

Watchdog Reporting: Exploring Its Myth

‘The myth of journalists doggedly uncovering all the facts is both important—and dangerous.’

BY FLORENCE GRAVES

Once upon a time, the nation was crawling with brave and well-funded investigative reporters who found and exposed wrongdoing wherever it occurred. From Ida Tarbell to Bob Woodward, journalists crusading for truth bravely defended democracy from the incursions of corruption and undue influence. Alas, how we have fallen from those mighty days! As newsrooms slash budgets and publishers demand higher profits, investigative journalism is under attack.

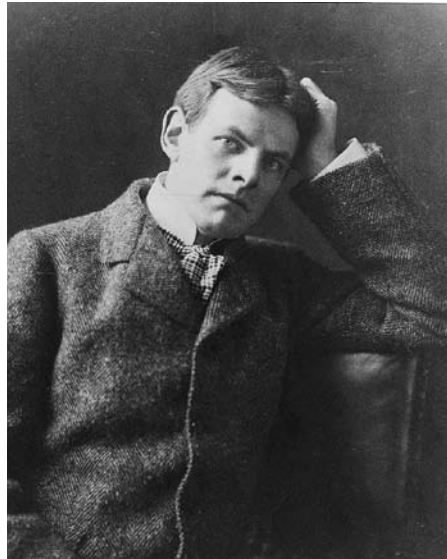
It’s a great narrative. But it’s a myth.

The profit pressures on journalism are very real. In fact, that is one reason I founded the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism in 2004, as one of the emerging nonprofit models for investigative journalism. And the urgent need to expose undue influence, tainted decision-making, and hidden malfeasance is real. Those are among the main goals of the Schuster Institute at Brandeis University, and it’s also why I founded and ran Common Cause Magazine with a focus on investigative reporting during the 1980’s. We can admire—and aim at—this goal without believing the myth. The truth: Even when news organizations were flush, in-depth investigative reporting has been more an ideal than a reality.

Consider the research done by Michael Schudson, professor at the University of California at San Diego and at the Graduate School of Journalism of Columbia University, and published in his books “The Power of News” and “Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget and Reconstruct the Past.”

- In “The Power of News,” Schudson wrote, “The muckraking theme has been powerful in American jour-

WATCHDOG GALLERY



David Graham Phillips (1867-1911). In 1906 *Cosmopolitan Magazine* published “Treason of the Senate,” a nine-part series exposing patterns of corruption among senators. *Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.*

nalism for a century, even though its practice is the exception, not the rule.” He points out that “in the time between Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and Ray Stannard in 1904 and Woodward and Bernstein in 1972 and 1973,” muckraking had “no culturally resonant, heroic exemplars.”

- In analyzing myths generated by Watergate, Schudson concluded that “the press as a whole during Watergate was—as before and since—primarily an establishment institution with few ambitions to rock establishment bonds.” While he concluded that many news organizations’ commitments to investigative reporting began to increase in the

1960’s—before Watergate—that commitment was already dissipating early in the Reagan years.

Government Watchdog

The myth of journalists doggedly uncovering all the facts is both important—and dangerous. “What is most important to journalism is not the spate of investigative reporting or the recoil from it after Watergate,” wrote Schudson, “but the renewal, reinvigoration, and remythologization of muckraking.” This helps all of us aim higher and dig even more deeply.

Here’s the danger: Many Americans naively believe that Watergate spawned hordes of investigative reporters who are urgently ferreting out all waste, fraud and abuse of power in the public interest. This fosters a false and complacent public impression that if there is any wrongdoing by government or corporate officials, heroic journalists are doing everything they can to track it down and report it.

While the Washington press corps has grown mightily, is it adequate? Most medium-sized newspapers have a Washington presence, but these reporters often focus on the same few issues and the same few people at the top—leaving significant issues and agencies uncovered. Those U.S. news organizations that do assign a full-time reporter to an agency “beat,” usually assign them only to a handful of big beats such as the Pentagon, Department of Justice, Department of State, and Treasury. Those “beats” usually involve tracking major policy decisions and rarely leave enough time for reporters to make connections between these policies and relevant influence-peddlers or to dig deeply into other agency business. It is extremely

difficult, if not impossible, for these reporters—as well as those who are assigned to cover several agencies at one time—to cover the “official” daily news and the insider machinations about decisions and also track the influence of hundreds of well-paid lobbyists and well-staffed PR firms dedicated to protecting huge corporations’ interests and who have vast access to policymakers. This doesn’t even take into account the increased difficulties reporters confront when facing the recent and unprecedented government clampdown on the release of information and deliberate slowdowns in response to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, the increasing trend of the government issuing subpoenas to journalists to disclose their confidential sources, and the threat posed by libel suits.

Contrary to the myth, only a skeleton crew of reporters is trying to find out how Americans’ daily lives—what they eat, the medicines they take, the products they use, and the environmental conditions in which they live—are being affected by hundreds of lobbyists, dozens of partisan and “Astroturf” think-tanks, scores of federal agencies, and hundreds of officials all defended by the ironically named “public information officers” who prevent the flow of many important facts out of their offices.

To get a sense of just how bad the problem was becoming, in 2001 The Project on the State of the American Newspaper surveyed newspapers and wire-services to determine which ones “regularly cover” 19 federal departments and agencies.¹ The survey found that apart from the major departments such as defense, state, justice and treasury—which are comparatively well covered by reporters—a surprising number of agencies with huge budgets had either no reporters or just a few, including the following:

- No full-time reporter: Veterans Affairs (\$46 billion budget) and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (\$482 million budget)
- Two full-time reporters: Department of Interior (\$10 billion budget)
- Three full-time reporters: Agriculture (\$73 billion budget), Environmental Protection Agency (\$8 billion budget), and Social Security Administration (\$7 billion budget)
- Four full-time reporters: Labor Department (\$39 billion budget) and Internal Revenue Service (\$9 billion budget).

Congress is where laws are passed, but it is within these agencies that the laws are shaped into realities that affect our lives. Are only three full-time reporters enough to oversee all of the government’s decision-making about environmental protection and monitor all of what lobbyists do to shape those regulations behind closed doors? Consider, too, the spectacular growth in sophistication and influence of a vast number of power centers—multinational corporations, global financial institutions, international governments, and nongovernmental organizations. Then there is coverage of local and state news, when editors and publishers are subjected to even greater pressure from special interests—commercial and otherwise—in their community.

Increasingly bereft of key resources—time, people and money—to do in-depth reporting, journalists have become much more dependent on leaks and tips from people who usually have an agenda that might not always be so obvious. One resulting paradox is that while more reporters than ever are covering Washington, we really know less about many very important things. Consider the press’s spectacular failure to find out the truth about the administration’s claims about Iraq. Or

President Ronald Reagan has sold weapons to Iran in order to influence the release of political hostages in the Middle East.

1987

Bob Woodward exposes questionable policies and practices at the CIA in “Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987,” published by Simon & Schuster.

1989

Jerry Mitchell reports on October 1 in the Jackson, Mississippi, Clarion-Ledger that the 1964 trial of the man accused of assassinating civil rights leader Medgar Evers was rigged with jury tampering. His story leads to the reopening of the case and a murder conviction. Other civil rights cases from the era are reexamined and retried.

1993

Eileen Welsome exposes “The Plutonium Experiment,” a federal study involving plutonium injections conducted without patient knowledge. It runs on November 15 in the Albuquerque Tribune.

2001

Eric Schlosser examines the health hazards of convenience foods in “Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal,” published by Houghton Mifflin.

2004

Seymour Hersh collects a series of articles written for The New Yorker

¹ An article about the project’s original 1999 survey is available at www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=3269. The survey was updated two years later by Lucinda Fleeson, and the new results appear with the original AJR article written by John Herbers and James McCartney in “Breach of Faith: A Crisis of Coverage in the Age of Corporate Newspapering,” edited by Gene Roberts and Thomas Kunkel.

how long it took to unmask Congressmen Tom Delay and Randy (Duke) Cunningham. Or the overlooked warnings about today's subprime crisis—and in earlier years the Savings & Loan crisis, the Department of Housing and Urban Development scandal, and the Iran-contra arms deals.

This is not to say that investigative reporters have been failing. Press investigations have recently revealed unacceptable conditions for Iraq War veterans at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the CIA's abuses in prisoner interrogations, the use of warrantless wiretaps of citizens' phones by the U.S. government, and other memorable watchdog stories. We can find plenty of other examples of superb investigative journalism—likely more and better than a decade ago—but that doesn't mean there's enough of it.

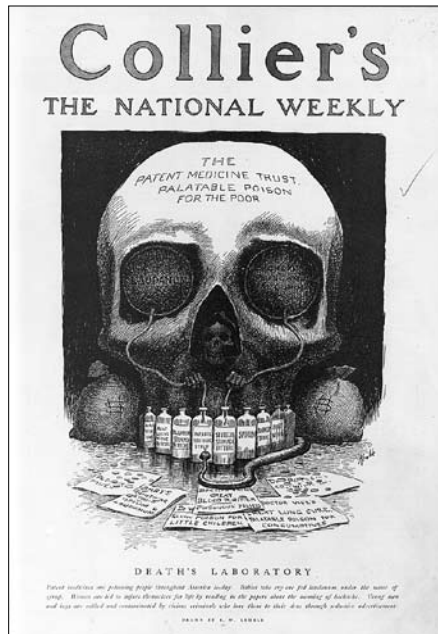
In our news media's daily practice and performance, watchdog reporting is not keeping pace with the growing need. While powerful institutions—government, corporate and nonprofit, both U.S. and global—that need to be watched are multiplying and getting richer and more sophisticated, precisely the opposite is happening in journalism: The number and availability of reporters who have the time, institutional backing, and resources to be effective watchdogs are getting pinched. Nor does it seem that this trend is about to change given the faltering financial resources available at most news organizations—and the ways in which these resources are being used in this era of celebrity and entertainment journalism.

Uncovering Corporate Malfeasance

Meanwhile, news organizations have never been very committed to exposing corporate wrongdoing. A convincing argument could be made that today corporations effectively run the country—including what happens in Washington, D.C.—through their campaign contributions, opposition research, careful spin-doctoring, sophisticated public influence campaigns, heavy-hitting lobbyists, and still more tools.

Arguably, corporate titans might be in a better position to abuse the public trust than many government officials. While numerous outlets cover business and report on corporate news, most of what reaches the public is aimed at investors, usually indicating whose business is up and who's is down. The New York Times then-media reporter

WATCHDOG GALLERY



In 1906, Collier's published E.W. Kemble's "Death's Laboratory," an investigative article about the sale of alcohol and chemical-laced medicines. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

Felicity Barringer pointed out a few years ago that "more than 250 Pulitzers in journalism have been awarded since 1978. Business figures prominently in about 10." She then asked, "But what about corporations and industries? Are there some comfortable folk there who could do with some afflicting?"

Our own survey of the Pulitzers revealed that out of the 90 Pulitzers given for public service journalism, only about a handful involved primarily an investigation of corporate power. And of the 25 Pulitzer Prizes awarded for investigative journalism, in just two of them did the reporters

focus specifically on situations involving corporations.

Even in flush times, the job of systematically and thoroughly covering the government, the corporate sector, and the nonprofit sector would have been a mammoth David-takes-on-Goliath effort. But these are not flush times for the news business. And that's why there's such an urgent need for what Chuck Lewis, founder of the Center for Public Integrity, has been calling the new nonprofit journalism. [See Lewis's article on page 23.] Each of us who launched one of these new nonprofit models did so independently, albeit with similar reckonings about the need. None of us pretend to be the solution to the ongoing financial crisis that has led many newspapers to eliminate or cut back their investments in investigative reporting. But all of us want to contribute to the solution—albeit in slightly different ways and with somewhat different areas of focus.

Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism

The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism is the nation's first—and only—investigative reporting center based at a university (in our case, Brandeis University) that is intended to help fill the increasing void in high-quality public interest and investigative journalism. As journalists, we research, report, place and publish or broadcast our work. Our ongoing interaction with students comes in working closely with those we hire to assist us with our investigations; we get superb research assistance, while we mentor them and offer an intimate sense of what is required to do in-depth reporting. We also reveal to them the value this kind of reporting holds for our nation. No matter what these students end up doing, whether it's journalism, law, business or politics, they take with them an understanding of—and appreciation for—the importance of a free and unfettered press in a democracy.

Our goal is to explore in-depth significant social and political problems

and uncover corporate and government abuses of power and reveal what we find through “impact journalism,” in which our in-depth projects break important news and jump-start public policy discussions about underreported social and political injustices important to a democracy. The three prime areas of our interest are:

1. Political and Social Justice
2. Gender and Justice
3. The Justice Brandeis Innocence Project.

Our investigations reach the public via broadcast, the Web, and in newspapers and magazines that have a proven ability to inform the public.² In collaboration with The Washington Post, I explored a whistleblower lawsuit against Boeing. In reporting that story, we found that Boeing—with what seemed like almost a wink from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)—was installing unapproved (and potentially dangerous) parts on its planes. With the freedom I have through my association with this institute,³ I was able to delve deeply for months. Few reporters would have had the time to study the FAA’s regulations and requirements deeply enough to be able to challenge its spin. “Boeing Parts and Rules Bent, Whistle-Blowers Say,” appeared as an above-the-fold Page One story in April 2006 and was picked up around the world.⁴ While reporting the story, I discovered many indications that Boeing and the FAA have a tighter

relationship than any citizen would want to exist, and I uncovered half a dozen other stories I’d like to pursue when I have more time.

There are certainly other ways to do this work—and plenty of room for many more news organizations and journalists to commit to doing it. The breadth of global “beats” is only going to expand, while it appears likely that crucial stories simply are not going to be done. Last fall, the Columbia Journalism Review editorialized that, “As newsroom resources continue to contract—foreign bureaus close, staffs shrink, travel budgets evaporate—producing a broad, deep and authoritative news report day in and day out may in some cases require that news operations join forces.” The Schuster Institute alone—or even in concert with every other nonprofit investigative journalism entity in existence today—will never be able to fill the growing gap. Doing so is going to require innovative ideas matched with unprecedented cooperation and collaboration among journalists and a commitment to this job by all of us. ■

Florence Graves is the founding director of The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. She was founder of Common Cause Magazine and has been an investigative reporter for nearly three decades.

magazine about the government’s Iraq War policy into a book called “Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib.”

2005

Dana Priest, reporting in November for The Washington Post, uncovers the existence of secret overseas detention centers maintained by the CIA for its fight against terrorism.

2006

William Glaberson writes a three-part series for The New York Times about the “Broken Bench” of New York State’s system of 1,250 town and village courts.

Bob Woodward publishes “State of Denial,” the third book in his investigative look at the planning and execution of the Iraq War under the leadership of President George W. Bush. He documents systematic negligence and misjudgment.

2007

In a follow-up report for The New York Times, William Glaberson reveals widespread fraud and mismanagement of the millions of dollars exchanging hands each year in New York State’s small-town courts.

Washington Post reporters Dana Priest and Anne Hull expose widespread problems with outpatient care at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center for soldiers wounded in the Iraq War. ■

² The institute pays for the in-depth research that goes into our preliminary proposals and investigations; for our placed articles, we accept freelance fees, which pay for a fraction of our research costs. In the past year, our work has appeared in such media outlets as The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, Columbia Journalism Review, and Good Housekeeping (U.S. and international editions), and has been featured in various NPR radio and TV talk shows. Our investigative work has been picked up by news organizations such as The China Post, The San Jose Mercury News, ABC News online, Chicago Tribune, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, and The Standard (Hong Kong), and linked to or commented on in more than 150 blogs. —F.G.

³ Brandeis University provides our institute with a home firmly placed within an academic tradition that honors freedom of inquiry and independence from government influence and corporate control, with an explicit dedication to social justice and to the pursuit of truth wherever it might lead. —F.G.

⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/16/AR2006041600803.html>