice. Her mother, Eileen, put the child in a warm bath and massaged Osco Lice Treatment Shampoo into her scalp. Problem solved.

But when Eileen lifted Amber from the tub, she noticed her daughter's chest had turned red. She called her husband, James, upstairs, and the couple tried bathing Amber in cool water. The little girl's condition deteriorated quickly. She labored to breathe. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and her skin peeled off in clumps, according to a lawsuit filed by the family.

LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

Center Director Bill Buizenberg, reporter M.B. Pell and the EPA's Debra Edwards discuss the use of pyrethrins and pyrethroids.

EPA PESTICIDE INCIDENTS 1992-2007
SEARCH BY:

CHEMICAL PRODUCT

Product

Exposure

City

State

Incident Date From

Incident Date To

SUBMIT

The Environmental Protection Agency collected the above data from chemical manufacturers. Not every exposure is included, only those that companies report. Search either by chemical name or product name, as there are multiple chemicals in a single product.

To find reports regarding pets and other domestic animals, search under: Exposure for "Domestic Animal," "Domestic Animal Fatal," "Domestic Animal Major," "Domestic Animal

The Center for Public Integrity published its investigation of the dangers of pyrethrin- and pyrethroid-based pesticides in July 2008.

abundantly clear: The number of incidents attributed to pyrethrins—a family of insecticides extracted from chrysanthemums—and their synthetic relatives, pyrethroids, had increased dramatically since 1998, according to reports filed with the EPA by pesticide manufacturers.

Our analysis also revealed that the number of human health problems, including severe reactions, attributed to pyrethrins and pyrethroids had increased by about 300 percent in the previous decade. Our review of more than 90,000 adverse-reaction reports found that pyrethrins and pyrethroids together accounted for more than a quarter of all fatal, “major,” and “moderate” human incidents in the United States in 2007, up from 15 percent in 1998. Although the number of deaths was low—about 20 from 2003 to 2007—the number of moderate and

serious incidents (more than 6,000) attributed to the group of chemicals was significantly higher than for any other class of insecticide.

The numbers surprised us. Americans, it turned out, increased their use of pyrethroid and pyrethrin insecticides after the EPA had cracked down on organophosphate pesticides such as Dursban. Toxicologists and epidemiologists told us that pyrethrins and pyrethroids are thought to be less acutely toxic than organophosphates, and the manufacturers insisted that the products are safe when properly applied.

Due to the rise in popularity of pyrethrins and pyrethroids, however, some researchers are taking a closer look. We discovered that recent studies have linked long-term pyrethroid exposures to developmental disorders and found that pyrethrins can cause allergic reactions and aggravate asthma. A team of researchers from Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a study in 2006 concluding that even children fed an exclusively organic diet had pyrethroid metabolites in their systems after their parents had used pyrethroid pesticides in their homes. (These pesticides can be found in therapeutic shampoo and antiflea and tick shampoos, bug sprays, and pet products.)

Sharing What We Found

According to the experts we interviewed, there was reason for concern. Notable was the case of a two-and-a-

¹ www.cdt.org/righttoknow/10mostwanted

... the idea, which some have put forward, of relying on the chemical industry to collect information on incidents is akin to allowing the fox to watch the hen house.

half-year-old Pennsylvania girl who died after being treated for head lice with a pyrethrin-based shampoo. We learned of the child's death after filing an FOIA request with the EPA asking for copies of the FOIA requests filed by others. This led us to the lawyer for the child's family, who wasn't allowed to speak with us under terms of a settlement with the shampoo's manufacturer. But we were able to track down the family's lawsuit and related court documents, which told a vivid tale of a terrible death: "The skin on [the child's] chest begin to peel, her breathing became labored, and her eyes roll[ed] back in her head."

We recounted her death in our initial story in our series, "Perils of the New

Pesticides,"² published by the center in July 2008. We followed up with several other stories related to the intersection of the use of these pesticides with safety and health issues. In those stories, we spotlighted information about the following topics:

- The poorly regulated sales of pesticides via the Internet
- A study of the environmental impacts of pyrethroids by the state of California
- The sometimes deadly effects of pyrethroid-based antifea and tick treatments on pets. From 2003 through 2007 the EPA received 25,000 reports of pets getting sick after being exposed to pyrethroid-

based flea and tick treatments from popular companies such as Hartz, Sergeant's, Farnam and Bayer. The 25,000 incidents included 1,600 deaths.³

To help parents, pet owners, and consumers better understand the risks associated with pesticide use, we also made the pesticide data searchable online.⁴ The public can assess for themselves the number of incidents associated with a particular product or chemical and judge for themselves whether they still want to use certain products.

The EPA cautioned that the data are not without flaws: Incidents are often reported by consumers and not by trained experts, nor does the EPA have the manpower to follow up on the reported incidents to determine their veracity. Critics agree the system could and should be improved. But the idea, which some have put forward, of relying on the chemical industry to collect information on incidents is akin to allowing the fox to watch the hen house. The EPA plans to overhaul its system in the next year to make it more efficient. Even so, its own analysis of pesticide exposure data already has prompted product recalls, chemical use restrictions, and chemical and product phaseouts.

As a result of the center's investigation, Debra Edwards, director of the EPA's Office of Pesticide Programs, said the agency would expedite a review of the health effects of pyrethrins and pyrethroids. "I'm going to ask that we do a broad report on pyrethrin and pyrethroid incidents to see if we can determine anything about trends," she told us. The agency also launched an investigation to determine if the maker of the pyrethrin-based shampoo used on the little girl in Pennsylvania had violated any EPA regulations by not reporting the child's death.

Probing Toxic Plastics at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

In "Chemical Fallout: A Journal Sentinel Watchdog Report," Susanne Rust and Meg Kissinger, reporters at this metro newspaper, explored in depth the evidence that long-term health effects may be caused by the release of chemicals found in the packaging, on the surfaces or in the contents of common household plastic products. They investigated, too, whether government fulfilled its promise to fully test the safety of chemicals that go into the manufac-

ture of plastic items, such as baby bottles. Health effects they examined include cancers of the breast, brain and testicles, lowered sperm counts, early puberty, other reproductive system defects, diabetes, attention deficit disorder, asthma and autism. In February, their six-part investigative series was awarded a George Polk Award in Journalism. These articles are archived at www.jsonline.com/watchdog/34405049.html.

² Stories from this series can be found at www.publicintegrity.org/investigations/pesticides.

³ Read "Pets and Pesticides: Let's Be Careful Out There," at www.publicintegrity.org/articles/entry/1090.

⁴ This database can be found at www.publicintegrity.org/investigations/pesticides.

While we await the outcomes of these inquiries, it's worth remembering that pesticides have too often been deemed safe by their manufacturers until there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The final decision on whether products like Dursban stay on the market rests with the EPA. But journalists can help hold this agency accountable by demanding and parsing data buried in its computers. ■

Michael B. Pell, a computer-assisted reporter at The Center for Public Integrity, worked as a reporter for the Watertown Daily Times and as a Pulitzer Fellow at The Arizona Republic.



Ellie, a mini dachshund from La Vernia, Texas, suffered chemical burns where pyrethroid-based antifea and tick drops were applied to her back. *Photo by Michele Worcester.*

A Small Newspaper Tackles a Big Investigative Project

The persistence of two reporters pays off in revealing how local government failed residents who worried about connections between corporate behavior and the high incidence of brain cancer.

BY KEVIN P. CRAVER

Tan southwest homes gave way to desert as Interstate 10 took us out of Phoenix, and I couldn't help but dwell on the voice mail greeting I'd recorded the day before from my desk in Crystal Lake, Illinois. "I will be out on assignment"

It's a phrase I'd never uttered in seven years with the Northwest Herald, a small paper in McHenry County, Illinois, two of them as the newspaper's senior reporter. In these trying times for newspapers, talking the editors of a 38,000-circulation daily into two plane tickets and two hotel rooms is worthy of a story in and of itself.

Sitting in the passenger seat on the sunny October 2007 day was Danielle Guerra, a 22-year-old videographer and Vanderbilt University graduate, whose persistence was one of the reasons for the trip. And ahead of

us on I-10 was an interview that we both wanted and dreaded to conduct. Waiting in that Phoenix suburb was Joanne Branham, who lived much of her life in the small town of McCullom Lake, nestled in McHenry County, a county northwest of Chicago. She and her husband of 44 years, Franklin, had moved to Arizona after raising five children to spend their sunset years somewhere warm.

But that was not to be—Franklin died in 2004 of glioblastoma multiforme brain cancer, a deadly disease that afflicts slightly more than three people per 100,000. That wasn't the main reason Danielle and I hopped on a plane. Months after Franklin's diagnosis, two of his former next-door neighbors in McCullom Lake were diagnosed with brain cancer as well. All three families in April 2006 sued

two manufacturers, Rohm and Haas and Modine Manufacturing, located a mile north of their homes in the neighboring village of Ringwood. For decades, consultants had tracked a plume of volatile organic chemicals in the groundwater from their operations.

After more than a year of covering the issue piecemeal, Guerra and I convinced our editors to let us pursue what turned into a six-part investigation full-time, also atypical for such a small-size newspaper. By the day of our trip, 22 current and former residents, all but four with brain and nerve cancer, had sued the companies.

One of my favorite proverbs from a book of sayings that my late father kept in his study was that age and treachery will always overcome youth

In the multimedia presentation of this story, Joanne Branham expresses profound sadness about her husband's death from a glioblastoma multiforme brain tumor that she and other families similarly affected believe was caused by industrial contaminants near their home in McCullom Lake, Illinois.

and skill. But whoever came up with that bromide never examined what could happen if you merged the two—Guerra's youth and skill and my age and treachery—toward a common goal. The two of us—and the Northwest Herald—banked our reputations on the answer.

Moving Pictures

I had worked on stories with multimedia components before embarking on this series, but nothing this ambitious. Guerra and I agreed at the beginning that every story in the series would have accompanying video, and I attended almost every interview or shoot that she conducted. I quickly learned of multimedia's potential—its raw power to reach out and grab viewers by the collar and not let them go.

Arizona's climate had been good to Joanne Branham. She was healthier than many people half her age, and she had the energy to manage a restaurant, where patrons affectionately

called her "Aunt Jo." Guerra's camera captured an interview that I could not have conveyed if the editors gave me the entire "A" section and half of Sports. Print could not capture the amazing volume of tears that spilled down her face, or the cracking in her voice as she recalled Franklin's last moments. Upon his diagnosis, doctors gave him six months to live, but he barely made it one month.

Weeks later, that same camera came along with us to Philadelphia, home of Rohm and Haas's world headquarters and the attorney who took the villagers' cases. It captured the crusading style of Aaron Freiwald, a former investigative reporter himself before entering law, as well as the measured tones of Rohm and Haas's spokesman and the company's counsel.

As we traveled down the back roads of eastern Pennsylvania, multimedia helped capture the curious tale of Spring House, a Rohm and Haas research campus where 15 or so employees, five of them in one

hallway, have developed brain cancer. Moving pictures again told a thousand words as former corporate executive Tom Haag gave us a tour in his car, pointing out who died in which part of which building.

And while the interview of widow Joan Szerlik didn't have the raw grief of Branham's—it had been 14 years since Szerlik lost her husband, who worked at Spring House, to brain cancer—it caught how perplexed she was at the company's conclusion that the 15 cases were coincidence.

The story's true test came when Editor Dan McCaleb sat down at Guerra's computer to watch the first video of the series, which featured Branham's heart-wrenching tale. Through the corner of my eye, I noticed the boss tearing up a bit, which is no small feat if you ask any journalist. The verdict was in, although unspoken—the time and money spent on the project was more than worth it.

Digging Up Buried Information

But what kind of investigative work could a newspaper with the limited resources of the Northwest Herald hope to execute? I was an army of one writer—no bright-eyed college interns, no gofers, only me. Six stories averaging 100 inches, not counting sidebars, based on numerous interviews and tens of thousands of pages of data, requires the Melinda Mae approach. (Melinda Mae was the little girl in a Shel Silverstein poem who decided to eat a whale. She did it in 89 years, which I didn't have.)

Melinda Mae did it one bite at a time. Likewise, all I could do was begin to pore over everything—one page, one question at a time. But doing so required a flurry of FOIA requests to local, state and federal agencies, as well as about \$1,500 worth of legal dockets downloaded from the U.S. District Court where a class-action lawsuit on behalf of McCullom Lake residents had been filed.

This deliberative strategy paid dividends. The information I received showed, for starters, that the former

owners of one of the factories knew about the pollution a decade before reporting it to environmental authorities. Private e-mails from the environmental consultants who mapped the water pollution showed they had serious concerns about the accuracy of their data.

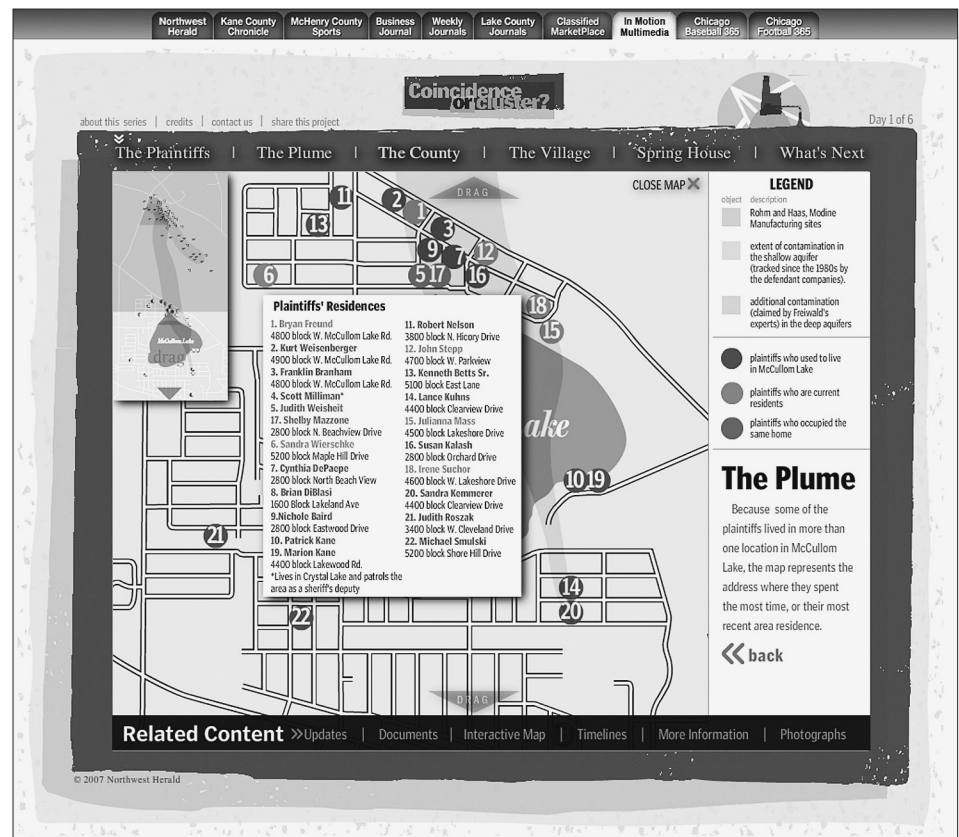
For me, the bigger question was just how the McHenry County Department of Health had done its research to reach its conclusion that nothing was wrong, when it found that the defendant manufacturers were not responsible for these cancers. Just one month after the first lawsuits had been filed, county health officials had pronounced before worried village residents that local cancer rates were not above average and presented maps showing the contamination far from village wells. But the cancer data the county relied on were from years before nearly everyone involved in these lawsuits had gotten sick. More ominously, many of the maps that the county trotted out to calm the masses stated in small letters, “Provided by Rohm and Haas.”

Curious as to whether the county appointed a fox to guard a chicken coop on the taxpayer’s dime, I acquired every e-mail, document or cocktail napkin in which county officials referenced the brain cancers, as well as attorney Freiwald’s deposition of the county epidemiologist. What I found was the crowning achievement of our series, as our watchdog journalism enabled us to publish evidence of government failing the people.

The series revealed that, aside from relying on out-of-date data and maps provided by the defendant companies, the epidemiologist depended on college textbooks, class notes, and Web sites to hastily assemble the study. The study had no protocol, ignored accepted standards for researching disease, and its authors privately ran it by Rohm and Haas executives before showing it to the public.

Public Reaction

The series, “Coincidence or Cluster?,” was published in December 2007. It



This interactive map gives users the ability to see where cancer patients lived in proximity to one another and to the factories and the alleged water contamination. *Map courtesy of the Northwest Herald.*

has won at least a dozen awards for investigative and online journalism, but its ultimate accolade is one that Guerra and I strived for from the start—none of what we reported in the series has ever been proven wrong. Not one fact, not one statistic has ever been successfully disputed, though county officials tried—if by “tried” one means that they jumped up and down and screamed about the stories. In a meeting in which they planned to highlight “key facts” we chose to “downplay, spin or ignore,” their defense amounted to the fact that the whole mess was state government’s responsibility.

Our diligence did not end with the series. As with any good investigative effort, “Coincidence or Cluster?” shook other facts loose. For example, we learned that county officials downplayed some critical facts involving their own activity in regard to this public health issue; they obtained some of the bombshell memos in our series a year before it ran, but chose

not to read them.

Following our series, one advisor to the county health board told its members, “People’s memories who read the newspapers are short. So maybe in about a year, nobody will remember this.”

Yet again, they were wrong. And the reason is because a small newspaper refused to believe it was too small to tackle such an ambitious project, not only in print, but also with video. ■

Kevin Craver, senior reporter at the Northwest Herald, got his start in journalism drawing comic strips for the Northern Star, his college newspaper. He and Danielle Guerra were named 2008 Journalists of the Year by Suburban Newspapers of America for their work on “Coincidence or Cluster?.” The series has won recognition from The Associated Press, the Illinois Press Association, the Chicago Headline Club, Washington Monthly, and the Chicago Journalists Association.

The Other Side of China's Economic Miracle

A Chinese reporter describes how he learned about the injuries and illnesses that befall migrants who work in factories where exported products are made.

BY RAN AN

Four years ago, as I drove through China's Jiangsu Province, known in the past as the "land of fish and rice," I saw many disastrous effects of its radical industrialization. Rivers, once thriving with fish, were polluted. Farmland, once bountiful, was vanishing. In numerous factories, workers—many of them migrants from poorer regions in China—were producing clothes and textiles, consumer electronics and toys. On the walls of these roadside factories, a frequent advertisement caught my attention. Two huge, red Chinese characters declared "hand connecting," with a cell phone number below. This graffiti-like drawing looked like an ad for hand surgery. A friend traveling with me confirmed that reconnecting severed limbs is a good business in local hospitals and private clinics. The surgeons near these factories, he said, are very accomplished in doing this kind of repair.

As a reporter and a former medical doctor, I knew that this requires intricate surgery performed using a special microscope and miniature precision instruments. Learning of this unexpected skill of local surgeons indicated to me that there must be a high incidence of amputation in this area, since the level of injury or disease often relates to the practice and skills of nearby doctors. My friend assured me that amputation accidents happen a lot in the factories.

The idea of one day doing a story about this situation popped into my mind. But it would be four years—including one year



An advertising lamp-box for hand surgical operations at Longgang District Central Hospital, Shenzhen City, Guangdong Province. *Photos and captions by Ran An.*



Two young workers lost part of their fingers, one in an electronics factory accident and the other at a furniture factory.

as a Global Health Fellow at the Nieman Foundation—before I was able to report on this occupational health crisis in China.

Preparing to Report

By the summer of 2008, when my reporting began, several extensive articles had been published in the Western press about health issues factory workers confront because of exposure to toxic chemicals in making exported products. [See Loretta Tofani's article on page 59.] As a Chinese reporter, I knew that doing an in-depth investigation on migrant workers' health is regarded as a very politically sensitive topic, and press censorship and oversight would be a factor in me being able to tell this story. If, however, I presented occupational health issues in China as a public health concern rather than as a story about human rights, I felt I could make my reporting be more scientific and have the story be constructive and less politically sensitive.

With this approach, I'd be able to use my medical training to read academic literature and talk with medical sources. Dozens of professional periodicals on occupational medicine and industrial safety are published in China. As a medical reporter, I was accustomed to searching in these journals for case reports and papers and digging out epidemiological data. Then I would turn to experts to learn more. So I went to the medical library of Peking University and read in

journals about occupational hazards in the making of furniture, garments, electronics, toys and gems and in coal and gold mining. I found reports on the poisoning of benzene, lead, nickel, n-hexane, cadmium, mercury and other toxins and learned about the causes, spread and symptoms of occupational illnesses—knowledge I would use in my on-the-ground reporting.

In doing this story, I decided to present myself as a Harvard fellow “doing field-work” rather than as a reporter for *China Newsweek*. Although some journalists in China play the role of muckraker even as they deal with government censorship—and their contributions should be valued historically—many of them feel frustrated in being labeled as troublemakers. Bureaucrats warn each other about dealing with such reporters; they use the phrase “three-wariness” that places journalists alongside fire and thieves in what should be prevented in daily official businesses. By presenting myself as a fellow, officials at some exclusive organizations, such as the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), accepted my interview. Had I come as a reporter, my reception would have been much different.

Like many reporters in China, I also relied, at first, as many business people do, on connections and personal relationships (relatives, schoolmates, friends, or friends of friends) to find my way to the people and places I needed to see. Even though an authorized press card and stamped “introduction letter” are vital documents for any reporter to carry—if only for self-protection in gathering news—by the time I left Beijing I’d failed to get my press card routinely renewed by



Mr. Zhong, 40, had been living in Shenzhen Hospital for the Prevention and Treatment of Occupational Diseases since May 2007. Zhong acquired lung disease in November 2005 and was originally misdiagnosed and treated for tuberculosis without stopping his work in a dusty electronic factory. He was eventually diagnosed with silicosis. *Photo and caption by Ran An.*

the supervising authority—the State Press and Publication Administration. I did have introductory letters from the Nieman Foundation and *China Newsweek*, and I’d set up strong connections in Jiangsu Province, where I’d grown up, and local friends agreed to assist me.

Interviewing Officials in Jiangsu Province

When I arrived in Jiangsu, my welcoming dinner was held at a high-priced restaurant. At our table were a number of local physicians who enjoy the luxuries of life primarily because of kickback money they take from pharmaceuticals, bribes in “red envelopes” from patients, and the moonlighting they do in lower level clinics. The government’s commercialization of medical facilities has broken down the former state-supported systems of public health and medical care. Medical services are now money-driven and unaffordable to many Chinese; a popular saying of “three huge mountains” describes the escalating costs of health care, education and housing and the widening wealth gap despite the

government’s call for “building a harmonious society.”

In my first interview, which lasted two hours, I spoke with a hand surgeon who had managed hand-surgical wards under contract with five local township hospitals. Then my friend accompanied me to the local CDC, where I met with the director, a person he knew, who sat behind a huge executive desk and smoked. In a half-hearted voice, he gave me a basic idea of how the CDC evaluates the working conditions of local industries, and he emphasized the political skills he needed to

deal with occupational health issues. He also expressed prudence in releasing information about these various issues. The response to my visit was courteous and careful; responses conveyed a bureaucratic tone.

This attitude and manner was prevalent as I traveled to other government departments in Jiangsu and neighboring provinces, including Zhejiang and Shanghai. Authorities in each place provided me with few details; however, in each location a lavish banquet was held in honor of my visit, and this was a time when friends introduced local sources to me. From a somewhat cooperative official, I received some new case reports of occupational diseases, and at one stop I had access to a huge factory where they make laptop batteries. This turned out to be a showcase factory of safe work practices. When I requested random visits to factories or asked to meet workers who’d been hurt on the job, these officials were extremely reluctant to help.

As I moved from place to place—following this pattern of friendly introductions—I began to regret taking this approach, even though it’s a customary way of doing stories in

China. I realized that I was only scratching the surface of this story; it was unrealistic to believe that local officials, who were held responsible for accidents and are protecting themselves, would share with me any useful information.

Using Grass-Roots Sources

I turned to grass-roots sources, such as those who are involved with improving workers' well-being, and set out for Chongqing, a mega-industrialized city in western China, surrounded by poor villages that produce a steady supply of migrant workers.

There I met with an independent lawyer by the name of Zhou, who is well known for fighting for the rights of workers maimed in factories.

Zhou works, eats and sometimes sleeps in apartments he shares with his associates, some of whom include maimed workers he has hired. Before coming to his office, I was invited to eat a lunch they cooked and ate together around a big table like a family. In his office were photographs of Zhou with Westerners with whom he met to discuss the status of workers' rights and legal practice in China. When he wins a case for his clients, his payment is part of the compensation. During our visit, he told me about various victims he had served and copied files of some typical cases for me. He also called workers who were suffering from serious pneumoconiosis—a chronic disease of the lungs due to repeated inhalation of particles of dust, silicate and carbonate—to set up interviews for me with them.

From Chongqing, I traveled by bus for four hours to reach Wanzhou. The next day, after two hours in a minibus and a bumpy 40-minute motorcycle ride, I arrived in the county seat of this mountainous village. There I met with workers, 42-year-old Mr. Ran and



Mr. Ran, 42, and Mr. Pu, 45, represent a group of 11 workers who contracted deadly silicosis in a pottery mill. Seven of them died in the process of a lawsuit seeking proper compensation based on China's Law on Prevention and Control of Occupational Diseases. *Photo and caption by Ran An.*

45-year-old Mr. Pu, who'd come home after acquiring this incurable lung disease while working in Zhejiang, the eastern province where I'd just been. They contracted this illness while working in a pottery mill without any protection. Eleven fellow townsmen who worked in the same mill had also been diagnosed with this disease after inhaling silicon dust for five years. Ran and Pu told me how their boss at the mill tricked them into signing an agreement to accept 7,000-50,000 yuan in compensation (roughly 1,000 to 7,000 U.S. dollars). They believe they deserve to be compensated with 500,000 yuan (or 70,000 U.S. dollars), according to China's Law on Prevention and Control of Occupational Diseases. Seven of the victims from this town, I was told, had died before the lawsuit on their behalf was even filed.

Ran and Pu gave me copies of their medical records, including their certificates of diagnosis and legal documents. With their dim futures, their families are foremost in their minds, and they just hope to win this lawsuit in which Zhou is representing them. They are not at all certain of getting the outcome they desire; they told me that the person who is registered as owner of the plant is not the real

boss, and there are issues involving bankruptcy of the factory.

Pneumoconiosis (and silicosis, a form of the disease several of these men had) primarily affects miners, sandblasters and metal grinders, and it consistently tops the list of China's occupational illnesses. Recently some migrant workers who have silicosis have won class-action suits against employers, and such cases have drawn attention from China's most powerful leaders. As Zhou explained to me, among his clients, silicosis and amputation are the most common cases.

Local Hurdles

Now I wanted to talk with people at the Guizhan Institute of Highland Development, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) helping gold miners who live in what are called "villages of silicosis" in Guizhou Province. Its coordinator persuaded me by telephone not to come, since a local authority had cracked down on their work. It would be impossible for me to approach any workers; in fact, the institute was no longer contacting any of them. When I tried to open their Web site after our conversation, I found it listed as an "expired domain name."

What had become clear in my reporting is how often local Chinese officials try to conceal the scale of disease, injury and deaths from industrial (and natural) disasters. They do this to avoid punishment from central party officials and citizens' anger; some local leaders even profit from partial ownership in the lucrative businesses involved in these health dangers. These same officials can make it difficult for NGOs—most of whom receive operating funds from overseas foundations—to operate; registration is fraught with obstacles. To register at the local civil affairs department requires sponsorship by a government institution.

Some NGOs decide to register as a business through a local industrial and commerce bureau, but they have to pay substantial fees and taxes.

In Longgang's industrial district, home to more than three million migrant workers at thousands of export factories, the streets are choked with construction vehicles competing for space in a city on the move. It is a satellite town of Shenzhen City, in Guangdong Province. Here I was introduced to Qiang Zhu, cofounder of an underground NGO for migrant laborers' rights.

He lost his arm in a crude machine while making plastic bags. In his office, next to a dusty construction field and beside a noisy road, the 25-year-old told me what happened to him and about the founding of his organization. He spoke in a calm voice as he told me about how he and his volunteer partners visit hospitals and dormitories to provide legal support to injured workers.

At Zhu's office, I interviewed three young workers who lost their fingers in accidents at a furniture factory, at a hardware shop, and at an electronic plant. Each told me of the moment when he was injured and how fellow workers and bosses responded to the injury. They had seen foreign businessmen come to the factories, but they didn't know who they were, and they did not know to what country the exported products were being shipped. Each described the part he made, but none knew what the final product looked like. They talked of family and the future, with each concerned about the amount of compensation he might be awarded. Though I likely seemed breezy in my conversation with them, in my heart I felt sympathy and sadness.



Qiang Zhu, 25, cofounder of an underground NGO for migrant workers' rights in Shenzhen City, Guangdong Province, lost his arm in a crude machine while making plastic bags. He helped me get to interview workers with severed fingers in a local district hospital. *Photo and caption by Ran An.*

Visiting a Hand Injury Hospital

At Longgang District Central Hospital, a ward is devoted to hand injuries and surgery. In it, patients fill 142 beds of this five-floor building, which is separated from other parts of the hospital. On a sweltering evening, Zhu and I went to this building and, posing as Zhu's friend, I talked with three workers with bandaged hands. The youngest I spoke with was 18 years old. Perhaps because of their youth, they seemed less worried than how I imagined they'd feel and were willing to talk with me. However, they were shy of the camera as they scurried from bed to bed, having fun trying to avoid it.

In days that followed I rode a bicycle to almost every industrial zone in the Longgang area. I pedaled by factories of all kinds, but I couldn't enter any except a crude punch machine factory used to train first-time workers. Zhu and his friends tried to help me, but they couldn't get into the workplaces either. Volunteers are threatened sometimes for trying; Zhu said that last year

two knife-wielding assailants attacked a volunteer from the Migrant Worker Centre who had been offering education on labor contract law. Zhu did give me an album containing photos of shabby workplaces taken by workers without the knowledge of their employers.

In Shenzhen, I connected with a doctor before visiting the Hospital for the Prevention and Treatment of Occupational Diseases. I made this connection as a backup plan, though I intended to visit patients in their rooms on my own. I'd go to the ward

of occupational diseases after 3 p.m. because I knew the schedule of doctor visits, transfusions, injections and the dispensing of pills finished before that time, so no medical personnel would be there. Once, when I encountered a doctor or nurse while interviewing, I told them I was a social worker offering help to the patients. And when I met patients, I said I was an investigator for a project on occupational diseases. No press card or introduction letter was demanded. I could take photographs and record my conversations.

Two women with a chronic condition caused by chemical poisoning told their stories in detail and gave me medical records, certificates of diagnosis, and other documents. And when our conversations were over, they introduced me to other patients on the ward. Their kindness helped me get to know other patients. By talking with people who had different kinds of chemical poisoning—all related to industrial work—I could report on conditions I'd learned about in the academic papers I'd read.

For most of the patients, after getting sick they received 800 yuan (about

120 U.S. dollars) each month. The vast majority are disputing that level of compensation with their employers. Some offered me contact information for their factory managers; most are businessmen from Hong Kong or Taiwan. I called them and asked the reasons for specific workers' diseases or injuries. Most blamed them on the workers' carelessness. All of them refused my request for an interview and denied they were paying improper compensation to the workers.

Finding a Network of Sources

I gradually found my way inside the network involved with workers' health and rights. It spreads throughout China and consists of NGOs, lawyers, scholars, doctors and some international organizations. Now I am able to crosscheck information from different angles. When an NGO leader talked of social audit firms inspecting manufacturers for the importers in the West, I spoke to an auditor, Ms. Yang. We met at a Starbucks coffee shop in Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong Province.

Yang kept a low profile at the coffee shop. She told me she'd worked for an NGO in support of workers'

rights, transferred to an audit firm, and now is an independent auditor and advocate for workers' rights. She showed me hundreds of photos she'd taken and collected and explained the harmful working conditions she'd found in a variety of industries. She shared her analysis of the causes of occupational illnesses and injuries, let me know about the usual ways that factory managers try to fool and bribe auditors, and pointed out the loopholes in the social audits done for multinational companies.

Yang's conclusion was that the social audits of factories (also referred to as "factory inspections") are far short of being effective tools to control workers' injuries and illness. To some extent, the audits are a convenient way for the Western importers to ease social blame.

After returning to Beijing in October, I heard often about the bankruptcy of factories in Guangdong and Jiangsu Provinces due to the economic crisis in the United States and other Western countries. In China, the voice blaming the collapse of these factories on the new Labor Contract Law, which offers additional protections to factory workers, became louder and louder. Some economists and investors

complain that this is not the proper time to enforce this law, which they argue raises production costs while improving worker conditions. Some are calling for suspension of the law. A "bad job is better than no job," they say. Government leaders emphasize that their top priority remains the ensuring of economic growth rather than any other policies.

Workers' occupational health protection is most uncertain in China's economic system of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Even the topic of health problems among these workers seems out of sync with the ways of China today. Yet it is a story that needs to be told, however difficult this might be to do. ■

Ran An, a 2008 Nieman Fellow, was a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Global Health Reporting Fellow. He returned to China, where he has been reporting this story while rejoining his job at China Newsweek, the Beijing-based magazine printed in Chinese that belongs to the China News Service. His story about occupational illnesses in China will be published in China Newsweek.

Medical and Public Health Concerns: Off-Limits in the Russian Press

'The problem facing public health reporters is not the police; it's a medical system with little transparency and fear of unemployment.'

BY KARL IDSVOOG AND MAX GRUBB

In December, Kent State University professors Karl Idsvoog, a 1983 Nieman Fellow, and Max Grubb visited the Tomsk Media Group in Tomsk, Siberia as part of an IREX/Kent State University media development project to help TV2 improve its internal journalistic and business training programs. In the following article, they share their observations about pressures that

most reporters are facing in Russia today when they try to cover public health issues and dangerous medical situations.

Regardless of topic, reporters have to get sources on the record for their story to have credibility. Those who have something to lose if they speak openly and honestly about a public

health problem are understandably hesitant to talk to reporters, especially when what they might lose is their job. In today's Russia, a combination of history, economics, and the rule of Vladimir Putin, citizens who don't ask and journalists who often don't dare combine to put health reporting on the critical list.

To know where we are today, it

is important to understand a bit about Russian economic, medical and journalistic history. Under the Soviet system, medical care was free but lousy. Economic conditions for the average family were equally lousy. Consumer goods? Forget it. The press was propaganda, not journalism. For journalists, Boris Yeltsin's election to the presidency is remembered as a time of incredible freedom and economic turmoil. The shift to a market economy made many citizens wish for the Soviet times.

Then comes Putin. The economy, political stability, and the standard of living go forward, free press goes backwards, except in a city in Siberia. That city is Tomsk, and the year was 1991, the year of Yeltsin's election. A group of like-minded independent journalists came together there to form the Tomsk Media Group. TV station—TV2—today still surprises anyone who visits. “When people come from Moscow and they see what kind of news we cover,” says News Director Yulia Muchnik, “they ask how come you still function, how come you're not shut down?”

Station Manager Svetlana Serena agrees journalism has “stopped” in nearly all of Russia since Putin rose to power. But her station pushes on with its commitment to producing solid journalism, focusing on local news for the citizens of Tomsk. The company's charter calls for the station to provide viewers “truthful, complete and verifiable information.” In a country where it's common for businessmen and politicians to pay journalists to do favorable stories, TV2's code of ethics strictly prohibits this. Managing Editor Victor Muchnik, Yulia's brother, warns new hires they'll be fired for violating the code and lets his new journalists know “there are no sacred cows.” He means it.

Indeed, TV2 has done stories it knows local officials won't like, and they've paid the price. After reporting how a businessman died under questionable circumstances while in police custody, the police department banned TV2 reporters from press conferences and posted officers outside

the station who proceeded to check licenses and identification paperwork on every reporter and photographer leaving the building.

No Transparency, No Watchdogs

The problem facing public health reporters is not the police; it's a medical system with little transparency and fear of unemployment. Victor and Yulia Muchnik come from a family of doctors. They describe their mother

**... when the ‘troubles’
involve medicine, a
hospital or a doctor, for
the journalist it's almost
like being back in the
Soviet time. The story
can't be told.**

as an “expert on medical mistakes,” mistakes she won't talk about. Victor describes the current Russian medical system as “one of the most closed for journalism.” As he puts it, “You may never find truth, because no one will share it with you.”

For medical stories, it's often a source of frustration for both the press and the public. The people of Tomsk have come to realize, recognize and respect that reporters of TV2 are not spouting government propaganda. By aggressively covering local news, TV2 has developed a loyal viewership. “When people have troubles,” says Yulia Muchnik, “they always contact us. They say please come and help us.” But when the “troubles” involve medicine, a hospital or a doctor, for the journalist it's almost like being back in the Soviet time. The story can't be told.

TV2 reporter Maxim Voronin says

he has lots of medical sources. Reporting on a new medical procedure or the opening of a new operating room is never a problem. If it's positive, people talk. But if there's a case of medical malpractice, if it's anything of a critical nature, there are no quotes to be had. “There's an insider culture,” says Voronin. And if there are serious medical mistakes, he says there is a “desire to conceal.”

In Russia, there are no public watchdogs, no Dr. Sidney Wolfe, compiling lists of dangerous doctors, dangerous medical devices, and dangerous drugs. For a reporter, says Voronin, “It's very hard to acquire impartial, objective proof of any medical mistake.” And although there have been several cases of what Victor Muchnik describes as “self-trials, lynching [of doctors] by patients who thought they were harmed because of doctors' mistakes,” there's no demand from the Russian citizenry for more vigorous health reporting.

Nelly Krecheova, the director of international and regional relations for the Tomsk Regional Government, who once tried unsuccessfully to start a public TV station, says Tomsk is fortunate to have TV2 because the state channels “do not want to raise those issues which could generate too much discussion in public.” When it comes to medical information, the loser is the public, but they don't seem to care. “Now the philosophy is don't worry, the state is going to solve all your problems, just don't worry, and this is a habit. Russians are accustomed to that. We are accustomed to getting advice from (and not questioning) the state,” Krecheova says.

In Russia, people have more money to spend and seem interested in commercial goods and not in demanding a freer press in a country where the Kremlin has left no doubt that critical reporting is not welcome. Still, the Tomsk Media Group says it plans to stay true to its mission. “We decided for ourselves that as long as we can work and function being free and without censorship, we will go on,” says Yulia Muchnik. ■



An ISAF soldier takes a photograph of a photographer in Kabul. *Photo by ©Travis Beard/Argusphotography.*

News Photography in Afghanistan, Climate Change and Politics, and Economic Calamity and Coverage

Three major stories of our time—and they are with us at a time when the news media’s resources are stretched thin and audiences are dispersed in their search for credible information. How will these huge stories be told?

From Afghanistan, what images will photojournalists be able to bring us? A photographer who works there describes how visual access to the war is being curtailed.

To comprehend, then convey, the complex story of climate change is tough. Stir politics into the mix, and the road ahead gets even tougher. In pulling observations from his online reporting notebook, an environmental journalist presents the dimensions of our journalistic challenge.

A look back at how the news media did during the economic boom years with coverage of such consequential issues as deregulation and derivatives provides opportunity for worthwhile reflection. Where was the connect-the-dots reporting—the kind that joins Main Street to Wall Street and Wall Street to the world? Will reporters’ and editors’ awareness of what didn’t happen then lead them to improve what happens next? ■

Afghanistan: Pictures Not Taken

‘When the press started to feel empowered to show and tell the truth, it was only a matter of time before the military and government powers would retaliate.’

BY TRAVIS BEARD

Nothing has more power to communicate the destruction and despair of our time—especially from the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan—than photography. But in the sanitized and censored environments now of government and military control, taking the picture can be as difficult as getting it published.

In coverage of these wars,

freelance photojournalists are indispensable. One after another, news organizations have abandoned the task of informing the public. For editors back home, photojournalists—and the images they transmit—are problematic. But it’s not the photographers who pose the problem; it’s the truth their images tell. During the Vietnam War, there was the searing image of nine-year-

old Kim Phouc running down the road with her flesh melting and fusing into her body after a napalm strike and her brother running in front of her with an expression that recalled Edvard Munch’s “The Scream.” This photograph spoke to people in ways that words had failed to do. These children were ones the Americans were supposed to be saving, not bombing. Images such as this one

did much to turn the tide of that war, but if they did, it was because they conveyed important truths.

Press Restrictions in Afghanistan

Most of the freelance photographers who once worked in Iraq have moved across to Afghanistan and now feel compelled to tell the story of this country and its people—the 30 years of war it has sustained, with billions of dollars spent on weapons and aid. In the eight years since America and its allies arrived to oust the Taliban, little seems to have changed except for the presence now of suicide bombers.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, those who control the battlefields require a compliant media and so embedding (or in-bedding as some call it) is seen as a way to manage reporters and photographers while appearing to provide access. But the not-so-well hidden agenda underlying it is that by being assigned to a particular unit it creates what the military calls “unit cohesion” or bonding among fellow human beings who spend time together in dangerous situations. Loyalties and empathies surface as journalistic objectivity can disappear.

But not every reporter and photographer in Afghanistan is towing the official line, even as military restrictions on the press are increasing as the war intensifies. To function in Afghanistan, a member of the press must have media accreditation, issued by NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul. ISAF now demands that applicants take a Biometric Automated Toolset (BAT) examination; the results—which include highly personal information—are kept by the U.S. military for the apparent reason of facilitating entry to all military bases in Afghanistan for accredited press. ISAF doesn’t provide a privacy guarantee.



Journalist Ash Sweeting rides in a pickup with the Afghanistan National Police. *Photo by ©Travis Beard/Argusphotography.*

I have been living in Afghanistan for more than two years and recently had to take a BAT test. When I asked whether “the data will be shared with any other parties outside the ISAF media office,” they refused to answer. I asked the officer in charge why this security procedure had been introduced. His answer: “Too many Afghans are getting access to the base, so we’ve

to get to the war’s frontline. Most other aspects of reporting can be done without “help” from ISAF. My sense is that it can be more dangerous to be embedded since, when you move with military forces, you become a target. And chances of being involved in a suicide attack increase.

It is perhaps not surprising that similar to what is happening in Iraq, there is disparity in how Western reporters do their jobs (many opt for ISAF embeds) and how Afghans do theirs (traveling with Afghan forces and embedding with the Taliban). One reason for this could be that ISAF wants to make it difficult for Afghans to be able to embed with its forces for fear of sensitive information being compromised; the Afghans then choose the easier option of an Afghan forces embed. It could also be that Afghans are not embedding with international military units because many consider them to be a more dangerous option.

Though I’ve done embeds with ISAF forces for a story—and for the



A sign in front of a military base says “no photographs.” *Photo by ©Travis Beard/Argusphotography.*

introduced this system to filter out the supposed journalists from the real journalists.”

Journalists use the embed program



British soldiers push photojournalists back from the site of a suicide blast. *Photo by Fardin Waezi/Aina Photo.*

experience—I believe this approach to coverage is a contrived tool of propaganda. Now I try to report from a more independent perspective and use my extensive Afghan contacts to get the stories I think people throughout the world ought to see. My last embed was to a forward operation base in Zabul province, deep in Taliban country. The base was hit by Taliban mortar rounds on such a regular basis that soldiers joked about a 4 p.m. attack time. Sure enough, we were shelled by rounds from nearby mountains at just that time, so when I came back to Kabul I reported about the punctual assertiveness of the Taliban.

Months later I requested to return to the same base with ISAF. Numerous times I was told the base was not available to visit and was encouraged to visit other “less active” areas. Of the embedded journalists I talk with, most tell me that the time they spent with their unit was a little disappointing since they didn’t see enough action. Though some reports indicate that the Taliban now control up to 70 percent

of the country, seldom do ISAF embeds get assigned to units in areas where those forces are losing ground. Usually they are sent to areas where ISAF is “winning” the war. Images of military action tend to come from journalists who were “lucky” enough to be in the right place at that time.

Clamping Down on the Press

The liberation of Afghanistan from Taliban rule created many new opportunities for Afghans, including the emergence of a youthful and energetic media industry. TV and radio stations—private and government run—started to broadcast, some funded by international donors. More than 300 newspapers are now in circulation throughout the country.

In a similar spirit, Aina Photo Agency (APA), the nongovernmental organization where I work, was set up in 2002. There, Afghan photographers learn how to tell “through Afghan eyes” the truth of what is happening in their country.¹ Years of absence of a free

press explain much about the years of conflict that Afghans have endured. If a free press is essential to a democracy, then the work of APA’s graduates will be part of its bedrock.

In our early years, these Afghan photojournalists were met with open arms and support from the Afghan government and international donors. But as time has gone by—and with the Iraq experience informing the situation here—the Afghan press started to strongly question the effectiveness of eight years of occupation by the allies. When the press started to feel empowered to show and tell the truth, it was only a matter of time before the military and government powers would retaliate.

Of course, during the rule of the Taliban it was more dangerous to carry a camera than a Kalashnikov; citing Islamic law, the Taliban declared it illegal to take or have images of living things. Being a photographer was not only brave, it was downright foolhardy as many were arrested, beaten and tortured. Their shops were shelled, their families persecuted, and sometimes they were killed just for taking a photograph or owning a camera. Fardin Waezi, now a professional photojournalist who trained at APA, was arrested seven times under Taliban rule for such offenses.

The ISAF seems to now be feeding on the Taliban’s paranoia about cameras. Signs banning the use of cameras began to proliferate at about the same time the Taliban seemed to be regaining a stronger foothold. Freelancers, like me, no longer hear people call out “Ax me Biggie,” which roughly translated is street talk for “take my picture.” The joy of traveling with a camera is turning into a misery on two fronts—with the military forces and now, too, on the street.

The Afghan government, guided by the United States, is also jailing journalists and even imposed a death sentence for student/journalist Sayed

¹ Travis Beard wrote about Aina Photo Agency and Afghan photographers it trained and displayed their work in a photo essay published in the Spring 2007 Nieman Reports. His article can be read at www.niemanreports.org.

Parwez Kambakhsh.² Television stations have been raided. Newspapers closed down. Nor is there any assistance for Afghan journalists taken hostage by the Taliban. Their families must broker their release or they are left to die. It is not only more dangerous for Afghan journalists to operate here than it is for international reporters and photographers, but they get paid a lot less.

I see the situation for them worsening in 2009. What follows is an account of just one week of trying to function as a freelance photojournalist in Kabul.

A Suicide Bombing in Kabul:

At a suicide bombing on the Jalalabad Road, my colleague Fardin Waezi and I had an encounter with British troops, who were cordoning off the area. (Usually this is done by U.S. troops.) The Brits pushed the media back one kilometer from the blast site, but members of the press tried to inch closer. I challenged the soldier and asked him why we couldn't get any closer to take some photos.

"Mate, I'm just doing my job securing the area and keeping you in a safe position."

"I'm just doing my job, too, to report on what happened here," I replied, to which he said, "It's not you I am worried about; it's the Afghan journos who are with you."

"They are friends of mine and professional accredited photographers," I told him.

"For all I know they could be the next threat," he said, referring to the bombing.

This conversation went on for a while, and then the soldier became quite forceful and approached members of the press to move back. "Please don't point your gun at me," I said to him, and he told me he wasn't. "I can

was clear that the soldier was pointing the gun at me.

Photographing "No Photos": I had a story idea of taking photos in places where the signs tell me I'm not allowed to be. Again, I took Waezi with me. We drove around Kabul requesting permission to take photos of signs saying "no photos." We'd taken four such pictures without a problem when we went to the entrance of the President's Palace and asked the Afghan guards if we could take a shot of their sign. They said sure, as long as we didn't shoot any of the palace behind the sign. I reassured them we wouldn't. We took the shot and said thank you. On the same street is Camp Eggers, a U.S. military base. We stopped to ask these Afghan guards if we could do the same. The guard in charge frowned, so we explained again what we wanted. Then he took our cameras and called for verification.

An armed U.S. soldier came out 15 minutes later and asked what we were doing. I told him. "I need to check this with my superior," he said. In another 15 minutes a higher-ranking armed officer came out and asked us more questions. He asked for our IDs, made some radio checks for verification and our IDs were cleared, but then he confiscated our IDs and told us we could pick them up the next day. We were given

back our cameras, and he then asked if he could take a photograph of us. I said, "Sure, if I can take a picture of you." He declined, took the photo of us, and let us go. When we returned for our IDs, we were told we had to



In 2007 the Taliban stepped up its campaign of suicide bombing in Kabul. The target then was often military convoys and international NGO vehicles. The casualties included innocent bystanders. After an attack the area was flooded by international and Afghan military, who kept the press at bay. *Photo and caption by © Travis Beard/Argusphotography.*

see down the barrel of your gun, so you must be pointing it at me," I said, and again he denied it.

It was only later that day when Waezi came to me and showed me his frames from the moment that it

² An article about Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh's trial and sentence, published by the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, can be read at www.iwpr.net/?p=arr&s=f&o=342144&apc_state=henh.



Sign at the exit of the United Nations Humanitarian Air Services at the Kabul International Airport. Photo by © Travis Beard/Argusphotography.

register again, and this was when I had my BAT test done.

Despite all of these security measures, there are moments when one must smile at how intentions sometimes go awry. On another occasion a friend and I went through full body

scans, had our IDs checked, handed over our phones, and made our way to the restaurant at the NATO base in Kabul. We were somewhat surprised to find that she still had her passport. Turns out the security checkpoint had taken, by mistake, her address book.

Covering the Afghan story requires a deep understanding of the country's people, its three-decade history of war, and the complex mesh of issues involved with this current conflict, including the roles played by Afghanistan's powerful warlords, drug barons, and so-called "ministers" and the areas they control and why. With its labyrinth of regulations restricting press access, including that of Afghan journalists, government

officials and the military are making it very difficult for eyewitness coverage to happen. The result can be seen in the all-too-common oversimplification of a complex story. And if roadblocks to coverage remain—and increase, as has been the case—the burgeoning Afghan media will gradually diminish in size and energy devoted to telling this story as realities of survival take over. ■

Travis Beard visited Afghanistan in 2001 as a photojournalist and then returned in 2006 as chief editor of Aina Photojournalism Institute. There he has guided more than 30 Afghan students towards professional positions. He also works as a freelance photojournalist with Paris-based Picture Tank Agency and directs his own company, Argus Group, which offers services in translation, transport, security and logistics.

Coming to a Political Beat Near You: Policy Wars Over Global Warming

As intense partisan politics begin to infuse the climate change story, what do journalists and journalism students need to know?

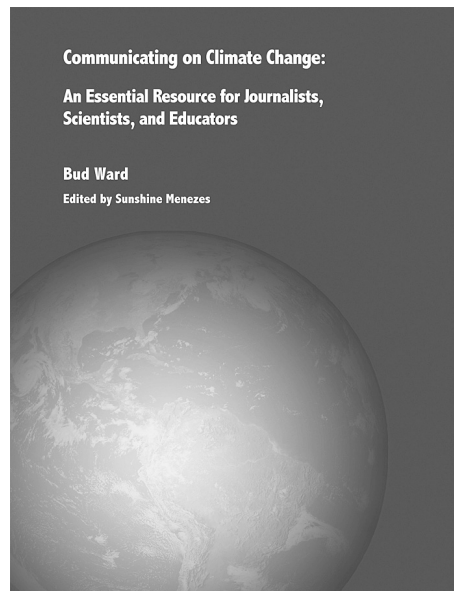
BY TOM YULSMAN

Communicating on Climate Change: An Essential Resource for Journalists, Scientists, and Educators

Bud Ward
Metcalf Institute for Marine & Environmental Reporting. 74 Pages.

As humans, we are finally recognizing that the promise made in Genesis has come to pass: We've achieved dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth—and even more important, each of the planetary life support systems that sustain us, including the climate.

"We're big. We're *really big*," says James White, director of the Institute



of Arctic and Alpine Research at the University of Colorado at Boulder. "So far, humans have changed carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by an amount equal to what nature was capable of doing over at least the last million years." Those natural fluctuations were accompanied by climate changes as momentous as the coming and going of ice ages. So we should not be surprised by what our emissions of greenhouse gases will likely bring.

"Big climate change is a done deal," White says.

Blind dominion of nature is risky business, and the extent to which the public now gets this can be attributed in large measure to the work of journalists. So the recent publication

of “Communicating Climate Change: An Essential Resource for Journalists, Scientists, and Educators,” by longtime environmental journalist Bud Ward, comes at an especially appropriate time. Ward has done a masterful job of synthesizing the outcome of a series of workshops involving scientists and journalists between 2003 and 2007, offering valuable advice both to working journalists and student journalists, who are preparing to cover the topic in very uncertain times.

At the outset of those workshops, journalists expressed frustration at how little traction climate change was getting. By 2007, however, “the media and the general public had begun to understand and more widely report on the ever-greater consensus of

scientists that anthropogenic climate change is real and that global atmospheric temperatures are increasing,” Ward writes.

But I wouldn’t count on this trend continuing. With bankruptcies of major news outlets, closure of newspapers, and layoffs of more than 14,000 journalists in 2008 alone, journalism is in the midst of an unprecedented crisis. “This is the worst possible story to tell, and it is getting harder, because our resources are decreasing at the same time the story complexity is increasing,” notes Andrew Revkin of The New York Times, who participated in the workshops.¹

Meanwhile, climate science isn’t getting any less complex. A host of scientific questions with uncertain

answers may prove more difficult to report on than the simple attribution question: Are humans causing global warming? For example, do dangerous thresholds exist in the climate system and, if they do, could we be close to crossing one of them?

Climate and Politics: Covering the Clash

To the list of these challenging issues we must now add what might become the most nettlesome one of all: the looming political battle over climate policy. That’s where the climate change story is heading as we enter 2009, and any journalist who wants to follow it responsibly should have at least a basic understanding of how to approach the

An ‘Open Notebook’ Project About Climate Change

When Tom Yulsman set out to write this article, he created an “open notebook” project on the Center for Environmental Journalism online journal at www.cejournal.net/. He called it “the future of the global warming story.” After he’d done an interview—for example, with the Times’s Andrew Revkin—he’d post his notes in the online notebook and then welcome comments. He’d let people know via Twitter and other means that new information had been posted.

As he wrote in a message explaining his intent to potential visitors, “What I have in mind for CEJournal is an ‘open notebook’ project in which I will share some of my reporting as I go along. I hope to include both text summaries of my interviews and background reporting, along with podcasts, pictures and, if possible, video.”

To explore Yulsman’s open notebook project, go to www.cejournal.net/?page_id=598. ■

CEJournal

News & Perspective from the Center for Environmental Journalism

The open notebook project: the future of the global warming story

This item was posted on January 3, 2009, and it was categorized as [Uncategorized](#).
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James White in his lab at the University of Colorado's Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (photo by Tom Yulsman)

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- [Dot Alpine Blog](#)
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¹ Revkin blogs at <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com>, where he writes about climate change and other topics related to natural resources and the environment.

scientific underpinnings.

This is where “Communicating on Climate Change” can really help.

Ward’s book clearly lays out the pitfalls to be avoided in covering humankind’s grand experiment with the climate system. Chief among these is the question of journalistic “balance.” As the book points out, science often consists of a spectrum of differing points of view. Over time, accumulating evidence may tend to converge in support of one over the others. So journalists should avoid what has come to be called “false balance,” in which we line up equal numbers of experts on either side of an issue. Since the vast majority of climate experts say we humans are warming the planet, our stories should not give equal weight to the handful of experts who argue otherwise.²

But “Communicating on Climate Change” also warns against overcompensation. Some journalists, particularly those who haven’t covered the issue before, are approaching the topic without sufficient skepticism of new claims. This concerns Revkin. “Presumably, the basis for action lies in an understanding of the risks,” he says. “And understanding the risks comes from a clear view of the science, including what we don’t know about climate change.” In his opinion, that clear view of the science is getting “terribly lost in the distillation that comes with saying that there is no more denying it.” His warning: “There is complexity out there, folks, and the things that are clear are only the basics: more CO₂ means a warmer world.”

As the policy wars heat up, it will also be important to recognize that the Kyoto Protocol was intended as a beginning, not global policy’s endpoint. And despite some progress by European countries, Kyoto hasn’t reined in global carbon dioxide emissions, which have actually shot up by nearly 30 percent since 1990. Reporting on

future policy action should acknowledge that important context.

“Many of us, myself included, thought Kyoto was one of those necessary baby steps that you take on the way to actually dealing with the problem,” Colorado’s James White says. It hasn’t turned out that way because the pace of change driven by our need for energy has been, in his words, “so fast and so enormous.” [See box on page 85 to find more about the interviews Yulsman did with White, other scientists, and journalists.]

The quickening pace of change is dramatically manifest in Greenland, White says. There, melting has lubricated the base of ice sheets, hastening the flow of ice into the sea and thereby contributing to sea level rise. But how much can we expect in the future? We just don’t know for sure. And the stakes are huge: “It’s Greenland and West Antarctica that really are going to dictate whether or not Miami is around in 2100 or 2150,” White says. So this will be an important part of this story on which American journalists should focus their reporting. (In each region of the world, there will be connective threads, such as this one, and that’s another task for journalists, to seek help from scientists in identifying and finding ways to accurately track.)

The Framework Convention on Climate Change (to which the United States is a party) calls on the countries of the world to avoid “dangerous interference with the climate system.” But what constitutes “dangerous” interference? For example, at what concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere do we run a significant risk of widespread melting of ice sheets and potentially catastrophic sea level rise? The convention didn’t specify. So that question went to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Stanford University climate scientist Stephen Schneider was a co-lead author on the chapter in the most recent IPCC assessment devoted to

addressing that question, as well as a participant in the “Communicating on Climate Change” workshops. “Right off the bat we had to distinguish between risks, which involves scientific judgment, and how to manage those risks, which involves values,” Schneider says. “Given the risks we’ve identified, how many chances do you want to take with planetary life-support systems, versus how many chances do you want to take with the economy?” Schneider asks. “That’s a value judgment, and that’s the government’s job, the corporation’s job, an individual’s job.”

Such value judgments will be made in an intensely political environment, predicts Roger Pielke, Jr., a fellow of the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences, where he focuses on the nexus of science and technology in decision-making. As the politics heat up, he urges journalists not to take sides in what is certain to be a vigorous debate with all kinds of information vying for people’s attention and belief. “Climate policy needs more options, not less,” he argues. “Like it or not, people wanting to go slow or not go at all are part of the political scene.”

As journalists, it’s our responsibility to cover the full spectrum of political views, not just the ones we think are in tune with the scientific evidence, because decision-makers will be taking into account other factors, such as economic consequences related to decisions about climate change policies.

Solving some of the conundrums of climate coverage might ultimately be aided by Web-based journalism. But right now, the transition to digital news media could be having the opposite effect. According to Peter Dykstra, former head of CNN’s science, technology and environment unit, the gatekeepers at broadcast and cable television news outlets are increasingly relying on Web clicks to tell them what TV viewers, not just Web readers, want to

² A collection of articles about coverage of climate change in the Winter 2005 Nieman Reports can be read at www.niemanreports.org. Journalists describe how and why they have moved away from presenting a “false balance” in reporting on global warming.

see. As a result, “What you routinely see is a mix of serious and absurd stories,” Dykstra observes. What we are unlikely to see moving forward is sustained, serious coverage of the complexities of climate change and the policy ramifications.

In an essay Dykstra contributed to “Communicating on Climate Change,” he says he urged his bosses not to use the standard of criminal trials to judge the issues. Demanding that the case for climate change be proved “beyond a reasonable doubt” is unreasonable and has contributed to the false balance problem. “Preponderance of evidence’ is the order of the day in a

civil court.... [And] this may be the fairest analogy to apply to policy and science issues such as climate change,” Dykstra recommends.

This is great advice. It’s just too bad that his bosses at CNN are no longer receiving it. They dropped Dykstra and his entire unit at the end of 2008. He believes their ouster leaves broadcast and cable news with no reporters or producers working full time on environmental issues, not to mention science and technology.

This gaping chasm in environmental expertise in television news, along with downsizing at nearly every newspaper and the slackening of online ad reve-

nues that might pay for serious-minded digital journalism, does not bode well for the future of news reporting about climate change. ■

Tom Yulsman is codirector of the University of Colorado at Boulder’s Center for Environmental Journalism and editor of the CEJ’s blog, CEJournal (www.cejournal.net). He has covered climate change since the early 1980’s and has written for a variety of publications including The New York Times, The Washington Post, Audubon and Earth magazine, where he was editor from 1992 to 1996.

‘Plunder’ Explores What Happens When an Important Story Is Poorly Told

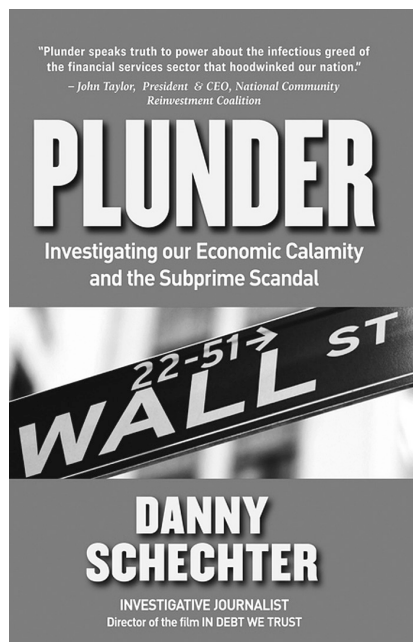
‘In retrospect, editors and reporters should have looked more carefully and consistently at the consequences of deregulation on Wall Street and Main Street.’

BY SUSAN E. REED

Plunder: Investigating Our Economic Calamity and the Subprime Scandal

Danny Schechter
Cosimo Books. 196 Pages.

In “Plunder,” Danny Schechter traces the destructive self-interest of the financial services industry from the issuing of subprime loans just before the turn of the century through a 2008 protest of the Federal Reserve’s bailout of Bear Stearns. The tale is sobering in its detail and remarkable for its timing, given that it was published late last summer at a time when most Americans were just waking up to screaming headlines and broadcasts about the collapsing investment firms



and the plummeting stock market.

The financial crash is a complicated tale, but Schechter lays it out well, drawing from a panoply of sources—low-income buyers who lost their houses, state attorneys general who investigated mortgage fraud, and defrauded consumers who testified to empty seats at Congressional hearings. He also explains how Wall Street enabled the mortgage crisis to go viral with its worldwide bundling and sale of mortgage-backed securities.

Throughout the book, Schechter is incensed by what he describes as the news media’s failure to adequately cover the subprime crisis as it evolved.¹ Yet his own reliance on newspaper stories for his book raises a question about the solidity of this allegation. There is

¹ In the Spring 2008 issue of Nieman Reports, Schechter wrote about these issues in an article entitled “Urgent Issues the Press Usually Ignore,” at www.niemanreports.org.

certainly evidence of local and national coverage of aspects of what we now know as the subprime crisis as it was evolving.² In *Forbes*, Stephane Fitch and Brandon Copple wrote presciently on this topic in September 2001 in an article that explored the very real possibility that a housing bubble was being created. (Given the article's timing, it is certainly possible that readers' minds were focused on the more immediate crisis.)

Since the late 1990's, there has been a proliferation of magazines, Web sites, articles and books offering advice to consumers about how to handle their financial lives. If someone sought out specific information about mortgage problems or credit card debt, they could have found it. Yet, in the euphoria of the moment, it seems that many weren't seeking such guidance.

Even with news coverage and good guidance available, Schechter is correct that the kind of story that makes people take notice—the vital connect-the-dots reporting—was seldom done. And stories that were done about this subject weren't given banner headlines on the front page of newspapers or top billing on Web pages until the dominos of the world's interlocked financial system had begun to fall. In retrospect, editors and reporters should have looked more carefully and consistently at the consequences of deregulation on Wall Street and Main Street.

As is now known, rule changes made during the past decade resulted in increased debt in every sector of the economy. In 1997, the Taxpayer Relief Act created the conditions for a housing bubble when it changed the old rule that homeowners had to use the profits they made to buy another, more expensive house within two years. The new rule enabled single owners to

take up to \$250,000 without paying capital gains and a married couple to take \$500,000 without capital gains. Out of this emerged a profiteering mentality in which a lot of people took out a mortgage to buy the house, another loan to renovate it, and then sold the property to reap a profit in two years in which they were supposed to be living there. By not taxing income on the profit of home sales, Congress turned home ownership into a free-for-all investment party that featured the buying and flipping of homes for the purpose of producing quick, tax-free income.

Two years later, the Clinton administration reduced mortgage requirements for working-class buyers and thereby introduced a new segment of homeowners, many who lacked adequate collateral, into this escalating market.

The crowning blow came in 2004, when the Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) changed the net capital rule. That rule had required that no broker or dealer be able to allow its net indebtedness to exceed 15 times its net capital. Encouraged in this rule change by former Treasury Secretary Henry M. Paulson, Jr., who was then head of Goldman Sachs, the SEC allowed the big five investment firms to more than double that leverage to 33 times their assets. Within a few years, several of the nation's largest investment banks crashed or sought emergency buyers when they couldn't pay the rush of investors or lenders who demanded payment.

Stories Ready to Be Told

Americans really could have used connect-the-dots reporting that would have shown them where Main Street and Wall Street intersected before

the debt collisions occurred. They needed narrative stories describing how ordinary house and car loans were being transformed into investment opportunities for the rich and powerful—and a glimpse into the ways that mounting debt belonging to homeowners and financial institutions could jeopardize almost every sector of the economy.

Stories were certainly there to tell: An enterprising journalist could have followed a mortgage taken out on a home in the desert of Las Vegas and shown its path through the global markets as it was converted into a mortgage-backed security and sold to the government of Iceland. Another good place to begin reporting might have been at the sparsely attended (and rarely covered) Congressional hearings, as people whose finances and lives were in ruin told their stories to people whose institution was complicit in creating the rules governing what was turning into a high-stakes game.

Either story—and many others—could have been done in much of the same way that *The Oregonian's* Richard Read tracked the French fry from its underground birth in Washington state to the Asian dinner table in 1998. His series of articles took readers on an insightful journey into the Asian economic crisis and illuminated its spillover impact on Americans; these stories earned Read the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting.³

Reporters should always produce vivid snapshots of the local economy. But given what we now know of the incestuous nature of the global economy, journalists also have to be willing to devote more time and resources to finding creative ways of linking these snapshots to create a sweeping panoramic view. The ongoing challenge is

² In the December/January 2009 issue of *American Journalism Review*, an article entitled "Unheeded Warnings" contends that despite journalists shining "a spotlight on serious problems in the U.S. economy" before the collapse, "regulators and members of the public didn't pay much attention." This story can be read at www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=4668.

³ Read's article, "The French Fry Connection," can be read at www.pulitzer.org/archives/6243.

to humanize the type of complicated business story that front-page editors often resist out of fear that readers will have a hard time connecting to terms such as “collateralized debt obligation.”

Business reporting—especially when it has the potential to touch so many people so close to home—often requires a face and a narrative. Schechter confronted this challenge in

writing “Plunder.” In the preface, he explains how he could not convince traditional publishers to pay attention to “Plunder,” because they didn’t think the average buyer at Barnes & Noble would “connect” with it. It is our good fortune that Schechter didn’t let this deter him. Cosimo Books, a specialty publisher for niche audiences, stepped forward to rescue “Plunder,” and in this a lesson for business reporters

can be found. When they encounter reluctance to publish complex financial stories, grab some of Schechter’s determination, venture forth, and get the information out—even if they have to publish it on their own blog. ■

Susan E. Reed, a 1999 Nieman Fellow, has covered business stories for CBS News, The New York Times, and several other organizations for 25 years.

NIEMAN NOTES

Choosing Risk In a Volatile Economic Environment

A journalist concludes, ‘A timid reaction assumes forgoing the opportunity to innovate at this exciting juncture of history.’

BY ANDRÉS CAVELIER

After spending a superb year as a 2008 Nieman Fellow, a time I will also remember for the collapse of the traditional U.S. news media model, I reached a major conclusion: The crisis facing American journalism is a deep one that calls for a radical response by each of us in the industry. A timid reaction assumes forgoing the opportunity to innovate at this exciting juncture of history.

That’s why, after departing Cambridge in June 2008, I quickly took a voluntary buyout package from The Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald, the newspapers where I had worked since 2001. I could have gone back to a comfortable desk on the Herald’s fifth floor, overlooking the stunning Biscayne Bay, but that option no longer felt right. In the end, I chose risk over safety. Or, better put, safety in the long run over risk in the short term.

Single at 40, with no family to feed and luckily a couple of pennies in the

bank, I concluded that the time had come to assemble my own new media start-up by blending my expertise in online journalism with the experience and contacts resulting from 18 fascinating years in print, television and digital journalism in the United States, my native Colombia, and Latin America.

I have lived roughly half of my life in Colombia and the other half in the States, which, as best as I understand it, makes me a bicultural guy, with its pros and cons. I love both places and, thanks to airplanes, Twitter and the BlackBerry, I feel I can now play as a local in both places. The challenge is to make a decent living while enjoying myself, helping shape the future of digital journalism, and linking good ideas across boundaries.

Upon leaving the Herald last summer I relocated to Washington, D.C., seeking a national and international platform and, admittedly, the familiar-

ity of a city that had grown on me when I lived there as correspondent for El Tiempo newspaper and RCN Television in the late 1990’s. I first made a cushy landing on my brother’s basement next to American University—oh, did I say gracias brother? As fall 2008 kicked in, I spent a considerable amount of time in a makeshift office at the National Press Club, in downtown Washington, drafting a plan and consulting about my next move with colleagues, friends and confidants.

During this time, I became absorbed in the use of social media tools to press forward with my plans. I spent odd hours posting on my new media blog at AndresCavelier.com, following dozens of media sites like BuzzMachine and PressThink via RSS; checking and updating my Twitter, Facebook, del.icious and FriendFeed accounts, and BlackBerrying friends and contacts.

As a result of this process, I settled

on starting a top-notch new media consulting firm to help U.S. Hispanic and Latin American media companies and institutions succeed in their Web and mobile businesses. I hope to capitalize on some of the lessons learned as chief content officer for GDA.com, a now-defunct start-up put together in 2000 by the top Latin American newspapers, and as multimedia manager for El Nuevo Herald, the leading Spanish daily newspaper in the United States.

Taking the Next Step

Called MediaBoutik, a name a friend suggested in an informal brainstorming session, my agency specializes in content and business strategies for the Web, social networking, online marketing, and multimedia training. Early clients include Terra.com, a Spanish news and entertainment site, and Gato Communications, a Virginia-based strategic communications firm.

My vision is to grow the firm over time by bringing in key partners and excelling in a niche. In the long run, I want to hire a small and nimble team of experts to work in-house. In the meantime, I have invited a handful of accomplished media executives, journalists, Web developers, and young techies from different countries to engage as advisors and consultants—a structure that should allow MediaBoutik to quickly assemble professional teams to serve our clients.

I am well aware I am taking an unpaved road filled with land mines. More than one colleague has warned me about the dangers of becoming an entrepreneur and starting such a business in these troubled times. Confronting trouble, staying focused, managing time effectively, working within budget, making swift decisions, and keeping positive are some of the dilemmas I regularly face. Some hurdles can be anticipated and dealt with, but others come flying at my face. In October 2008, when the U.S. stock market plunged, I became concerned about the timing of my enterprise. Should I abandon ship and look for a job? I quickly concluded

The screenshot shows the website andrescavelier.com with a navigation bar and a main content area. The main article is titled "Arte, tecnología e imaginación. Encuentro Fractal 2009" and is dated February 17, 2009. The article discusses the "Encuentro Fractal 2009" event in Medellín, Colombia, which is a mix of technology, literature, music, and art. It mentions that the event is organized by Fundación Manuel Mejía Vallejo and Proyecto Líquido. The article also notes that the event is a continuation of a tradition started in 1966 by Manuel Mejía Vallejo. A sidebar on the right contains a "What I'm Doing..." section, a "Tag Cloud" for "Colombia", and a calendar for February 2009.

that I should carry on at full speed in starting up MediaBoutik, based on all the exciting opportunities for growth in the digital sphere.

Looking Ahead

When I look at the future, I see great potential for companies entering the Latin American market. In 2008, less than one quarter of Latin Americans used the Internet, a penetration that compares poorly to the 72.5 percent in the United States, reports Internetworldstats.com. The number of users in the region is expected to grow exponentially in the next decade given the availability of cheap personal computers, the expansion of broadband connectivity, and the eagerness among the young to socialize and get their news and entertainment via the Web and mobile phones. Most of the users are in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Peru and Chile.

Colombia is a good case study of the communication changes taking place in the region. While most of the 45 million Colombians rely heavily on television and radio for their news

and entertainment, Internetworldstats.com reports Internet usage in that country grew at a rate of almost 1,500 percent between 2000 and 2008, when it reached nearly 14 million users. Out of these, 4.1 million are on Facebook, the second highest figure in Latin America after Chile, according to the AllFacebook.com.

These data signal the transformation that companies, governments, institutions and media organizations in Latin America are up against. Some of them are gearing up for change; others are blindly relying on the old ways of doing business. I'm convinced that those profitable newspapers in the region that do not plan and execute now a sharp digital strategy will be bankrupt in five years. Emerging local and foreign "Googles" will eat them alive. I hope my start-up will help these media companies shape their response, as well as assist new players to enter the market successfully. ■

Andrés Cavellier, a 2008 Nieman Fellow, is principal at MediaBoutik.

1942

James Colvin died on January 4th in Greenville, South Carolina at the age of 96; he had been one of the oldest living Nieman Fellows. Known as a lifelong scholar by family and friends, Colvin was involved in a variety of intellectual pursuits in addition to his career as a journalist.

Colvin worked at the Chicago Daily News after graduating from Loyola University Chicago in 1934 and rose to the position of assistant city editor. After his Nieman year, Colvin served in the U.S. Navy as a lieutenant in the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts during World War II. While in service, he wrote a comprehensive summary of World War II supply corps procurement for the navy's administrative history project, initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as part of the navy's efforts to record its wartime experience. Colvin's history, one of 175 accounts in 300 volumes, is still located in the U.S. Navy Department Library's rare book room.

After serving in the navy, Colvin worked for Encyclopædia Britannica in Chicago as director of public relations and later joined World Book Encyclopedia as the vice president of advertising and public relations. During that time, he directed two unsuccessful expeditions to find the Loch Ness Monster and often appeared on early television game shows, such as "The Big Surprise," hosted at one time by Mike Wallace. He was also in charge of distributing sets of the Great Books of the Western World, a project undertaken by Britannica and the University of Chicago, and produced a Great Books discussion panel for Channel 7 in Chicago. The Great Books was a project by then chancellor of the University of Chicago Robert Maynard Hutchins and professor Mortimer Adler, founders of the Great Books Foundation; the books were sold door to door in 52 black leatherette volumes, comprising 443 books distilled from the literary, scientific and philosophical canon of the Western world.

Colvin's son and daughter-in-law described Colvin as a self-schooled, avid reader. "He was an incredibly intelligent man," said Kathleen Colvin, his daughter-in-law, in a (Chicago) Daily Herald obituary. "Up until the day he died, he always had a well-informed opinion about things." Before retiring in 1972, Colvin was associate editor of Popular Mechanics, coauthored "Words Most Often Misspelled and Mispronounced," and received the National Press Photographers Association's (NPPA) Joseph A. Sprague Award. He received recognition from the association for establishing the NPPA-Encyclopædia Britannica-University of Missouri Photo Competition and for his longstanding support of NPPA's educational programs.

Colvin is survived by his son, Stephen. His former wife, **Mary Geary**, and oldest son, Timothy, preceded him in death.

1953

Don Janson died on February 1st in Richland, Michigan. He was 87. Janson spent the bulk of a career that he loved, 34 years, as a correspondent for The New York Times. In an obituary on Mlive.com, by Dave Person, Janson's daughter Rebecca said, "He liked everything about it [journalism]. He liked pursuing the story, he liked reporting, he liked writing, he liked meeting deadlines, and he liked that what he wrote might make a difference." She said that he especially liked to write stories on civil rights, the environment, and issues surrounding the lives of migrant workers and Native Americans. "He believed in justice and that every human being was valuable and deserved equal consideration," she continued. "He was accepting and forgiving, and at the same time he was tough. He could take a stand and keep it."

In his early days as a reporter, Janson worked for The Bay City Times and the Milwaukee Journal, which was his paper when he became a Nieman Fellow. He joined the Times in 1956 as a beat reporter. He later covered

the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the arrest and murder of Lee Harvey Oswald, and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Over the years he worked out of Des Moines, Iowa; Chicago; Kansas City, Missouri; Philadelphia, and as chief of the Eastern Seaboard bureau.

After Janson's wife, **Jane**, died in 1990, he retired and returned to Richland. He is survived by his wife, **Belinda**, and three children. A daughter, Lynn, died in 1965.

1955

Sam Zagoria, former Washington Post reporter, editor and ombudsman, will mark his 90th birthday with a cruise with his wife from Florida to Copenhagen. Sam was a Fulbright Fellow in Copenhagen after retiring from the Post. He says his "last previous cruise was an all-expense paid voyage to Australia hosted by Uncle Sam. It has taken 67 years to get over it."

1962

John Hughes has ended an 18-month consultancy advising the owners of The Christian Science Monitor about the future of the paper. In 2009 the Monitor will end five-days-a-week publication, replacing it with a weekly publication and accelerated coverage on the Web. Hughes is a Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign correspondent, and former editor, of the Monitor.

Hughes has also returned to his tenured professorship in journalism at Brigham Young University after an extended leave of absence as editor and chief operating officer of the Deseret News in Salt Lake City. During his time at the News he converted it from afternoon to morning publication and increased circulation.

1968

Jerome Aumente visited Lebanon

in fall 2008 for a series of lectures and meetings. In Beirut, he talked about new media and the Internet for 30 print and broadcast journalists from Iraq in a program at the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies and appeared on two one-hour television programs, broadcast throughout Lebanon, discussing the U.S. presidential election. He met with representatives of the American University in Beirut and the U.S. Embassy to explore future training initiatives with the Rutgers School of Communication, Information and Library Studies (SCILS) and with Meridian International Center, a non-profit institution dedicated to public diplomacy and global engagement.

Also in fall 2008, Aumente led training programs for journalists in Saudi Arabia and Kosovo. In Pristina, he ran an economic reporting workshop for Kosovo Serb journalists. Back in the United States, he organized the second part of a program for Saudi broadcast journalists in New York and Washington, D.C., sponsored by the State Department through Meridian International Center.

Aumente is Distinguished Professor Emeritus and counselor to the dean of SCILS at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

1973

Wayne Greenhaw was chosen to deliver The Neil and Henrietta Davis Distinguished Lecture presented by the Department of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University, in Alabama, in February. The lecture series was established in 1996 to honor the couple and to encourage journalism excellence. **Neil Owen Davis** is a 1942 Nieman Fellow who was founder, publisher and editor of The Lee County Bulletin for 40 years. His wife, **Henrietta Worsley Davis**, was associate editor and chief reporter for the newspaper. The announcement described them as journalists who “devoted their professional lives to making their newspaper an agent for positive change in the community, giving a voice to the voiceless and advancing

the cause of civil rights in Alabama and throughout the Southeast.” John Carvalho, the journalism program director, said that “What’s inspiring about Wayne Greenhaw and writers like him is that they are continuing the courageous, diligent work of Neil and Henrietta Davis. The Davis family did more than establish this lecture series; they inspired the lecturers.”

Greenhaw has published 21 books of fiction and nonfiction. The most recent, “A Generous Life,” the story of W. James Samford, Jr., an Alabama politician and businessman, was published two days after Greenhaw presented the Davis lecture. In the 1980’s Greenhaw was editor and publisher of Alabama Magazine; in the early 1990’s he was a columnist with The Alabama Journal and the Montgomery Advertiser, and as a columnist and reporter he has written extensively for international and national publications, including The New York Times and The Atlantic Monthly. In 2005 he and coauthor Donnie Williams wrote “The Thunder of Angels: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the People Who Broke the Back of Jim Crow.”

In reflecting on his selection as the Davis Distinguished Lecturer, Greenhaw said, “I consider it a great honor personally and professionally to be chosen to give a lecture in the name of my old friend Neil Davis and his wife Henrietta. For me, Neil Davis personified the essence of good journalism. He was not only a top-flight professional with the highest ethical priorities, he was a true gentleman in every sense of the word. When I speak at Auburn, I will think of Neil being in the front row, watching and listening.”

1979

John C. Huff, Jr. became editor of the Anderson Independent-Mail, in South Carolina, at the end of December. He had been editor of The Sun Journal in New Bern, North Carolina, for about a year and a half, though his wife, **Patty**, stayed behind with the house in Charleston (where

John had been executive editor of The Post and Courier). “It’s about time for the house in Charleston to sell,” John said. “I am finally back in the part of the country, near the mountains, that appeals to both of us.”

In the announcement of his appointment, John said, “Coming to Anderson is, in a real way, coming back home for me. I grew up a couple of miles inside Greenville County (next door to Anderson)...” John reports that he still hasn’t lost his faith in the value of a daily newspaper and has a few ideas to try in Anderson, where the local politics and concerns about the local economic future are as dynamic and unpredictable (and, he says, “sometimes downright mean”) as any place he has lived. Before Charleston, John was an editor at the Orlando Sentinel, The Dallas Times Herald, and The Philadelphia Inquirer. Patty, who was an EMT in Charleston, is still a great quilter, John says, and daughters Kelly and Brenny (who were ages two and one in Cambridge) are both firefighters in Florida. Later arrivals Neely and Johnny are also on their own, working in Florida and South Carolina.

Frank Van Riper and his wife and professional partner, **Judith Goodman**, are “thrilled to report the publication of our latest book, ‘Serenissima: Venice in Winter.’” The book is a hardcover collection of photographs and essays about the Floating City when many of the tourists have left.

“Work began seriously in 2000,” Frank reports, “and Judy and I made a total of six extended visits to Venice, some as long as a month, over the course of six years. We shot more than 300 rolls of film—more than 10,000 images, none of them digital—and I wrote thousands of words of text. ... We made it a point not only to photograph Venice’s beauty but also to document its life behind closed doors: to record this magical place when it reclaims itself, however briefly, from its perennial hordes of tourists and becomes a living, breathing city. We felt confident that it would produce a great book.

“So did Jan Morris, the famed

NPR's Gwen Thompkins Delivers Morris Lecture

Gwen Thompkins, East Africa correspondent for NPR based in Nairobi, Kenya, presented the 28th Joe Alex Morris, Jr. Memorial Lecture at a dinner at the Nieman Foundation on February 5th. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, Thompkins covers a variety of nations from the Horn to the heart of Africa.

Thompkins, a superb storyteller, brought something unexpected to the lecture—song. She began her talk with an acappella version of Aretha Franklin's "All the King's Horses" and ended with Sam Cooke's "Bring It on Home to Me," using each to make a point about reporting from Africa. The story about the Franklin song led her to comment on the assumptions people make about how Africa should be covered: "... assumptions don't work. Especially when the assumptions are based on what you think you know about race or some other such foolishness. The biggest beef listeners have with my stories is that the stories don't talk about things they assume all stories about Africa should be about. But assume too much ... and you'll miss a great story."

Thompkins also talked about bravery: "... extraordinary acts of bravery—which are something to see. Bravery can be hard to write about because you run the risk of lionizing the person ... making the person a hero, when the story is far



Gwen Thompkins delivered the Morris Lecture at Lippmann House to fellows and guests. *Photo by Winston Yan.*

more complicated than that. Bravery isn't necessarily about moral fiber or noble intent. But when you are watching it up close, it's like seeing something fleeting and spectacular in nature—like watching a block of ice split from a glacier and fall booming into the sea."

Born and raised in New Orleans, Thompkins graduated from the Newcomb College Institute at Tulane University. She was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow in Eastern Europe and has worked as a reporter and editor at *The Times-Picayune*. In 2005 and

early 2006, she and NPR producer Sarah Beyer Kelly filed a series of radio stories from New Orleans on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Thompkins' own home had been damaged by the storm.

The Morris lecture was created in 1981 to honor Morris, a foreign correspondent of the *Los Angeles Times* who was killed in February 1979 while covering the Iranian Revolution in Tehran. The lecture was established by his family, Harvard classmates, and friends. Morris was a member of the Harvard class of 1949. ■

British author and travel essayist, whose book 'The World of Venice' is a classic. 'One of life's subtlest acquired pleasures,' she wrote to us after seeing our initial book dummy, 'is the Venice of winter, of mists and puddles, umbrellas and empty alleys and gondolas in the rain. This book magically acquires the pleasure for us—and no less miraculously—enables us to enjoy it all the year round.'

"Heady stuff from someone who also is a fellow of The Royal Society

of Literature.

"Given such praise, we could be forgiven, I think, for assuming that finding a publisher would be a slamdunk. But, in fact, looking for a publisher stateside simply reflected the parlous state of American book publishing, the dumbing down of which over the past decade (a consequence of corporate consolidation and resultant bottom-line paranoia) has been a terrible thing to see.

"So much had the make-a-buck-

regardless-of-quality mindset infected the industry that I wasn't really surprised when a senior editor at one of the country's largest and most respected fine art publishing houses told me, 'We simply don't have the luxury of publishing things we simply like.' But eventually we landed Vianello Libri, a fine art publishing house in Italy and Hudson Hills Press in the United States as our American distributor."

For more information go to www.veniceinwinter.com.



From left, Jungho Yoon '07, reporter for The Chosun Ilbo; Youngjin Kang '05, editorial writer for JoongAng Ilbo; Bob Giles, Nieman Curator and NF '66; Dong-Kwan Lee '01, spokesperson for the president of Korea, and In-Yong Rhee '03, senior vice president and chief communications officer, Samsung Electronics Co. Ltd. *Photo by Jay Cooney.*

Bob Giles Meets With Korean Fellows

During a family holiday in Seoul, Curator **Bob Giles** and his wife, **Nancy**, had dinner with a group of recent South Korean fellows and their spouses. **In-Yong Rhee**, NF '03, who was host for the dinner at the Taepyungro Club, recently left television journalism to join Samsung as senior vice president and chief communications officer. **Dong-Kwan Lee**, NF '01, became spokesperson for President Lee Myung-bak following his election in 2007. **Youngjin Kang**, NF '05, continues his work as an editorial writer for JoongAng Ilbo as a specialist on North Korea. **Jungho Yoon**, NF '07, who organized the gathering, is assistant editor on the political desk of The Chosun Ilbo. Also in the group

were Jong-Woo Han, president of the Sungkok Journalism Foundation; Ms. Kyung-sook Lee, representing The Asia Foundation, and Sunshik Min, president of National Geographic Korea, each of which shares in supporting Nieman Fellowships from that country. The Giles's daughter, Megan, and son-in-law, Jay Cooney, joined in the dinner discussion. Cooney is vice president for corporate affairs at GM Daewoo.

Earlier on their trip, Bob and Nancy had lunch with 1966 Nieman classmate **Se-Hyung Cho** and his daughter, Helen. Se-Hyung is the former Korean ambassador to Japan and now is president of the Junghak Institute for Political Studies. ■

1988

Eugene Robinson is spending late spring as a Visiting Fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics. Visiting fellows typically meet with various student groups, lead discussion groups, and sit in on public policy classes. Robinson is

associate editor and op-ed columnist for The Washington Post.

1991

Kevin Noblet became deputy managing editor at Dow Jones Newswires in February, helping to create and

direct a new service for wealth managers. Noblet previously worked for The Associated Press, where he spent 27 years in a variety of positions, including business editor, deputy international editor, and bureau chief. Brian Cronk, managing editor of Wealth Management, said in the announcement of Noblet's appointment that "Kevin's extensive experience in news management, top-level editing, and recruiting and training will be a valuable asset as Dow Jones prepares to launch its Web-based Wealth Management initiative in 2009. Kevin will help guide the coverage and supervise the reporters in the personal finance and wealth management group and coordinate coverage with colleagues throughout Dow Jones."

1993

Rick Bragg, professor of writing at The University of Alabama, is the recipient of the Harper Lee Award for a Distinguished Alabama Writer. The award will be presented to Bragg at the Alabama Writers Symposium in Monroeville in May.

Among others, Bragg is the author of three award-winning, nonfiction books about his family and growing up in Calhoun County, Alabama—"All Over but the Shoutin'," "Ava's Man," and "The Prince of Frogtown." In 1996 he received the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing for his coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing and, in all, has received over 50 writing awards in his 20 years as a journalist.

"I was honored to hear I had been chosen to receive the Harper Lee Award, named for a writer whose book, and its message, have spanned decades," Bragg said in the announcement of the award. "I am also honored to join a list of people I have admired and respected all my writing life, people who have helped establish this state as a place where good writers just seem to come out of the dirt."

The Harper Lee Award, presented annually by Alabama Southern Community College at the Alabama Writers Symposium, is supported through a

grant from George F. Landegger and is administered by the Alabama Writers' Forum.

1995

Chemi Che-Mponda Kadete brings us up to date: "I am working at State Street Bank in Boston as a legal assistant. I also still work part-time at WBZ News Radio 1030 as a news writer. On the side, I do acting and writing (plays & screenplays). I am now a member of the Screen Actors Guild as well as the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, and I have done 'extra' work in many films shot in the Boston area including 'Paul Blart: Mall Cop,' 'Gone Baby Gone,' and 'Pink Panther 2.' I also acted in a film shot in Tanzania, East Africa in 2007 called 'Bongoland II.'

"I am also one of the top Tanzanian bloggers. My blog specializes in briefing Tanzanians about interesting current events in the United States and some commentaries. It is called Swahili Time. The address is: <http://swahilitime.blogspot.com/>. Also, thanks to the Internet I am able to communicate and do work for the Tanzania Media Women's Association, of which I am a founding member.

"On a sadder note, all the males in my family who held high positions in Tanzania are dead either through accident or illness, including my uncle who was the deputy minister of finance. It's strange that we women are raising the younger generation and can only tell of the deceased's accomplishments.

"On a happier note, my son Camara turns 23 next month, and he is engaged. He is finishing his studies at McDaniel College in Maryland. His brother Elechi is 19 and is studying at Green Mountain College in Vermont. That's it for now."

1997

Deborah Seward is now The Associated Press bureau chief in Paris. Seward previously was AP's Paris-based special international editor for

restructuring, innovation and training. John Daniszewski, AP managing editor for international news, called Seward "invaluable as one of the main drivers of change in the AP, including the project to regionalize AP's global editing structure and develop faster story forms and better cohesion among television, text and photo journalists." He also said that Seward intended to continue many of these duties while bureau chief.

Prior to her position as special international editor, Seward had been executive producer of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) central newsroom in Prague for two years; before that she had been AP's international editor in New York. Except for her two years at RFE/RL and her year as a Nieman Fellow, Seward has worked for AP since 1988, reporting from Paris, Moscow, Berlin and Warsaw.

2001

Don Aucoin was one of seven Boston Globe reporters who collaborated on "Last Lion: The Fall and Rise of Ted Kennedy," edited by Peter S. Canellos and published by Simon & Schuster in February. The book also appeared as a series both in the daily newspaper and, in a multimedia presentation, at boston.com.

Aucoin was invited to participate in the series because of his years covering Senator Kennedy for the Globe, including Kennedy's 1994 Senate race against Mitt Romney. In the book, Aucoin writes about events from the plane crash that killed John F. Kennedy, Jr. and his wife and sister-in-law and Ted Kennedy's eulogy, through Kennedy's 2008 speech in Denver, Colorado, after he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Aucoin also writes about Kennedy's efforts to unite his family after Robert Kennedy's death, help the families of the 9/11 attacks, and pressure the Pentagon to put armor on Humvees. In an article by Rob Borkowski about Aucoin and "Last Lion," Aucoin says, "The thing that makes the book necessary is the fact that Kennedy has

had such a remarkably productive last 10 years." The series can be seen and read at www.boston.com/news/specials/kennedy/.

2002

Roberta Baskin won an Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award for Excellence for "Drilling for Dollars: Children's Dentistry Investigation." The series, for WJLA-TV in Washington, D.C., focused on a chain of dental clinics that targeted children on Medicaid. The award was presented at a ceremony in January at Columbia University in New York City. The announcement of the award read: "... Without hidden cameras, Baskin methodically shows how children were physically harmed by the extreme practices of the clinic. They tracked down former employees to report on the bonus system that rewarded employees for doing the most dental work, even if it was unnecessary. Baskin followed up on the report to show similar problems at Small Smiles clinics across the country. The reports sparked a criminal investigation and a federal investigation. As a result of Baskin's tenacity, six different insurance companies suspended their contracts with Small Smiles clinics in Maryland."

In an unusual addendum to such an honor, WJLA-TV decided to eliminate their investigative unit, ending Baskin's work at the station. In an article about "Drilling for Dollars" beginning on page 62, Baskin writes about the series and the station's decision to shut down the investigative unit: "The station's owners described such reporting as 'a luxury' they can no longer afford. I disagree. It is work that takes time and demands resources. But it pays long-term dividends for news organizations who earn the trust of viewers who realize their well-being is valued."

2005

Chris Waddle was named the Ayers Chair of Communication at Jackson-

ville State University (JSU) in Alabama in the fall semester of 2008. Waddle is also the president of the Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism and coordinator of the Knight Community Journalism Fellows program, a joint program of The University of Alabama and The Anniston Star for master's degree students in community journalism.

"Journalism is undergoing a tremendous change in every form," Waddle said. Because of the "stress and duress" of these changes on the news industry, Waddle continued, it is more critical than ever for universities to produce good journalists.

Waddle will be teaching "Opinion Writing" and is working with faculty and officials across the university to plan a conference in March on economic development and the media. He continues to review books for the Star and to produce news commentaries on a podcast with the editor of that newspaper and on his own blog, OneJournalist (<http://one-journalist.blogspot.com/>).

2006

Guillermo Franco's Spanish-language book in PDF format, "How to Write for the Web," has been published by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at The University of Texas at Austin. The 221-page book, which can be downloaded free of charge from the university's site, includes Franco's extensive research on Web writing as well as an appendix of many practical examples. (The book, in Spanish, can be found at http://knightcenter.utexas.edu/como_web.php.)

Franco, who has dedicated the past eight years to studying digital journalism and the Internet, says that he hopes the book will become a starting point for discussing and making online writing manuals. Several colleagues who participated in the project have already created a discussion group for it on Facebook.

"In the search for information about this topic on the Web and in many books and interviews that we

conducted, we found all kinds of viewpoints, but we favored those that were backed up by research," Franco writes in the introduction to his book. "This is an invitation—even for its detractors—to give it a shot before trying to controvert it."

Franco is the new media content manager at Casa Editorial El Tiempo, the owner of the El Tiempo daily newspaper, and is the editor of *eltiempo.com*. He also teaches postgraduate programs in online journalism in Colombia and Ecuador.

David Heath received the 2008 Everett McKinley Dirksen Award for Distinguished Coverage of Congress from the National Press Foundation (NPF) at its annual dinner in Washington, D.C., in February. Heath and reporter Hal Bernton shared the award for "The Favor Factory," a Seattle Times series exposing congressional graft by linking earmarked votes to campaign contributions. The series also won the Clark Mollenhoff Award for Excellence in Investigative Reporting in 2008.

The NPF judges commended Heath and Bernton for creating their own database to track contributions to representatives who voted for the 2007 defense bill. They posted the searchable database online, as well as graphs showing the contributors who gave the most money and the lawmakers who received the most money. The multiplatform series, as well as Heath's recent articles on hidden earmarks in 2008, can be found at www.seattletimes.com/favorfactory. And his article "Connecting Congressional Earmarks With Campaign Contributions," in the Fall 2008 issue of Nieman Reports, is at www.niemanreports.org.

Heath has been a reporter with the Seattle Times since 1999 and, along with his work on earmarks, has written investigative pieces on topics such as terrorism, corporate deception, and medical research.

2008

Iason Athanasiadis's photography was featured at the Craft and Folk Art

Museum (CAFAM) in Los Angeles, California and at Harvard University's Center for Government and International Studies. His exhibit at CAFAM, "Exploring the Other: Contemporary Iran," runs from January to March 29th. The photographs reveal the customs and everyday life of Iranians, images that are rarely seen in conventional Western media. "I wanted to use this opportunity to show how varied Iran is—what it's really like," Athanasiadis said in a Los Angeles Times article. Images include a backstage scene at a rock concert, teenage girls protesting their exclusion from a soccer game, and two youths at a Reformist rally during the 2005 election.

"Iranians lead these paradoxical lives, governed by quasi-medieval rules, but they resolve it for themselves," Athanasiadis explained to The Guardian. "There are three realities to Iran. The Islamic republic, where women wear chadors and men have big beards. You have the reality of the streets, people wearing T-shirts and women pushing back their headscarves. Then, in the house you can be completely liberal or even more conservative than the image the Islamic republic likes to project."

Athanasiadis's exhibit at Harvard, "Sufism: Mystical Ecumenism," explored diversity among Sufi Muslims across present-day Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and Syria. The images addressed the absence of media coverage of Sufism, which Athanasiadis noted is the most lenient form of Islam and is increasing in popularity in the West. The show was up from February 5th to March 10th.

Athanasiadis, a writer, photographer and television producer, has covered the Middle East, Central Asia, and the southeast Mediterranean for various print media for 10 years. He covered the 2003 invasion of Iraq from Qatar for al-Jazeera, the 2004 Athens Olympics for BBC World, and the 2006 Israeli-Hizbullah war in Lebanon as a freelancer. His documentary "Deserted Riviera" won third place in the 2007 ION International Film Festival in Los Angeles. Athanasiadis is based in Istanbul as a freelancer. ■

Detroit Free Press Wins Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism

Staff writers Jim Schaefer and M.L. Elrick and their colleagues at the Detroit Free Press are winners of the 2008 Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism for their series "A Mayor in Crisis." During their yearlong investigation, the reporters chronicled in detail the lies, false testimony, and insider dealings that led to the downfall of Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and his top aide Christine Beatty, who together attempted to bury a lawsuit settlement that threatened to expose their romantic affair. The prize was presented at the Nieman Foundation in March.

The Nieman Foundation is the new administrator of the prize and presented the \$20,000 award for the first time this year. Previously, the prize was presented during the National Press Foundation's annual awards dinner in Washington, D.C.

Honorable mention went to The Seattle Times's **Ken Armstrong**, NF '01, and Nick Perry for their four-part series "Victory and Ruins," which showed how a community's blind loyalty to the celebrated University of Washington (UW) football team, which won the 2001 Rose Bowl, compromised judges, prosecutors, police agencies, the university, and the media. The Rose Bowl team included at least two dozen players who were arrested during their time at UW, some for violent felonies.

In choosing "A Mayor in Crisis" for the Bingham Prize, judge and investigative reporter David Heath commented: "With tenacity and

grit, the reporters at the Detroit Free Press pursued a story that exposed a popular mayor. What they found was not just a sex scandal but also corruption and a cover-up. It's one of the finest examples I've seen of pure investigative reporting." Judge James Asher, investigative editor for The McClatchy Company's Washington bureau, noted: "The Free Press's coverage of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and his chief of staff, Christine Beatty, was courageous and impressively relentless. I especially appreciated the refreshingly stark descriptions of what some might have called obfuscations and entanglements. Kilpatrick's and Beatty's fates were sealed from the very first day when the Free Press chose to use the simple, but unequivocal, word 'lied.'"

Judges for this year's prize were **Anne Hull**, NF '95 and investigative reporter for The Washington Post who won last year's Bingham Prize with Dana Priest for "Walter Reed and Beyond;" **David Heath**, NF '06 and award-winning investigative reporter for The Seattle Times; James Asher, investigative editor for The McClatchy Company in Washington, D.C., and **Julia Reynolds**, NF '09 and a criminal justice reporter with The Monterey County Herald. Two additional 2009 Nieman Fellows, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter **David Jackson** from the Chicago Tribune and **Rosita Boland**, a reporter with The Irish Times in Dublin, helped in the selection process. David Heath did not participate in the judging of The Seattle Times entry, under

the prize guidelines.

Nieman Foundation Curator Bob Giles stated, "We are honored that the Nieman Foundation is the new home of the Worth Bingham Prize, with its long tradition of honoring excellence in investigative journalism. Judges this year had a difficult task, having to choose among 84 worthy entries. Newspapers both large and small continue to value in-depth research and dogged reporting and, in the process, they provide a crucial service to readers."

The Worth Bingham Prize honors investigative reporting of stories of national significance where the public interest is being ill served. Prize judges are guided by such factors as obstacles overcome in getting information, accuracy, clarity of analysis and writing style, magnitude of the situation, and impact on the public, including any reforms that may have resulted. Worth Bingham, who died at the age of 34, achieved prominence as an investigative journalist and was vice president and assistant to the publisher for The (Louisville) Courier-Journal. His family and friends created the prize in his memory in 1967. He was a 1954 Harvard graduate.

A complete list of previous Worth Bingham Prize-winners is available online at www.nieman.harvard.edu/bingham-winners/. "A Mayor in Crisis" and "Victory and Ruins" can be found at www.nieman.harvard.edu. ■

END NOTE

Presidential Dogs

BY ELINOR J. BRECHER

“Sasha and Malia, I love you both more than you can imagine. And you have earned the new puppy that’s coming with us to the new White House.”

With those two sentences last November, Barack Obama, in his first moments as President-elect, thrilled animal lovers nearly as much as his victory thrilled anyone who appreciated the historic significance of an African-American winning the nation’s highest office. The Internet exploded with speculation. What kind of puppy? Purebred or mix? Rescue, pound or purchase? Given that two-thirds of U.S. households

include at least one pet, it wasn’t surprising.

Interviewers couldn’t wait to dispense with weighty issues like war and recession so they could be first to answer the questions on millions of pet-keeping Americans’ minds. Obama dropped a few hints in his first press conference, noting Malia’s allergies—and his own biracial makeup: “There are a number of breeds that are hypoallergenic, but on the other hand our preference is to get a shelter dog, but obviously, a lot of the shelter dogs are mutts like me,” Obama said. “So, whether we are going to be able to balance those two things I think is a pressing

issue on the Obama household.” But he said the family would wait until spring to get a dog—after they’d settled in.

Speculation escalated to advice—and to opportunities to increase reader/viewer interest by offering avenues for giving it. Bloggers and mainstream media outlets, grasping the passion that the nation’s nearly 400-million house pets inspire, launched breed selection and naming contests.

My newspaper, The Miami Herald, was among them, losing no time in soliciting ideas from readers. We ran a short announcement every day for a couple of weeks in the paper, as well as

on my blog, Crazy for Critters, and got nearly 400 e-mailed responses. We ran a selection of photos and responses on the features front in early February and posted every picture—about 130—and all 400 e-mails at MiamiHerald.com. If the name of the media game these days is bringing eyeballs to the page, anything involving animals is a sure thing.

By then, the Obamas seemed to have narrowed down their choices to a Labradoodle—a Labrador/poodle mix—or a Portuguese water dog, both having the kind of hair that’s easier for someone with allergies to tolerate than most dogs’ fur. Aficionados of both types began lobbying anew, providing another



President Warren G. Harding being photographed in front of the White House with his dog, Laddie, 1922. Photo courtesy of the National Photo Company/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

opportunity to revisit one of the year's few feel-good stories. (On February 25th, Michelle Obama disclosed that the kids would get their pet after spring break in April and, more than likely, it would be a "Porti," as the water dogs are called. She told *People* magazine that the family hoped to find one through a rescue group—though at press time, the bloggers at *labradoodlesforobama.com* were reporting that "doodles" were still in the running).

Why such interest? Pets are hardly a White House novelty. But this was the first time that Americans felt as though they had some say in the choice—an empowering notion for an electorate that had just made history.

The vacating first family, George W. Bush's, kept three dogs and a cat.

The Clintons before them had a dog and a cat, Socks, whose death at 19 The Associated Press reported on February 20th.

Historians believe that all but four presidents since George Washington have kept animals on the official residence's grounds: a diverse menagerie that has included horses, cows, sheep, barnyard fowl, swine, snakes, rodents, tropical birds, fish—even elephants—in addition to scores of dogs and cats.

The petless four: Millard Fillmore, Chester A. Arthur, Franklin Pierce, and James K. Polk. Technically, Martin Van Buren (1837-1841) was also petless; he accepted a pair of tiger cubs from the Sultan of Oman but sent them to live at a zoo.

Surely the most exotic critters came

with the John Quincy Adams administration (1825-1829): an alligator that the Marquise de Lafayette bestowed on the President and silkworms that first lady Louisa Adams kept. James Buchanan (1857-1861) had the elephants, a gift from the King of Siam.

It could be argued that with financial markets in a death spiral and armed conflict raging across the globe, news organizations—themselves in dire circumstances—ought to be focused on the stories that affect the lives of Americans struggling to stay in their homes and keep their jobs. But presidential pets have long been in the news, sometimes as unwitting props, sometimes as political symbols, sometimes because they make news on their own. On November 6th, two



President Calvin Coolidge with one of his family's dogs. 1927. Photo courtesy of the National Photo Company/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



President Lyndon B. Johnson holds up his beagle, Him, by the ears as members of the press look on. 1964. Photo by Cecil Stoughton/Courtesy of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum.

days after Obama's election, Barney, a Bush family Scottish terrier, bit the outstretched hand of Jon Decker, a Reuters political reporter, at the White House. Given the outgoing administration's relationship with the press, pundits and late-night comics drew the obvious analogy.

It wasn't the first time that a first pet seemed to speak for—or volumes about—his or her master in chief. In 1952, Republican Vice Presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon was accused of accepting \$18,000 in illegal gifts. Perhaps foreshadowing the corruption that would end his presidency decades later, he denied the allegations—except for the cocker spaniel puppy that a supporter had given his two daughters.

In the smarmy combination of

self-pity and defiance that became a Nixon hallmark, he declared that his daughters, “like all kids, love the dog, and I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it.”

Lyndon Johnson outraged dog lovers when he hoisted a beagle named Him—whose mate was named Her—by the ears in 1964 on the White House lawn. But the gesture seemed an apt metaphor for Johnson's manhandling political methods.

Perhaps the most famous pet reference by a U.S. President was Harry S. Truman's rueful maxim, “If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog.” It was advice that the President—deeply unpopular for much of his two terms, 1945-1953—didn't follow. In 1947, he received Feller, a cocker spaniel, as a

gift. According to the Presidential Pet Museum, he passed the pup on to his physician, who became the first of eight masters to keep the hapless canine, until he found a home at last on a farm, where he died of old age.

Given Barack Obama's sky-high approval ratings, it's not likely he'll need Truman's advice, either. Given his political savvy, he also knows that the campaign promise he made to his daughters is one he dare not break. ■

Elinor J. Brecher, a 1988 Nieman Fellow, is The Miami Herald's obituary writer and the author of Crazy for Critters, the Herald's pet blog. She was accompanied on her Nieman Fellowship by her dog Harpo, a collie/golden retriever mix.



Then Vice President Richard M. Nixon and his family with their dog Checkers on the beach in Mantoloking, New Jersey. *Photo courtesy of The Associated Press.*

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THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

