

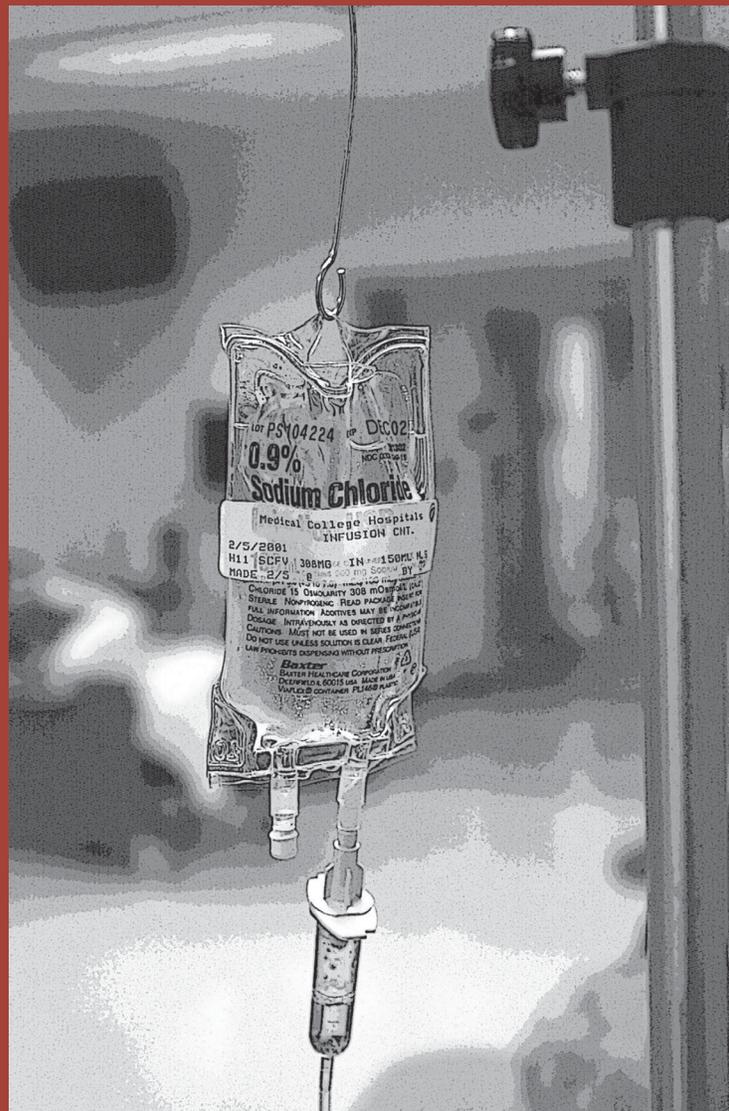
NIEMAN REPORTS

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

VOL.57 No.2 SUMMER 2003

Five Dollars

Medical Reporting



Coverage Before and During the War in Iraq

Watchdog Reporting: Access and Accountability

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

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

Vol. 57 No. 2 NIEMAN REPORTS
Summer 2003 THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Publisher Bob Giles
Editor Melissa Ludtke
Assistant Editor Lois Fiore
Editorial Assistant Elizabeth Son
Design Editor Deborah Smiley

Nieman Reports (USPS #430-650) is published
in March, June, September and December
by the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University,
One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2098.

Subscriptions/Business
Telephone: 617-496-2968
E-Mail Address:
nreports@harvard.edu

Subscription \$20 a year, \$35 for two years;
add \$10 per year for foreign airmail. Single copies \$5.
Back copies are available from the Nieman office.

Please address all subscription correspondence to
One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2098
and change of address information to
P.O. Box 4951, Manchester, NH 03108.
ISSN Number 0028-9817

Editorial
Telephone: 617-496-6308
E-Mail Address:
nreditor@harvard.edu

Internet Address:
www.nieman.harvard.edu

Copyright 2003
by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Second-class postage paid at Boston,
Massachusetts and additional entries.

POSTMASTER:
Send address changes to
Nieman Reports,
P.O. Box 4951,
Manchester, NH 03108.

4 Medical Reporting

6 A Chasm of Distrust in Medical Reporting By TERRY L. SCHRAEDER

WATCHDOG

8 Breaking the Medical Malpractice Code of Secrecy By STEPHEN KIERNAN

WATCHDOG

12 Using Technology to Uncover Medical Stories By CHRIS ADAMS

WATCHDOG

13 Mental Illness: Reporting on Maine's Most Vulnerable Children By BARBARA WALSH

WATCHDOG

16 Investigating What Goes Wrong in Medicine By PAUL LIEBERMAN

19 Portraits of the Living With the Dead By MERYL LEVIN

23 Is Stem Cell Reporting Telling the Real Story? By NEIL MUNRO

25 Reporting the Cloning Story: From Hype to Healthy Skepticism By AARON ZITNER

27 Transforming Medical Science Into Public Policy By BARBARA EGBERT

29 Covering Ethical Debates About Medical Issues By KATHLEEN RUTLEDGE

WATCHDOG

32 Digging Beneath What Is Said to Be the Truth By PHILIP J. HILTS

WATCHDOG

35 Acting as Watchdog on Cancer Research By PAUL GOLDBERG

36 The Emotional Toll of Reporting on a Cancer Trial By JENNI LAIDMAN

41 'Living With Cancer' By LOIS WILSON

44 Weighing Anecdotal Evidence Against the Studies By DIANA CAMPBELL

46 Documenting Native Approaches to Wellness By MARY ANNETTE PEMBER

50 Constraints on China's Coverage of SARS By PHILIP J. CUNNINGHAM

WATCHDOG

54 Medical Reporting In a Highly Commercialized Environment By JOHN ABRAMSON

58 A Hard Look Finds a Network Script Fades to Blah By MERVIN BLOCK

60 A Doctor Examines a Journalist's Work By PERRI KLASS

61 Critical Tools for Medical Reporting By RAGNAR LEVI

64 Helping Reporters Play the Medical Numbers Game By LEWIS COPE

66 Learning To Be a Medical Journalist By THOMAS LINDEN

Cover Photo: A patient's dosage for the Phase I trial of H11, a monoclonal antibody, in the treatment of her ovarian cancer. The study was conducted at the Medical College of Ohio in Toledo, Ohio. This image has been manipulated in Adobe PhotoShop. *Photo by Jetta Fraser/The (Toledo) Blade.*

68 Journalist's Trade Coverage of War

- WATCHDOG** 70 Blurring the Line Between Journalist and Publicist By PAUL McMASTERS
- WATCHDOG** 73 What Happens When Journalists Don't Probe? By MURREY MARDER
- WATCHDOG** 77 Covering the War Before It Started By MICHAEL GETLER
- WATCHDOG** 81 The Press and Freedom By BOB EDWARDS
- WATCHDOG** 83 Presidential Secrecy and Reporters Efforts to Breach It By SAM DONALDSON
- 84 In War, Journalists Become Part of the Problem By CHRIS HEDGES
- WATCHDOG** 87 Embedding Reporters on the Frontline By NANCY BERNHARD
- 90 Blogging the War Away By DANNY SCHECHTER
- 93 Getting a More Complete War Story By RAMI G. KHOURI
- 94 Televised War Coverage in Namibia By GWEN LISTER
- 96 Keeping an Eye on Thailand's Press By SONGPOL KAOPATUMTIP
- 98 War Coverage in the Chinese Media By YUAN FENG
- 99 German Skepticism About America's Intent and Goals in Iraq By MARTIN GEHLEN

101 Watchdog Reporting

- WATCHDOG** 101 A Lengthy Legal Battle to Gain Access to Public Documents By DEBORAH HENLEY
- WATCHDOG** 105 Reporting Holds Michigan's Child Welfare System Accountable By JACK KRESNAK

108 Words & Reflections

- 109 What Stands Between the Press and the Truth? By SETH EFFRON
- 110 Challenging the Charge of Liberal Bias in the Media By MIKE RILEY
- 112 Media Companies and the Internet By DAVID DEJEAN
- 115 Forty Years of Reporting the Nation's News By BILL WHEATLEY

3 **Curator's Corner:** Newspaper Editors Confront Errors By BOB GILES

117 Nieman Notes

- 117 Photographer Gordon Parks Turns 90 By LESTER SLOAN
- 120 **Class Notes** COMPILED BY LOIS FIORE

Newspaper Editors Confront Errors

'We learn from one another's mistakes.'

By Bob Giles

A strength of our craft is its transparency and its capacity for searching examination when core values and standards of journalistic performance are violated. This spring, several of our nation's leading newspapers demonstrated an admirable willingness to investigate their failures and inform the public through detailed accounts. The New York Times published an extensive account of how reporter Jayson Blair repeatedly wrote stories based on what the paper called "fabrication and plagiarism." And The Miami Herald acknowledged that it published a story that unfairly accused the winning Kentucky Derby jockey of cheating.

The power of e-mail and the Internet means that internal newsroom efforts to address problems of journalistic ethics and performance get widely circulated on Web sites and quickly become public forums for discussion and debate, as well as a place for venting anger. Airing of opinions, criticisms and thoughts about why such situations happened and how to correct problems are healthy for journalism. We learn from one another's mistakes. And through this process of self-examination, we send an important message to the public that in our most embarrassing moments we're willing to be candid and to work at making necessary corrections to prevent reoccurrences and rebuild trust.

In this tradition, our craft is unusual. Compare these responses to the Enron Corporation, where executives tried hard to prevent public disclosure of practices, which eventually led to the company's collapse by misleading the public, the securities markets, investors and, for a long time, journalists. Those in top positions at news organizations are more likely to initiate self-criticism and be forthcoming about their errors.

When a newspaper's standards are violated, it is the editor who must stand before the bar of public opinion. In some cases, it's been the editor who writes explanatory columns for the readers, who gives interviews, talks with readers, or holds a press conference. The editor must also be the person who responds to questions from angry staff members and readers, both of whom feel betrayed. It is often editors who answer readers' queries about the paper's ethics and performance. Rarely does a corporate spokesperson speak for the editor, nor is there a covey of flaks hovering nearby to coach an editor on how to spin the story to minimize the damage.

The evidence of wrongdoing can be raw, as the Times's four-page coverage on May 12th demonstrated. The questions from staff can be raw, as well, as the editor, Howell Raines, discovered in his two-hour meeting with the Times's staff three days later.

As editors and journalists in other newsrooms digested the details and began to think about the wide range of opinion and commentary, many newsrooms looked inward, asking "Could this happen here?" In a memo to her staff, Editor Sandy Rowe of The Oregonian noted that this "... profoundly sad and damaging chapter in journalism ... affects all of us who love the profession and work each day guided by the highest standards, striving to serve our communities and bring credit to our beloved newspaper." Then she asked her staff, as each read The New York Times account, to "consider what lessons you see, what questions you have, how you think they apply to our lives at The Oregonian, and what cautionary notes we should take from this."

The evidence in the Jayson Blair case so far points to two critical lessons for newspapers: First is the need to better align daily journalistic practices with the highest standards of our craft. The second lesson is to stop trying to put the blame for such episodes at the feet of affirmative action and to embrace the undeniable imperative that by having a diversity of perspectives represented in our newsrooms, our coverage of all aspects of community life will be enhanced.

There are lessons also to be learned from the experiences of journalists in their coverage of the Iraq war and of the role the press played—and ought to have played—in helping readers, viewers and listeners sort out governmental policies involved in waging it. In this issue, we publish a section of stories in which journalists offer differing perspectives on reporting that happened during the build-up to war and once the war began. Their stories speak to the value of the Nieman Foundation's international connections during a time of global crisis.

It is hard to dismiss the cynicism directed at the ubiquitous U.S. television images of American flags and on-screen banners such as "Operation Iraqi Freedom." It is equally difficult not to take seriously the conclusion reached by many international journalists that the American press tended toward conformity in their reporting, as many among them left unchallenged the Bush administration's story line about its military and foreign policy initiatives.

Our colleagues' views merit strong consideration as we ponder whether we acted, in this circumstance, as the free and independent press that we often proclaim ourselves to be. ■

✉ giles@fas.harvard.edu

Medical Reporting

“The chasm between medical journalists and physicians appears mostly to be one of ignorance rather than conflicting interests or malice,” writes **Terry L. Schraeder**, who for 10 years worked as a medical journalist before entering medical school. Now doing her residency in internal medicine, she uses these experiences to highlight the problems between journalists and doctors and ways to close the widening gap of distrust. She is convinced that only when they “understand the other’s professional training, education, deadlines, responsibilities, codes of ethics, and internal stresses” will the chasm narrow.

Stephen Kiernan, a reporter at The Burlington Free Press, worked many months in his investigation of medical malpractice in Vermont, examining its effect on patients and the state’s policies in dealing with harmful physicians. One lesson: “It is human nature to treat secrecy with skepticism; in this case, concealment proved an accurate guide to keep the reporting going.” **Chris Adams**, a reporter with Knight Ridder in Washington, D.C., demonstrates the value of using computer assisted reporting with projects in medical journalism both big and small. He’s relied on these technological tools to help cover the Food and Drug Administration. In Maine, **Barbara Walsh**, who writes about children for the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram, used databases, documents and shoe-leather reporting to stitch together the untold story of what happens to her state’s mentally ill children. Publication of her series led to changes in their care. “[T]hese children were no longer invisible. Family, friends, politicians listen to their stories now,” Walsh writes. **Paul Lieberman**, cultural correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, chronicles a career of happenstance, as time and time again he fell into investigating medical malfeasance. “Lesson One: Readers care about this stuff,” he observes.

Social documentary photographer **Meryl Levin** shares images and words from her book, “Anatomy of Anatomy,” which tells stories about medical students’ experiences as they work with cadavers to understand the human body.

Neil Munro, who covers the politics of science and technology for the National Journal in Washington, D.C., describes how language that advocates use gets adopted by journalists and shapes coverage of the debate about stem cell research. He compares mainstream media’s coverage of this issue to how journalists reported on the dot-com bubble by magnifying “the industry’s promise and predictions.” **Aaron Zitner**, also based in Washington, reports on science policy for the Los Angeles Times. He describes why journalists need to be extremely cautious in their reporting on human cloning, as many have not been. “When we did challenge their claims, reporters often fell into a simplistic is-not, is-too style of reporting that gave equal footing to the ‘cloners’ and their better-credentialed doubters,” he writes. San Jose Mercury News editorial writer **Barbara Egbert** helps readers understand policy and public funding decisions about what medical science is researching. “[W]hile those decisions may be obscure, they reflect on human nature, which anyone can understand,” she says. **Kathleen Rutledge**, editor of the Lincoln (Nebraska) Journal Star, writes about lessons learned when her paper and local broadcast partners used a civic journalism approach to “inform citizens and engage them in a thoughtful and civil discussion of the ethical implications of medical research.”

Philip J. Hilts, former New York Times reporter and author of “Protecting America’s Health: The FDA, Business and One Hundred Years of Regulation,” describes difficulties reporters confront in unraveling political rhetoric from medical fact in many issues that involve the FDA, which he covered for 20 years. In *The Cancer Letter*, a weekly newsletter that watchdogs cancer research, **Paul Goldberg** unearths important details in documents that journalists often miss; information he published about ImClone Systems, Inc. in January, soon made front-page news in major newspapers.

Jenni Laidman, science writer at *The (Toledo) Blade*, set out to follow cancer patients through a clinical trial and “use their stories to tell the story of cancer . . .” She writes of her reporting journey: “I started out so seduced by this molecule. I ended up seduced by hope, by human effort and human frailty.” Photographs by *Blade* photographer **Jetta Fraser** accompany Laidman’s words. At the *Star-Gazette* in Elmira, New York, editors took a different approach to reporting on cancer, and **Lois Wilson**, deputy metro editor, describes the paper’s yearlong project “examining how cancer affects our community and its residents.” **Diana Campbell**, a reporter with the *Fairbanks (Alaska) Daily News-Miner*, explains how she is using her Alicia Patterson Fellowship year to investigate the rising incidence of cancer among Alaska Natives.

Mary Annette Pember documented the increase of Type II diabetes among Native Americans as well as culturally relevant treatment and prevention programs. She shares her photographs and writes about experiences of people she met in her reporting.

Philip J. Cunningham, who writes for the *South China Morning Post*, describes a complex mix of cultural and political influences that affected how the Chinese media handled their reporting about SARS. **John Abramson**, a family practitioner and instructor at Harvard Medical School, offers eight guiding principles for accurate and fair coverage of research findings. Among his advice: “Financial ties of all experts quoted should be included in the story.” **Mervin Block**, a former staff writer on the “CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite,” demonstrates what can go wrong when a writer tries to transform complicated research findings into a short and simple news story. And **Perri Klass**, a pediatrician who often writes about her medical practice, finds her loyalties divided as she moves between journalism and medicine.

Medical editor **Ragnar Levi**, author of “Medical Journalism: Exposing Fact, Fiction, Fraud,” gives journalists roadmaps for finding the kind of evidence that good reporting requires. **Lewis Cope**, coauthor with the late Victor Cohn of the second edition of “*News & Numbers: A Guide to Reporting Statistical Claims and Controversies in Health and Other Fields*,” provides helpful hints about medical coverage, including words that best convey the degree of uncertainty usually involved in medical research and practice. **Thomas Linden**, director of the Medical Journalism Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, writes about what is learned in studying how to report on medicine and medical issues. “[T]o really own the medical beat, you need to know the subject matter,” he writes. ■

A Chasm of Distrust in Medical Reporting

A doctor who was a medical journalist tries to understand why journalists don't trust their sources and sources don't trust reporters.

By Terry L. Schraeder

After working as a medical journalist for 10 years, I entered medical school and then a residency in internal medicine. To my surprise, I emerged to find a new world of medical journalism. I am encouraged by some aspects of this world but disillusioned by others. It is true that medical journalism, more than ever before, has become an important source of public health education and information. But it is also true that there are problems in the relationship between medical journalists and physicians, including their understanding of each other's professions.

The chasm between medical journalists and physicians appears mostly to be one of ignorance rather than conflicting interests or malice. But across this divide exist miscommunication, misunderstanding and the potential for misguided messages to the public. Rose-colored glasses may have altered my memory, but I do not recall the caustic attitudes of journalists toward doctors or the skeptical tenor of doctors toward journalists when I was a full-time journalist a decade ago. I remember more professional respect, objective analysis, and collaboration. Perhaps, during the embryonic years of mainstream medical journalism, the parties were more polite, if not forgiving and patient of each other.

The Chasm Widens

The worsening rift first struck me after I finished my medical internship. Working as a freelance journalist, I thought I would be welcomed back into the fold of the fourth estate. Instead, I felt like an outsider. Negative comments about the medical profession seemed commonplace. Likewise, I heard physicians speak of members of the press as

if they were not to be trusted.

I listened to routine condemnation of medicine and journalism often framed with incomplete or inaccurate data. Instead of talking about story ideas and interesting science and medicine, journalists railed and postured as if they were protecting the public from a menace. It was as if in covering medicine, they were covering the enemy. Physicians dismissed medical journalists as being too uneducated to understand medicine or too busy to report on it accurately. They worried about the limitations of journalists and the motives of their editors while pointing to manipulation by outside interests. News reports were considered "abbreviated" at best and "sensational" at worst. Doctors accused the media of confusing their patients.

For me, the dispute came into focus at the Mayo Clinic's Medicine and Media Conference in 2002. One reporter charged that if journalists had not reported on the limitations of arthroscopic surgery that doctors would not have changed their practice of performing arthroscopy for osteoarthritis of the knee.

The journalist in me wanted to say, "Yes, mainstream medical journalists covered that research and informed the public." But the doctor in me wanted to say, "Doctors designed and conducted that research and a medical journal (*The New England Journal of Medicine*, July 11, 2002) published the study showing that arthroscopic surgery has no benefit over placebo for the treatment of certain types of osteoarthritis of the knee." A change in practice came about because of a collaborative effort instituted by doctors and conveyed to the lay public by journalists.

I began to wonder whether journal-

ists and doctors are oblivious to the importance of their collaboration. And I worried that the negative attitudes they had about one another could threaten similar effective working relationships of the future. Had medicine become the enemy, as some medical journalists thought? Are most medical journalists unable to inform and educate the public accurately on important health matters, as some physicians believed?

In trying to answer these questions, I thought of numerous examples of outstanding work from both fields. In my journey of medical reporting and medical training, I've witnessed countless instances of commitment, intelligence and courage from physicians and medical journalists, all working under profound professional stresses. So why the cynical attitudes toward one another?

What To Do About Distrust

No one will dispute the fact that the problems in medicine are vast, from the economic implosion affecting the ability of the profession to fulfill its mission to the limitations of the system to handle all aspects of medical care. Few disagree about the crisis of medical errors or the critical need to improve medical training and health care delivery especially for our aging and poor populations. But journalists and physicians working independently or as adversaries will not solve these problems.

Similarly, most would recognize that medical journalists are under enormous constraints of time, space and background knowledge. Many must cover an unimaginable range of complex medical topics on a day-to-day basis. Journalists must place an inordi-

nate trust in their sources and constantly worry about both missing some aspect of the story and the health implications of informing the public about medicine. Their beat is a moving target, where scientific interpretations and health recommendations change often.

Do doctors and journalists have a responsibility to work together? Can and should they develop a cohesive system to educate and inform the public as well as keep an eye on each other? Shouldn't they recognize that they share many of the same frustrations and restrictions, as well as ideals and goals? These issues—and others—must be articulated in an intelligent and constructive debate among individuals who have not lost respect for either profession. We must hear from those who will propose and implement effective solutions.

One example of a medical situation that would greatly benefit from collaborative trust and better communication is the diversion of ambulances from hospitals because of overcrowded emergency rooms. This is an important story, but most of the coverage of this issue has not included those inside medicine or public health who could help uncover and explain why the problem exists. Both the complexity and the magnitude of the story were missed. Furthermore, the reactionary “solutions” made by some hospitals in response to newspaper headlines were worse than the original problem. Overwhelmed and understaffed emergency rooms are not better for patients than hospital diversions.

At times, the relationship between doctors and journalists resembles a bad marriage, with equal parts dependence and disdain. Neither group seems to understand nor acknowledge the other's roles and responsibilities. Ultimately, the public and patients suffer. Perhaps those in medicine who criticize journalists for misleading the public might move away from providing only criticism and begin to find more effective means of improving communication or providing technical assistance to journalists. Whether it is books on epidemiology, symposia on

infectious diseases, or other professional development workshops, journalists would welcome the information. Furthermore, for doctors to relinquish the job of public health education and place it solely in the hands of the mainstream press is neither fair nor prudent.

Also, during the Mayo Clinic meeting, one speaker implied that if the press had not covered the hormone replacement study last summer, many gynecologists would not have called their patients or changed their prescribing practices. The hormone replacement study was released in a major medical journal (*The Journal of the American Medical Association*, July 2002) that is read by physicians and journalists. Such peer-reviewed journals help to set policy and practice standards. Whether the mass media covered the hormone story or not, most agree that medical practice would have changed and patients would have been notified.

Although many important stories are covered in the mainstream press, medicine is not taught in a 30-second sound bite, nor does it generally change on the basis of a newspaper headline. With the hormone replacement study, the media helped get the word to patients but, unfortunately, the complex conclusions of the message and the way it was released might have caused more confusion. If physicians and members of the media had collaborated on how best to get this message to patients and physicians—as suggested in an article, “Menopausal Hormone Therapy: Summary of a Scientific Workshop,” published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (February 18, 2003), everyone might have readily benefited.

Bridging the Chasm

Doctors and medical journalists both define themselves as public servants. They come together at a crossroads of public health. If they are to be patient advocates, they cannot be arch antagonists. They must fulfill their responsibilities to the public through professional cooperation and mutual understanding.

I am not suggesting that they be “yes men” or that they not expose one another's fallibilities and mistakes. But I do think it best if each becomes knowledgeable about the other's profession, whether guarding against medical errors in the hospital or in the headlines. This won't happen if each does not understand the other's professional training, education, deadlines, responsibilities, codes of ethics, and internal stresses.

Several years ago, I was speaking at a national health journalism conference when a journalist in the audience suggested how counterintuitive it was that a researcher would write a hypothesis before conducting a study and interpreting data. I knew that to do otherwise would be anathema to reputable research. Conversely, to explain to a doctor or clinical scientist why a journalist would never write a headline before they wrote their story might seem odd. Furthermore, to try to explain how a journalist could set out to write one story but then return to their editor with another would be difficult. It might appear even suspect.

Given today's realities of covering medical news, an important genetic discovery of a lethal disease often needs to be communicated in one-and-a-half minutes or 500 words. There is much at stake in journalists being sure this difficult job is done well since both patients and practitioners have come to rely upon medical journalism to help stay informed.

I must admit that I have heard more criticism from journalists of doctors than doctors of journalists. Of course, this might be related to the nature of a journalist's work; after all, medical journalists encounter doctors and cover the medical profession nearly every day. Most doctors come into contact with journalists on an irregular basis, if at all.

How are physicians affected by medical journalism? I am completing a research project that assesses physicians' attitudes about the news media and how medical information in the popular press affects them, their patients, and their practices. I also hope to help these two professions better under-

stand each other. Perhaps my study will facilitate an intelligent and productive discourse between doctors and journalists.

I know firsthand of the promises of both professions. I do not want the current adversarial abyss that lies between them to threaten their potential or harm their work. While keeping our roles and responsibilities distinct and clear, we must begin to build a bridge

over the chasm. Only then, will we as doctors and medical journalists truly serve the public and our professions.

■
Terry L. Schraeder, M.D., was the medical reporter for WCVB-TV (ABC-Boston) from 1986-1995 and has also written for The Boston Globe and other print and broadcast outlets. She graduated from Tufts

University School of Medicine in 1999. As a Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation Fellow 2000-2001 she began research on medicine and media. Schraeder will finish her training in internal medicine at Mt. Auburn Hospital in Cambridge in 2003. She is currently a fellow at The New England Journal of Medicine.

✉ TLSchraeder@aol.com

WATCHDOG

Breaking the Medical Malpractice Code of Secrecy

At The Burlington Free Press, a reporter persists in unearthing stories that doctors don't want told.

By Stephen Kiernan

The story began in February 2001, with a brief news item in a tiny newspaper downstate. The State of Vermont Board of Medical Practice had ruled that a local orthopedic surgeon—despite several complaints against him—was allowed to continue to practice.

At The Burlington Free Press, we'd written about the state's physician oversight panel before. A 1991 editorial slammed the board for allowing an ear, nose and throat doctor to keep his license after he was convicted of having sex with a minor in his examining room. In 1995, an editorial again criticized the board, this time for taking five years to act against a psychiatrist who counseled patients to cross-dress, ordered them to perform her office tasks, and overmedicated them to the point of seizures. In these editorial criticisms, the newspaper had treated those cases as rare instances of laxity by an otherwise diligent watchdog.

The small news story appeared to be another such anomaly. But was it?

Breaking Through the Secrecy

My editor and I decided to pursue this question. What we concluded—after



Gloria Lurvey holds a picture up of her and her husband, Gordon, who died after botched surgery was performed by a doctor whose license was later revoked by the state for unprofessional conduct. *Photo By Jordan Silverman/The Burlington Free Press.*

eight months of reporting—was a resounding no. What had happened with this surgeon—and the other doctors we found—exemplified problems in the medical profession and in state law designed to protect the public from

malpractice. The consequences of this lack of vigorous oversight, we learned, could be measured in body parts permanently damaged, in years of suffering, and in lost lives.

Nor was this only an issue of local

concern. The Institute of Medicine at the National Academy of Sciences has found that throughout the nation nearly 100,000 deaths occur annually due to medical errors. The institute identifies lack of physician accountability as a major cause.

The signal that a larger story might lie beneath the surface came early in the reporting. Vermont's regulation of physicians was surrounded by secrecy. Everywhere we turned—to the courts, regulators, health insurers, even doctors themselves—the answer was the same: State law prohibited public disclosure of physicians' performance. "The public could easily misunderstand," the head of the state's health care quality improvement panel told us. "Can you imagine what would happen if people knew a certain surgeon had a high malpractice suit count?" In fact, we could imagine: Such information would probably help medical consumers make more informed choices.

Our journalistic challenge was to break through the secrecy. Although I did the reporting and writing, assembling and shaping the project was a genuine team effort with my managing editor, Geoff Gevalt. We began by filing a public records request of the board's findings against the orthopedist. In those papers, the catalog of complaints against this doctor was staggering: surgeries on the wrong body part, patients permanently marred by surgical errors, even deaths due to post-surgical complications that he allegedly ignored. However, no patients were identified and details were scant.

We then requested the rest of the doctor's records. State regulators provided minimal paperwork, with many sections redacted. Then we requested information from the medical practice board about its investigation of the case—the names of complaining patients, evidence, minutes of the board's deliberations. Again, the board's answer was an unapologetic no. Staffers at the board made little effort to conceal their indignation that we would presume to make such a request.

We also turned our attention to examining the records of other doctors and other cases. With each, our inves-

tigation pursued three themes that we saw developing through our reporting:

- Substandard doctors could practice in Vermont with impunity.
- The oversight board was unaccountable to the public.
- State laws prevented health consumers from obtaining basic information about a doctor's competence.

Soon, it became apparent that this story would not be easy to tell. Though we'd uncovered many anecdotes, we'd been able to secure few documents to support what people alleged. By law, patient records are confidential. And doctors' conduct is guarded by peer review—a system of oversight by physician teams, which is confidential in all 50 states. (As we would learn, the secrecy in Vermont was tighter than in other states.) The medical culture, too, thrives on collegiality and an ethos of maintaining secrecy.

Telling the Story

We started interviewing critics of the board, state officials whom Vermonters had contacted over the years when they felt that their complaints about a doctor had been ignored. They confirmed that we were on the right track. Phone calls we made to malpractice attorneys provided people who would detail their misfortunes, but these cases did not address the larger issues. Often, too, settlements reached in lieu of a court finding involved a legal pledge of silence.

Finally, a source provided a tip that broke the story open for us. The tip was that an unnamed patient of the orthopedist had died on the same day the board ruled that the doctor could keep practicing. We collected a month's obituaries from every newspaper in Vermont and western New Hampshire and started calling surviving family members.

That was how we found Lois Tarczewski. A decade previously, she had slipped at work, banged her elbow, and couldn't shake the pain. It turned out she'd injured her upper

spine. She was scheduled for surgery at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center when the local surgeon convinced her to have the operation at his tiny hospital closer to home.

What she didn't know was that the surgeon at her local hospital had already been sued twice, losing one case and settling the other out of court. She didn't know that he had performed her surgery only once before. She did not know he had a drug problem.

Her operation went awry. She survived, thanks to emergency surgery at Dartmouth later that day. However, she spent 10 years in constant pain, struggling to walk, and living tethered to an oxygen tank. On the day the Vermont Medical Practice Board allowed her surgeon to stay in practice, she died. Had she known her doctor's past, Lois's husband said again and again, she would have gone somewhere else. Instead, she was a victim of what he called "the code of silence" in medicine.

Seeking to break that code, we interviewed scores of other patients, doctors, policy gurus, malpractice lawyers, and state officials. We then assembled a three-day series to reveal the problems we'd found and, before publication, we gave what we intended to publish to our newspaper's lawyers for legal review. As a reporter, that step in the process made me apprehensive. I worried that fears of possible legal action against the newspaper could compromise the story's vigor.

Instead the opposite happened. This legal review proved to be the story's salvation. The lawyers echoed my editor's concern that interviews were not enough for this story. We needed documents to provide a stronger foundation, for legal protection, and for missing details. We needed to report much of the story all over again.

Chasing the Documents

Again, we began to chase the documents.

Having exhausted what state regulators would provide, we looked elsewhere. For example, we dug through records in several county courts in Ver-

mont and in two other states. In the process, we uncovered a dozen lawsuits against this surgeon—his record proved worse than we'd known. Depositions in these lawsuits provided incredible, wrenching detail. We obtained thousands of pages of documents in Tarczewski's case. Those thousands of pages included her own wrenching deposition. Four pages of that testimony described in chilling detail the nature of her daily pain. We also obtained the testimony of her doctor, an examination so complete we learned the name of the surgical instrument that had injured her spinal sheath and the exact minute that the puncture occurred.

Armed with this detail, we were able to secure a three-hour interview with the surgeon. He struck me as a compelling person who seemed sincerely interested in helping to heal people. With his lawyer present, the doctor also admitted that he had struggled with addiction to medication (Percocet) and with alcohol abuse.

The series went through several rewrites and then its publication was delayed by the events of September 11th. By late November 2001, the articles were ready for publication, and this time the lawyers suggested only minor changes. On December 9, 2001, the first of three parts of "Code of Silence" was published.

Other Doctors, Other Abuses

Our reporting had unearthed other physicians whose records of malpractice, we believed, should be accessible to the public. Earlier in the fall, we had requested documents from the state about these doctors, but the board had again turned us down. At that time, our next step would have been to take the medical practice board to court. Instead, we decided to complete work on the Tarczewski story first.

We did not forget the other doctors. On the last day of the series' publica-



Gordon Lurvey with one of his sons, Ernest, and wife, Gloria, in a photo taken about five years ago. *Photo courtesy of the Lurvey family/The Burlington Free Press.*

tion, we refiled document requests for every doctor who'd been disciplined by the board. We also filed a separate request on a particular surgeon.

Publication of our series—and immediate public reaction to it—dramatically changed the board's behavior. Granted, the board challenged our accuracy in letters to the editor and in mailings to the legislature. But board officials also admitted that they were worried about what else we knew and had not yet published. Fearful, the board exercised its option under state law and requested an extension to delay answering our requests for several weeks.

At 4 p.m. on the day the board's extension was to expire, it faxed us a remarkable document. Instead of providing the information we'd requested about that surgeon, the board sent us a copy of a set of charges it had filed against him. The accusations ranged from numerous surgical errors to threats to kill a hospital president. A prominent state official later told us that these charges, 27 counts in all, came about entirely as a result of our insistence on obtaining records.

The story we published about this second surgeon created an even louder public outcry. And, following that, we renewed our request for the records of every physician disciplined in Vermont during the past five years. The state dragged its feet, finally capitulated, and sent us a photocopying bill for \$980. (We successfully fought the fee and got it down to \$170.)

We combed those records. In them, we found a doctor charged with sleeping with a patient in her hospital bed the night before operating on her. We found a hospital that routinely lacked an emergency surgeon because so many of its doctors had been sanctioned for misconduct. We found a physician who wrote herself a prescription for 18,000 Percocet. Though the Drug Enforcement Agency raided her building, Vermont regulators approved her return to work, in the same office, 108 days later.

As the cases mounted, we also found patterns:

- Psychiatrists, while only 11 percent of doctors in Vermont, received 39 percent of the discipline. Nearly all cases involved sexual relations with patients. The state's psychiatric leaders, far from being defensive, were aghast that they had not known there was a problem. They pledged to police their profession vigorously.
- One-sixth of the disciplined doctors practiced at one hospital, the state's third smallest. A local legislator said the rural health center appeared to hire whomever it could get.
- The board had resolved 93 percent of Vermonters' complaints about doctors in a manner that kept even the existence of the complaint out of the public record.

We expanded our research to look at federal jurisdiction. That, too, proved fruitful: Two hospitals in Vermont had decided to let their national accreditation lapse. Two other hospitals had

committed two-thirds of the state's violations of federal laws for handling radioactive medical materials.

Each successive story reinforced the point that Vermonters could learn more about the past performance of their plumber or hairstylist than they could about their doctor. A woman whose husband died after a botched hernia surgery was never told that anything had gone wrong. A pregnant woman given 32 times the prescribed dose of radioactive iodine was never informed of the medical error.

We ran a side-by-side comparison of Internet information available about a Vermont doctor and a New York doctor. The disparity was undeniable. Gradually, as information surfaced in our stories, the positions of health leaders began to shift. The state doctors' association said public openness would bolster patient confidence. The state's health care improvement organization offered to testify on physician quality. Then-Governor Howard Dean, himself a doctor, called for reform.

Friends and Foes

These stories promptly won friends to this cause. Only 21 days after the initial series began, lawmakers proposed a bill overhauling medical regulation in Vermont. It passed four months later. Meanwhile, statewide officeholders such as the secretary of state and attorney general called for reform. Many readers phoned and e-mailed, too, to share their frustrations about medical incompetence and laws that kept them uninformed.

Critics of our coverage proved equally galvanized. Staffers at the Vermont Medical Practice Board attacked our accuracy. Several lawyers whose specialty was defending doctors demanded retractions and apologies. Some attorneys ghostwrote scathing op-eds under the name of board members. They attacked the series and its reporter in letters sent not only well up our corporate chain of command but also to every legislator. One lawyer even made a public records request of certain officials' schedules, then circu-

lated a letter detailing each interview with the Free Press and presenting it as evidence of collusion.

We treated every criticism seriously. We recontacted sources and again verified their statements and positions. The series held up under this pressure. After more than 90 stories and 15 editorials were run on this topic, there's been need for only one correction to be published. It clarified information provided to us by a national consumer advocacy organization, which we had reported correctly but which we felt could have been misleading.

Politically, the attacks seemed to backfire. Their severity—and personal nature—seemed only to persuade lawmakers that our investigations were hitting a worthy target. The Free Press also received numerous legal threats, and a doctor filed two complaints in court. The first concerned our reporting that his license had been suspended. This information appeared in a story that contained basic facts quoted from a public document. His case was dismissed. When his name surfaced again, in the story about one-sixth of disciplined doctors practicing at one hospital, we didn't hesitate to name him. He sued again. The case is ongoing.

Lessons and Reforms

The "Code of Silence" project provided many lessons for me, as a reporter:

- It is human nature to treat secrecy with skepticism; in this case, concealment proved an accurate guide to keep the reporting going.
- Early on we made a commitment to the public's right to know, and that resonated not only with readers but also with lawmakers.
- Once we began publishing, we received many valuable tips from people who had long kept quiet; that instructed us to stay on the story, where we remain nearly two years later.
- A newspaper must commit itself early on to print the whole story regardless of whom it offends. Or, as one reader, a retired hospital chief ex-

ecutive, put it upon reading the series, "That's why God invented the First Amendment."

- Finally, documents ultimately were the key to getting the initial series focused and published. The documents—rich in detail and protected by law—allowed us to write with clarity and strength.

These stories led to comprehensive reform of medical regulation in Vermont. Doctors are now held to the same standards of conduct as nurses, mental health counselors, radiation therapists, and many other medical professionals. As important, Vermonters now possess far better tools to inform themselves about a doctor's past: Any malpractice losses or settlements, any state discipline, any criminal convictions must be made available to the public. Since most doctors have exemplary records, excellence will be as readily discernible as difficulties.

Several doctors lost their licenses in the course of our reporting, and the director of the regulatory board resigned. Public complaints about doctors doubled in one year, and regulators cut the average investigation duration in half. When the governor held a ceremony to sign the reform bill into law, his select invitees included the Tarczewski family. These humble, blue-collar folks, who had never been in the state capitol before, heard their praises sung for having the courage to share their tragedy in order to bring about justice.

What happened to the orthopedic surgeon whose case triggered our investigation? Two weeks after the public information law took effect, he closed his practice. ■

Stephen Kiernan is a reporter at The Burlington Free Press in Burlington, Vermont. "The Code of Silence" and subsequent coverage of medical issues won a George Polk Award and the Joseph L. Brechner Center for Freedom of Information award, among others.

✉ skiernan@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com

WATCHDOG

Using Technology to Uncover Medical Stories

With computer-assisted reporting: Think small and big.

By Chris Adams

For a few years in the mid-1990's, I was the geek in the corner of the newsroom—the in-house “computer-assisted reporter” at The Times-Picayune in New Orleans. Many papers big and small had somebody like me: a reporter, often self-trained or schooled at camps such as those offered by Investigative Reporters and Editors, who spent his days gathering massive databases from government agencies and working them into stories. It was commonly called “computer-assisted project journalism,” or given some other self-inflating moniker, and produced some stories that were both good and very, very big.

In the world of computer-assisted journalism, I had gone from zero to 100, starting with almost no knowledge of databases and spreadsheets, and soon tackling projects with records in the millions. My biggest took weeks to complete (okay, maybe months) and started with 60 million Louisiana Medicaid claims records. Over several painstaking weeks, I whittled those 60 million records down to a few million records relating to doctors, a few million others relating to hospitals, a few million more relating to nursing homes. Given the state of technology at the time, I sometimes started a database search when I was preparing to leave at night, hopeful that it would be completed by the time I got back to my desk in the morning. Other times, I had six computers, side-by-side, all tied up in the newsroom.

The end result of this number crunching was a series of stories that revealed doctors who were billing for 30 hours of care per day and hospitals that were billing for millions of dollars of care that they were ineligible to provide.

Technology is a lot better today, and I know a bit more about computers—meaning a major project like that would

take far less time. But for most of the past several years, I covered a beat for The Wall Street Journal—and, as one of many such beat reporters, I simply didn't have the time to dive into massive computer-assisted projects. While at the Journal, I did complete a few big computer-assisted reporting (CAR) stories—although none approached the scope of earlier work.

In April, I moved onto another job, as an investigative reporter for the Knight Ridder news bureau in Washington, D.C., which should give me the opportunity to do the big CAR stories again. But what I realized during my years at the Journal is that CAR tools can be used in the smallest of ways in regular beat coverage.

This, of course, isn't news to many, many reporters who incorporate databases and spreadsheets into coverage of the financial markets, or government budgets, or campaign finance. But there are plenty of reporters—I'd guess more than half—who have yet to work their way around an Excel spreadsheet, which is actually a simple-to-use tool that can free them from relying on a source for analysis, thus allowing them to see their own patterns emerge or to find entirely new ones.

Using Technology to Get Answers

Hardly a day goes by that I don't open an Excel spreadsheet for some story or another. Often, it's to manage a list of information already available on the Web. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), for example, was part of my Journal beat, and that agency dumps huge masses of information onto its Web site. While much of it is valuable, it's also hard to analyze for the kind of patterns that might make for a story.

An example: The FDA monitors the drug advertisements that companies

run for their products, making sure they don't overstate a drug's effectiveness or downplay its risks. They write violation letters to companies that break the rules, and they list hundreds of these letters on their Web site, going back several years. I had noticed some companies getting slapped more than once with violation letters, so I wanted to see which companies and which drugs had been cited the most.

How to do this? I could print out all the information and manually scroll through each one, counting them up with little marks. But there are hundreds of drugs out there, so the risk of missing one in such a count is real. And it would also take several mind-numbing hours. What I wanted was the actual, computerized list from the FDA that should detail each violation letter along with its date, company and drug. Since a form of that list was on the Web site, it had to exist in another form in somebody's computer at the agency, and I could have put in a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to get it. But I could be well into retirement before the FDA might actually fulfill an FOIA request (it has one of the slowest response times in the federal government).

A simple Excel tool let me bypass that process entirely. With a couple of clicks and drags, I picked up each yearly list of violation letters and pasted them into a single Excel spreadsheet file. From there, it's easy to sort them in whichever way you want. After alphabetizing them by drug name, for example, I could see that several had been cited many times. By telling Excel to perform a simple count of how often each drug name occurred, I could see that one drug had been cited 14 times by the FDA, another 11 times.

Companies, it seems, were running ads that pushed the limits, hoping they wouldn't be caught. If they were, they

dumped that ad and replaced it with another that also went too far. FDA authority was weak, making it difficult to prevent companies from using such a strategy. Once I had the basic numbers, I could zero in on which letters I wanted to completely review and which companies I wanted to interview. It was a good little enterprise story—nothing major, certainly, but interesting enough to be given nice play in the paper and be picked up by competitors.

The most interesting thing is how simple it was to complete. Doing the analysis of drug-ad violations by hand would have taken several hours, maybe a day, and the risk of messing up was real. Waiting for the FDA to respond to the FOIA request would have taken—who knows? Clicking and pasting into an Excel spreadsheet took minutes,

and even after running and re-running and running again the analysis (to make sure I hadn't botched it), the whole chore took at most a couple of hours.

There were other simple CAR stories I did at the Journal. This year I performed a count of the thousands of "warning letters" the FDA has sent in the past 10 years. What I found is that the number it sends to companies is down drastically this year, which we explained was due to Bush Administration changes. Similarly, while covering the steel industry, an examination of import records showed that many of the steelmakers that complained about steel imports were, in fact, importing themselves—and we could say, down to the pound, how much of hot-rolled, cold-rolled, and slab they had brought in. The computer work in both stories took at most a half day, but formed the

backbone for solid stories.

The key to doing such stories is to think small and to take a simple class in how to use Excel. Such basic knowledge will allow reporters to go far beyond their current abilities and lay the groundwork for someday doing a major CAR project that might demand more powerful computer software. One day, I might decide I need to analyze 60 million Medicaid records and, if my editors don't laugh me out of the room when I say I need a few months to do it, I know I'll be able to. But until then, there are plenty of other small stories waiting to be discovered. ■

Chris Adams is a reporter with the Knight Ridder Washington, D.C. bureau.

✉ cadams@krwashington.com

WATCHDOG

Mental Illness: Reporting on Maine's Most Vulnerable Children

Doctors and social workers said she'd 'never be able to tell the story.' She did.

By Barbara Walsh

Their psychiatric files, their poems, pictures and diaries sat in piles by my bed. I read them before I slept. I dreamed about them at night. I thought of them during the day. They were children with psychiatric troubles, children whose lives were interrupted by illnesses that left them suicidal, lonely and sometimes raging. For eight months, their faces, their words lived in my head, and the papers that chronicled their mental illnesses filled my home.

Telling their story was one of the most complicated and darkest assignments I've ever written in my 22-year career. And it was one of the most important. These children were all but invisible. Few people in Maine knew that more than 400 of these kids ended up in emergency rooms each month,

screaming, raging, begging for help. Few knew that hundreds more of these children languished in juvenile lock-up or were sent out of state for psychiatric treatment because Maine had nothing to offer them.

Unless there was a scandal or lawsuit, the plight of these kids never made headlines. Doctors and social workers had told me the lack of care for Maine's mentally ill children was the biggest crisis the state faced. But they also said I'd never be able to tell the story. They said I'd never persuade parents to talk because of the stigma and secrecy that surround mentally ill children. They told me I'd never get state records on how often Maine shipped kids away for care, how much the out-of-state treatment cost, or how many children grew worse because they didn't receive

proper psychiatric help.

I knew there would be many obstacles to telling this story, and the confidentiality that blanketed these children would be one of the biggest. But I also knew these kids deserved to have their stories told. Without help, many of them faced bleak futures. They'd be kicked out of their schools, their homes, and their communities. They'd be sent far from Maine to psychiatric hospitals and facilities around the country with no loved ones to be near them or look after them.

Reporting on Mental Health

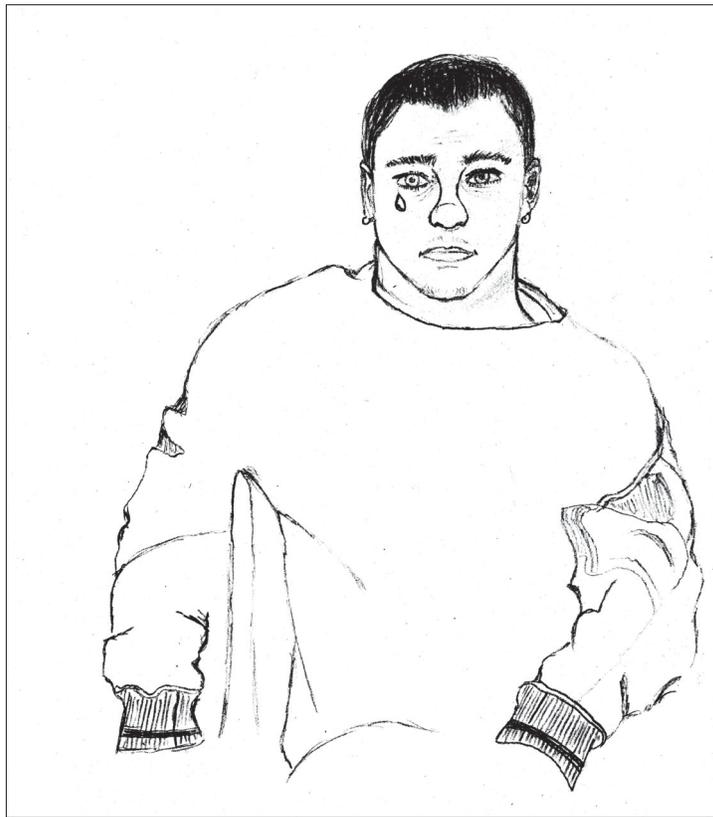
My newspaper, the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram, a small 75,000 circulation daily, agreed that Maine's failure to help these children

was an important story to tell. I figured it'd take me three or four months to get it into the paper. It took double my prediction—eight months.

During those months of reporting and writing, the story simmered always in my thoughts. When I biked or ran, I did not see the ocean, the pine trees or sky. In my mind's eye, I was seeing and thinking about the children I visited in juvenile lockups, courtrooms or psychiatric hospitals. I know I celebrated my daughters' birthdays, Christmas and the Fourth of July, but those celebrations are hazy memories clouded by a story that consumed me and, at times, left me with a lingering sadness.

I began my reporting in December 2001. It took me the first two months to just try to figure out the state's complicated mental health care system for kids. Several more months were exhausted by hundreds of interviews, some just to get the names and phone numbers of families with mentally ill children. I begged and cajoled doctors, psychiatrists and social workers to contact parents who might be willing to talk about their child's unmet psychiatric needs. Several of them bristled at my request, concerned about confidentiality and their fragile patients.

"Parents feel blamed for their kids' illnesses," some told me. "They're too ashamed to talk about it." Thankfully, several doctors and social workers believed the story needed to be told and risked their relationship with families by calling them for me. In the dead of winter, I began phoning parents myself. Talking with them was exhausting. Initial calls lasted an hour and sometimes two. The stories about their children were complicated and painful. Many of these parents spoke fast. They were accustomed to telling their stories over and over to people who



Joey Tracy spent much of the 11 months he was locked up at the juvenile detention center crying. Another boy detained at the center drew this sketch of Joey with a tear running down his face. *Used by permission of Susan Tracy.*

cut their conversations short or hung up on them. Several of the parents I spoke with cried, cursed and shouted as they told me about their child's illness and how they could not find help in Maine. They also thanked me for listening and for caring.

Many of these families couldn't talk during the day because they worked or were too busy taking care of their kids. I interviewed them nights, weekends, on Mother's Day, and Memorial Day. Mothers called me at home when their children smashed windows, screamed for hours, grabbed knives, or slipped into severe depression. They called me when police arrested their kids or rushed them to the emergency room.

I visited families in their homes, sat with them in kitchens, and hung out with children in their bedrooms. I flipped through their scrapbooks and photo albums, and they loaned me boxes of their psychiatric files, their diaries, letters and poems. Stacks of their records covered my night table,

bureaus, bookshelves and kitchen counters.

Documents and Databases and Real Lives

The deeper I dug, the more the story grew. By the end of my reporting, I'd spoken with more than 500 doctors, social workers, family members and mental health experts, and I had reviewed more than 4,000 pages of psychiatric reports, state and national records. One bleak February afternoon, I received a database detailing how many Maine kids had been sent out of state for psychiatric care from 1997 through 2001. It listed how long the children were gone, where they were sent, and whether they were in state or parental custody. This database was 15-pages-long and included information about 737 kids. Many of these children had been sent away for two, three and four

years.

I remember staring at that list for hours that day. Questions came to my mind. Who were these kids? Why were they gone for so long? Did anybody care about them? Were they worse or better after being away from their homes for so long? I shared these statistics with New England and national mental health experts, and many of them were stunned. A few told me, "Wow. That's a lot of kids sent away for such a small state." Whenever I grew exasperated with the story, the painful and endless interviews, the frequent calls to my home, I stared at that list. And I stared at the pictures of the children I wrote about. They were kids like my own, but they were also kids who needed help.

I stared often at a sketch of Joey Tracy. Joey began hearing voices when he was 11. Doctors diagnosed him with severe depression, conduct disorder, and possibly psychosis. By the time he was 15, Joey had been in and out of



Tammy Jackson's oldest daughter Emily, 15, suffers with bipolar mental illness and sometimes rages out of control, bringing the police to their Lewiston home. *Photo by John Ewing/Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram.*

several psychiatric hospitals and programs. He landed in the juvenile lock-up for burglary, harassing his teachers and classmates, and trying to kill himself with a homemade bomb. While he was locked away, he tried to drown himself in the toilet. He sliced his wrists with paper clips and staples. He jumped off a 20-foot tier.

Desperate for help, Joey's mom gave up custody of her son to the state so that he could get the care she couldn't afford to give him. Maine social workers told her if Joey was a state ward, he'd receive more federal money to pay for a group home, and there he'd receive counseling.

But the federal money didn't matter. There still was no place for Joey in Maine. He languished in the juvenile detention center, waiting for treatment. The state made plans to send Joey to Pennsylvania or Georgia. Joey made plans to kill himself. He had never been on a plane before and dreaded being sent so far from home. Joey wrote long letters to his mother, telling her he missed and loved her. He also drew a gravestone with his name on it. Joey cried daily during the 11 months he waited for help. Another kid at the

lockup drew a sketch of Joey, a tear falling from his eye. Joey's mom sent the drawing to me, and we published it with his story.

Tammy Jackson was one of the mothers I talked with weekly and often daily. Tammy and two of her three teenage daughters each lived with bipolar disorder. The illness provoked sudden and uncontrollable mood swings. Tammy's eldest daughter, Emily, was 15 and had been rushed to the emergency room more than a dozen times in two years.

Emily tossed bowls, TV remotes, stereos. She smashed windows, screamed for hours, slapped and swore at her sisters, and she cried at night, sobbing, unable to sleep.

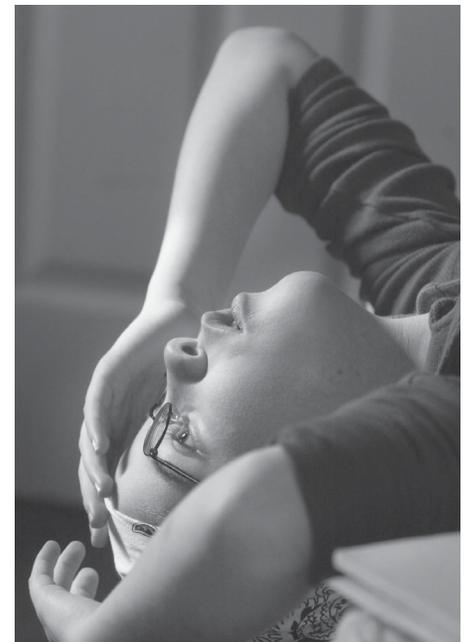
Police came to the Jackson home weekly, sometimes daily, to help calm Emily. They arrested Emily for assaulting her father. They also arrested her father for restraining Emily too roughly. A police officer told Tammy, "Your daughter is an animal." After he left the house, Tammy ran to the bathroom and threw up.

Tammy shared her journal with me. The blue binder held several hundred pages of notebook paper, thoughts she

scribbled daily. She wrote about her anger, her pain, her shame for "Hating Emily's illness. Hating Emily's actions. Hating our life." Tammy's youngest daughter, Stephanie, dreamt of being normal. She talked about going to the psychiatric ward when the "hurt got really bad." And she talked about the loneliness. At night, the 13-year-old hugged Abigail, a plastic doll the size of an infant. "Dolls are my friends," she told me, squeezing Abigail. "Sometimes, they're the only friends I have."

The image of Stephanie clutching her doll haunted me. I thought of her as she went in and out of the psychiatric ward during the months when I was reporting this story. A few days before the series was to be published, Stephanie was placed back in the hospital. She had tried to kill herself.

We had planned to use her photograph and story on the front page, and I worried about how it would affect her. I asked her mom what she thought, and she agreed to talk it over with Stephanie. They both felt strongly that their story needed to be told. Once the



Stephanie Jackson, 13, hangs her head off the side of her bed while talking with her twin sister, Bethany. Stephanie was born into a family that has struggled with mental illness for generations. *Photo by John Ewing/Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram.*

series was published, distant family, friends, church members offered comfort, support to the family.

“No one understood what hell are lives were like,” Tammy told me.

Reaction to the Stories

The Jackson’s story appeared in the newspaper in August 2002 as part of a three-day series, “Castaway Children: Maine’s Most Vulnerable Kids.” The stories chronicled the lives of several mentally ill children and their families. The series also looked at how Maine spent the bulk of its money on treating kids in crisis instead of preventing them from growing sicker.

The stories provoked outrage and change. The newspaper received 250 calls, e-mails and letters from readers,

demanding Maine provide better care for its most vulnerable kids. John Baldacci, newly elected governor, promised to rebuild the state’s mental health care system for kids. Susan Collins, U.S. senator from Maine, asked the U.S. Inspector General to investigate why families in Maine and other states have to give up custody of their children to receive proper psychiatric treatment. Public marches and legislative hearings were held. Most importantly, these children were no longer invisible. Family, friends, politicians listen to their stories now.

I remain in touch with many of the families I wrote about. The Jacksons sent me a Christmas card and a portrait of their family. They still struggle with their illnesses. Emily and Stephanie are receiving help in group homes now.

After the series was published, it took me months to clear the psychiatric files and records from my home. But I kept the Jackson family portrait. It is a reminder to me that tough stories, especially stories about children, are worth the long hours, lost sleep, and inevitable obsession. ■

Barbara Walsh writes about children for the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram. She was part of The Lawrence (Mass.) Eagle-Tribune reporting team that won a Pulitzer in the General News Reporting category in 1988. “Castaway Children” can be found at: www.pressherald.com/news/children/.

✉ bwalsh@pressherald.com.

WATCHDOG

Investigating What Goes Wrong in Medicine

After 30 years of doing this, a reporter passes along lessons—some serious, some not so serious.

By Paul Lieberman

The fellow who said we learn all we need to know in kindergarten must have been onto something, because he made a lot of loot off that little book. And when I think back on my three decades of conducting investigations into health care issues and atrocities, I see that he’s right—I learned the basic lessons when I stumbled onto such stories while still in the journalistic equivalent of kindergarten.

I say that I stumbled onto my first such story because I can’t remember how I came to “expose” phony psychologists while working my beat of a few suburban towns for \$120 a week in New York’s Rockland County. I do recall my sophisticated research technique, though: I went through the yellow page advertisements for psychologists, then checked with the state to see if they were licensed to use

that title. Many weren’t. One claimed a PhD based on a certificate from a mail order Bible school. Simple as the premise was, the stories prompted more phone calls than I’d ever received.

Lesson one: Readers care about this stuff.

Lesson two: Be ready for—the twist. With that series, the twist came soon after we published our stories, when the state held hearings on malpractice by therapists. One witness was a woman who went to a psychiatrist because of tension—she mentioned a stiff neck—only to have him subject her to months of very intimate treatments on his couch, charging his full fee all the while. There were gasps from the audience as she recalled his scandalous conduct, and as she stepped from the witness seat a deputy attorney general asked, “And what happened to your stiff neck?”

“Oh,” she said, “that went away.”

Investigating Medical Care

I recall better how I got into medical investigations at my second paper, in New Jersey. Someone on the business side, perhaps in the publisher’s suite, had an experience he wanted the newsroom to check out. (“It’s his sandbox,” a colleague explained, “he can play in it.”) The guy’s kid needed a spinal tap, but the insurance reimbursement had come back low, and his neurologist grumbled that it happened all the time. I went to see officials of the state’s Blue Cross Blue Shield plan and learned another lesson: For all the talk about codes of silence, health care insiders often relish help, even from a 23-year-old know-nothing. The neurologist had confided, for instance, that no doctor he knew really understood how health insurance worked. And Blue Cross allowed me to go through its statewide

printouts for two services—spinal taps and neurological consultations—for which, it turned out, half the patients were under-reimbursed.

Was this a conspiracy? No, it was paperwork errors: Clerks filling out the forms often wrote in the wrong number for the service. As unsexy as the answer seemed, the phones again didn't stop ringing. One call this time was from an employee of the second largest medical lab in the area who offered a confession of a different magnitude: He said he and others often wrote in results for blood tests they never performed. I wound up getting sworn affidavits from several employees saying they fabricated results under orders from the boss. He denied it and threatened to sue, not surprisingly, and invited us to inspect his lab anytime. So we arrived unannounced with a nationally renowned pathologist, whom we'd hired as a consultant.

Another lesson: Make sure you're right—there's a lot at stake, both for your publication and the people you write about. In this case, the lab went out of business in the wake of our pieces. We were never sued.

It was then that I decided this kind of reporting was a high calling. That was the Watergate era, when investigative reporting was coming into fashion. But most investigative journalism seemed to target government. Though the press was playing its classic watchdog role by scrutinizing public entities and officials, it struck me that writing about government was—easier. There usually was a slew of public records to work with and, because reporters were writing about public figures, they had libel protection of *New York Times v. Sullivan*. This meant they could get the stories wrong, in effect, and still have a cushion of immunity. If we'd been wrong about the lab, its owner might have owned our newspaper as well.

When Reporting Leads to Lawyers

But the bigger issue, then and now, is the impact the reporting has on readers. What has the most influence over their lives—what happens in govern-

ment or what happens in the private sector? I came to believe that the private sector—whether the workplace or the marketplace or the health care system—has more impact on most people than does government.

Despite this epiphany, the last thing I wanted to do was more of the same when, in 1976, I moved to The Atlanta Constitution. But when I arrived, that paper's investigative good ole boy, Jim Stewart, was waiting with a tip—the senior member of the state medical board had gotten his own medical degree through fraud. The twist on this one? It had to be the only time The National Enquirer picked up one of my stories, or Jim's. The supermarket tabloid ran a large photo of the poor doc puffing a foot-long cigar.

Several officials of the local medical society sought us out after that piece, and not to gripe that we had disparaged their profession, either. They wanted to talk about other rogues in their ranks who had eluded the disciplinary system. Some wandered from state to state, counting on the reluctance of authorities in each to pass along “negative” information about them. Others simply couldn't resist easy routes to making money, like a pair of doctors who were running pill mills.

In the ranks of such stories, these situations would not be worth mentioning, but for a moment that approaches the “stiff neck” episode. We sent a couple of novice reporters undercover to confirm how these “pill mills” dealt out prescriptions like playing cards, by gathering groups of patients and asking, “Who wants to lose weight?” and “Who wants help sleeping?” The twist this time came after both doctors were brought up on criminal charges and our reporters were subpoenaed to testify. The newspaper's lawyers and editors decided that was okay, as long as they merely affirmed what was in print—that the stories presented an accurate account of what had happened to them. But when the defense attorney got his turn, he asked the first reporter, “So what did you do with the pills you got?” Before our attorney could get the prosecutor to object, our young scribe confessed that

he'd gobbled 'em.

When physicians complain how they are terrorized by lawsuits, I tell them I understand. “I've been sued twice,” I say, “both times by doctors.” One suit was filed by one of the pill doctors *after* he went to jail. He claimed we'd violated not only civil law, but also the spirit of the Bible, and asked for \$20 million. The other suit was filed by a doctor on the state medical board, a friend of the one with the faked diploma. The twist there: He had secretly taped our conversations, a tactic sometimes used by reporters.

Another lesson: Act as if everything you say is being recorded. Don't spout outrageous things you would not want shared with the world—or a jury. Luckily, I hadn't in those conversations, and the quotes in the stories matched what was on the tapes. Both suits went nowhere.

I've also written a lot about the Mafia over the years. But the first time I was warned to stay away from home was during an investigation about a doctor. He happened to be a congressman as well. Long before he was killed in the 1983 missile attack on a Korean Airlines plane, U.S. Representative Larry McDonald was a darling of the far right. He also was plugged into a network selling laetrile, the cancer “cure” made from apricot pits. Jim Stewart and I spent \$600 of The Atlanta Constitution's money to secure a supply, but that was only an appetizer for the bizarre tale that followed. McDonald and another physician had collected a huge cache of guns that could not be traced to them by getting terminally ill patients to sign the purchase forms. This way the weapons were registered in the names of soon-to-be dead people.

After that article was published, one of the congressman's lawyers cautioned us that his supporters were, well, not happy. I also heard from another Paul Lieberman in the local phone book, who said he enjoyed my work but that his kids were a bit unnerved by the call threatening to burn down their house.

But, by then, the lesson was: Once you start on these stories, there's no exit.

A federal drug agent pleaded with us to tackle a ring ripping off truckers around the country by charging big bucks for what looked like amphetamines, but was really caffeine. Someone else mentioned a doctor in Alabama promising miracle cures through “chelation” treatments that cleared out the blood vessels like a Roto-Rooter would a pipe. One owner of the paper was interested in spinal surgery touted as a cure for paralysis. There was no end to the practitioners selling new varieties of hope while offering conspiracy theories for why their easy cures were being suppressed by organized medicine. By then, however, I’d made peace with the fact that, whatever you wrote, some readers would still seek the latest snake oil if peddled with good bedside manners.

An Endless Supply of Stories

If Stewart and I thought we could break the cycle by fleeing to Nieman Fellowships (mine was in 1980, his the next year, in 1981), we were wrong. By the time we’d gotten back to the paper, someone whispered into our ears that some doctors in the Air Force had refused to work with that service’s chief heart surgeon, claiming he had a 50 percent mortality rate while operating on children. The surgeon then had been shipped off to private fellowship where he might have hooked up a heart-lung machine backwards. Like Al Pacino in the last “Godfather” movie, we were “sucked back in,” spending the next year on military health care.

I could have escaped, I suppose, when I switched coasts to join the Los Angeles Times, where riots and earthquakes have a way of diverting your attention. But when I needed a knee operation, it amused me to learn that surgeons generally chose to stay awake when they underwent such procedures themselves, thus avoiding the risks of general anesthesia, yet preferred that their own patients be put under—perhaps so they couldn’t hear some mem-

ber of the surgical team blurt out an “oops.” What could be the harm in writing a lighthearted piece about that? Or a little magazine story about how radiologists often tried to bill for more than is provided by insurance plans? Or a piece about

Another lesson: Make sure you’re right—there’s a lot at stake, both for your publication and the people you write about.

Understand that during 32 years in the profession, medical reporting has *never* been part of my job description. Five years ago, I was the Times’s education editor, for example, when someone suggested that I monitor—in my “spare time”—a respiratory therapist at a local hospital who had claimed to be an “Angel of Death,” then took it back. He was only kidding, he said. What was no joke was how such medical “angels” may well be the most common type of big-number serial killer in our society, though we tend to downplay their murder sprees, what with their victims being old and sick and in the hospital or nursing home. That spare-time investigation wound up stretching on for several years, with the results filling seven pages of our paper last year with the story we called “Graveyard Shift.” The hospital worker who was only kidding eventually pleaded guilty to killing six patients with paralyzing drugs, but likely had killed dozens.

If this isn’t a cradle-to-grave subject, what is? It’s not as depressing as it might sound, either, for the same stories that document grim practices by some often spotlight the courage of others, like the fellow doctors who stood up to the chief Air Force heart surgeon, refusing to help him operate on babies any longer. Even back when Stewart and I began putting a spotlight on the Georgia medical board, one member had encouraged us to keep at it, angered by the self-protective poli-

tics in his profession. I had not spoken to that doctor in more than 20 years, so I looked him up this spring when I found myself vacationing on the Georgia coast. We met at the perfect place for medical reminiscing, the golf course, and he still gushed over with tales of

what various rogues were up to. He was basically retired himself, except for running a therapy group for practitioners with medical and drug problems—doing that work for no fee.

Back when I first stumbled onto this sideline, those of us working at newspapers didn’t talk about “news you can use.” There were just good stories and, for better or worse, causes. But if “news you can use” has now become a catch phrase, what specialty better fills that prescription?

So here are a few more lessons I’ve learned along the way.

When you really get sick, hire someone else to fill out the insurance forms—otherwise the aggravation will kill you before your disease will.

If your plan is supposed to pay all the costs of an anesthesiologist, refuse to sign the sheet of paper they give you in pre-op saying “patient accepts responsibility” for amounts not covered—and dare them to wheel you out of there.

Definitely get those travel medical policies when you go overseas, even if they seem costly—but don’t be surprised when they won’t reimburse you for one item at the finest hospital in London, your bill for “spirits.” ■

Paul Lieberman, a 1980 Nieman Fellow, now is a cultural correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, based in the newspaper’s New York City bureau.

✉ paul.lieberman@latimes.com

Portraits of the Living With the Dead

A photographer documents the transition from medical student to physician.

By Meryl Levin

The process of dissecting the human body during Gross Anatomy class forces medical students to face death, all in the hope of better understanding life. This introductory experience is considered a major transition in the training of physicians. And how medical students emerge from their training sets the tone for the relationships they will form with their patients.

“Anatomy of Anatomy,” a book and traveling exhibition, combines my photographs of a group of first-year medical students during their anatomy class with excerpts from journals they kept. During the past decade, I have focused my camera on issues of health and social welfare, observing the delivery of health care from the patient side. Over time, I became curious about the unique skill-set required of physicians,

as well as the intensity of their training.

This led me to Cornell University’s Weill Medical College in the spring of 1998. There I sought out a small group of medical students willing to collaborate with me on a project that would document their anatomy course. We worked in the basement lab, at the library and in dorms, recording the struggle of these doctors-to-be as they learned the innermost workings of the human body. All of this was made possible because of the generosity of individuals who, in death, donated their bodies to medical education.

We discovered that the dead can teach us in many ways. With honesty and openness, these students wrote about their experiences and their relationships to their cadavers, or as one student wrote, her “own really live dead body.” The students’ words help

provide “Anatomy of Anatomy” with a clear narrative framework.

As these words and images have traveled to 13 exhibition sites within the medical education arena, I’ve worked closely with educators and students, organizing panel discussions to explore the complex journey of moving from patient, to medical student, to physician. ■

Meryl Levin is a social documentary photographer based in New York City. “Anatomy of Anatomy” and its traveling exhibition were made possible by the Open Society Institute’s “Project on Death in America.” More information about the book and exhibition can be found at www.ThirdRailPress.org.

✉ mlevin@igc.org

I have finished my dissection of the wrist and hand. It is 3 p.m., and I have to pick up my daughter from school. I hold her hand tightly as we cross the street. She notices, but doesn’t say anything. Her hand is soft and warm despite the January cold. This is what life feels like, I say to myself. I have learned something about the human touch. I will never hold someone’s hand the same old, ignorant way again. —Rajiv



It happened so fast. One minute I was running to class finishing my cup of coffee, the next minute I'm in front of a chalkboard, watching the teaching assistant explain the subject area to be covered today. No different from any other day—a teacher, a bunch of students gathered around. But lying on the metal table right next to me was a real, live, dead body. Well, not really. But a dead body

From the minute I laid eyes on my own anatomy cadaver, I looked for clues that would help me piece together her life. I don't know why that was important to me. I wondered why she decided to donate her body to science, and then I wondered if I could make that same decision. Did she know what was in store for her when she signed the consent form?

As I looked around at all the blades and scissors and other sharp metal utensils strewn around the room, I wondered if I knew what was in store for the both of us. —Hilary



Thirteen outstretched arms greet me. The bodies on which we have worked for the last two weeks are all covered under a white sheet except for the neck, the shoulder, and the arm....

Professor Weber explains how the [test] is going to work. We will get a minute and a half to view whatever needs to be identified and then move on to the rest area next to the body to write our answers.

A bell rings, and it starts. Fifty-two living circle around the 13 dead. We bend down over the little tag, trace the thin black string that emanates from it, stare for a minute and a half at the body part tied to the string, and then move on. Nerves on edge try to recall the names of nerves that have stopped stressing about the trite and the mundane long ago. Most of us have completely blocked out the body attached to the part in question

In this macabre game of musical chairs, with music replaced by timed silence punctuated by a ringing bell, I make my way to my cadaver. Even though I can only see a part of his forearm, I have no trouble discerning that he is mine —Rajiv



The room was both a morgue and a classroom. At the beginning of anatomy, I had a hard time separating the idea of a morgue from my mind whenever I entered the room. The cadavers were not yet classroom learning tools, but only dead bodies. This caused me to view my own body in a different light. In a way, I was repulsed. I looked at my naked body in the shower and thought of hers. Though her aged lifeless body did not hold a close resemblance to my own, I couldn't help but think that the life-giving blood that coursed through my vessels was transient and would some day stop—and that I would become like her. —Hilary



In preparation for today's first lab of the lower limb, I felt nothing. It may be that after the grit and awe of handling his heart and lungs, the viscera of his abdomen and his urogenital organs, my cadaver's anterior thigh was not very inspiring. I think I felt that there were no more secrets left to move me. I was wrong. It was the most profound day yet.

After seeing the prosection, I knew what I wanted to work on. I felt a powerful need to dissect out his right greater saphenous vein. I took my time and slowly cleaned it of all of its attachments to the surrounding tissue. I felt obliged to dissect it out beautifully, in homage to my cadaver, "Stanley." The task was soothing. When I was through, it glistened perfectly, a milky blue from the upper thigh all the way down to the medial knee. I backed away from the table and started to tremble. I thought of my father, who is still alive after two cardiac bypass surgeries. His own saphenous veins from both legs are miraculously part of his damaged heart's circulation. They are his vessels of life and are the reason he saw me graduate from high school, from college, get married, and have two children.

Today, I became aware of how close I was to losing my father and how miraculous it is that he is still alive. For this, in addition to all that I've had the great privilege to learn, I am most grateful to Stanley. —Michael



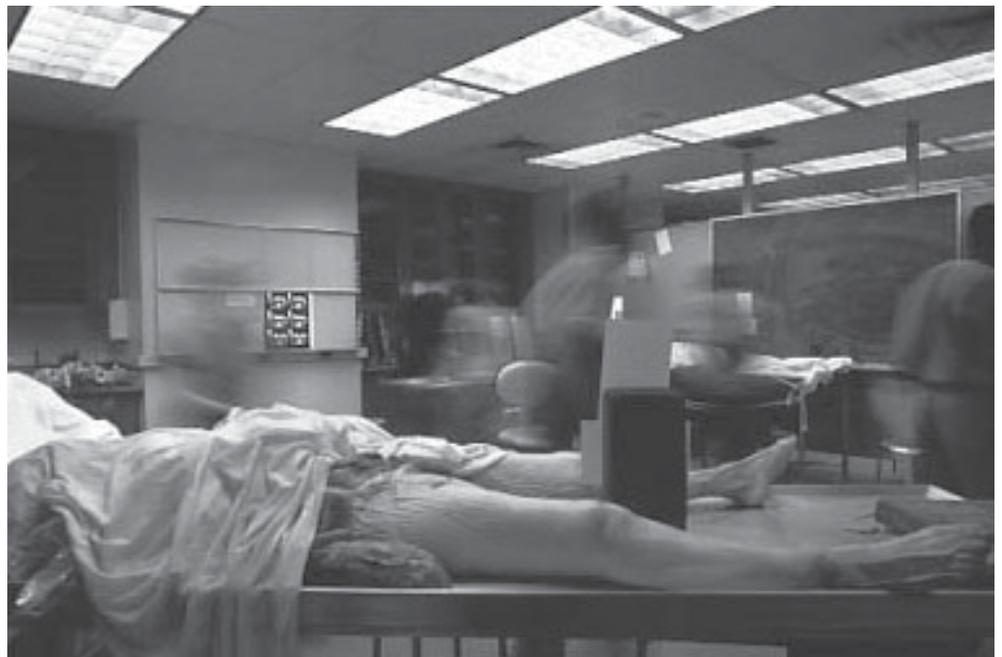
The power of habit is incredible. It is now two-and-a-half months since we began anatomy, and I feel unstartled by my cadaver, by all of the dead bodies, by the basement room, and the ritual. Even the oily smell which coats me is acceptable, almost unnoticed, like a neighbor who has lived down the hall for a while. I don't think twice about the cutting or having lunch afterward. I no longer draw silent comparisons between my cadaver's subcutaneous fascia and my son's unblemished face. Gross Anatomy has become one of the routine workings of my life and, by some sad equation, I am now wondering less about my cadaver's life, his routines, his visions, his loves, and his thought process that ultimately brought him to the anatomy lab. —Michael



Strangely, my most emotional responses to anatomy have been in retrospect. While reflecting on the course, I've allowed my emotional side to be involved in a way that I could not do previously. During the course, it was like a survival mechanism took over: Repress all sentiment, the thing in front of you is, indeed, a thing, not a person, not even something that once was a person. But I think about the cadaver now not as a thing, not as "my cadaver," but as Alice.

We, the six people in my group, always referred to her as "Alice." And we were proud of her. She was a good cadaver. She did not smell. Her organs had not decayed. Somehow, I think I believed that this preservation phenomenon was attributable to Alice herself. ...

The dissection was a collaboration between Alice and me, between Alice and the six of us who had been assigned to her. —Katie



Is Stem Cell Reporting Telling the Real Story?

A journalist says that media coverage of stem cells and cloning is repeating the mistakes the press made during the dot-com bubble.

By Neil Munro

Mainstream media coverage of stem cells and cloning is starry-eyed, lopsided and deceptive. But at least it is no worse than journalists' coverage of the dot-com bubble.

As the Internet bubble inflated, reporters magnified the industry's promises and predictions. They rarely investigated the overlapping networks of venture capitalists, insider stock deals, the hype, backscratching and the Ponzi-like financing of Internet companies whose sole assets consisted of fawning press clips and a foosball table. Of course, after the bubble burst and a few trillion dollars worth of hopes and illusions escaped into the ether, many journalists have judiciously written acres of cautionary stories and investigative pieces.

This pattern has repeated itself in biotech, only we're still somewhere between boom and bust. Remember those breathless pieces on television, in *Time* and *Newsweek* and many other publications, about the miracle new cures that will come from cloned embryos' stem cells—cures for Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, Diabetes so desperately sought by dying people? Hasn't happened. Won't happen, or not for many years, and not until today's patients are dead and gone, scientists now say, *sotto voce*.

But the press furor created a mini-boom for the few scientists and companies that specialize in this arcane corner of biotech and for the reporters who cover it.

Language Drives a Story

I'll start with the language. Stem cells from embryos are typically called "embryonic stem cells," but there's nothing embryonic about them. They are fully formed and fully prepared to



Antiabortion activist Randall Terry talks about his opposition to stem cell research during a demonstration in Lafayette Park across from the White House in August 2001. The demonstrators were asking President Bush to ban embryonic stem cell research.

Photo by Stephen J. Boitano/The Associated Press.

multiply into a living, breathing person. Better that they be called "embryo stem cells" or "embryos' stem cells."

This terminological transmutation is important because it changes readers' perceptions of the issues involved. This change becomes clearer in the intertwined debate about human cloning, in which some scientists want to create new stem cells by cloning embryos from adults with interesting genetic features or diseases. Until 2001, this process was routinely described as cloning. But once the technology matured to the point that cloning human embryos—not just mice or rats as before—seemed practical, scientists in universities and companies decided they needed a new name, one that would bypass the public's usual revulsion over the cloning of humans for scientific or commercial purposes.

Proponents of human cloning decided to deconstruct the single process into two identical processes—good "therapeutic cloning" to create embryos for use in medical transplants and bad "reproductive cloning" to create embryos for implantation and birth. Of course, this rhetorical trick also required scientists to argue that a cloned embryo was not human when destined for the laboratory bench or the tissue-bank, but was human when intended for birth. Thus many pro-cloning scientists now argue with a straight face that a cloned human embryo is only human when people say it is. Until that unscientific moment when opinion polls somehow breathe humanity into a human embryo, the cloned embryo remains property to be dismantled, diagnosed and disposed of, according to the owners' wishes. It also gets a new

identity—cleaved egg, ovasome, truck, pre-embryo, pluripotent stem cells, etc.—to distinguish it from other human embryos deemed worthy of life. Needless to say, no one calls the un-embryos “subhumans.”

Neither this new terminology nor this secular creationism has been challenged by any of the major newspapers—not in editorials nor in reporting. Translated into the dot-com scenario, such practices are akin to reporters accepting assurances from corporate executives that their financial losses are really investments and projected revenue is bankable cash. Come to think of it, that’s what many dot-coms did to hide their red ink, without it being described that way by reporters for months or years, until the Enron collapse precipitated the return of common sense.

Delivering What Reporting Promises

Cures that seemed so promising in the first wave of stem cell stories might never arrive, simply because there is too great a legal risk. The risk is that one or more of the millions of stem cells transplanted from a cloned un-human embryo into a patient will actually try to grow into a complete person. Each attempt will fail, of course, because the stem cell will have been extracted from its parent cloned embryo. But in the trying, such cells often now grow into “teratomas,” cancer-like growths of skin and bone, teeth and hair, and these would kill the patient.

Optimistically, assume the cloning scientists can control the process 99 out of 100 times. Those odds, while acceptable to dying patients, will likely ruin commercial prospects for any cloning-based therapy, especially when one adds the cost of custom cloning and considers marketplace competition from drug-makers, surgeons and the adult stem cell therapies.

Rival stem cell cures exist now, albeit in small numbers. Many cancer patients are treated with their own stem cells, and increasing numbers of patients with heart conditions, eye problems, brittle-bone disease, and

multiple sclerosis are also being treated with modest but significant successes. These treatments, so far, show no sign of killing their patients.

But the major media typically ignore these advances and have even recently taken to labeling them as “cell therapy” or even just plain “stem cell” successes. This reporting tends to mask their current therapeutic advantage over the much-touted use of stem cells from cloned embryos. So far, no one has been treated with embryos’ stem cells, although proponents argue that the first clinical trials could begin in three to 10 years. That delay gives the technology of adults’ stem cell many years to run further ahead of the embryo technology.

Back in our comparative dot-com land, this misplaced focus is akin to reporters arguing that investors should embrace companies with high online market share or impressive stock valuations, rather than real products, actual profits, and satisfied consumers. But that is precisely what many reporters and TV anchors did when they focused attention on companies whose lack of bankable assets was supposedly countered by their coolness. Remember *pets.com*? Who can possibly forget *clickmango.com*, or Blue Mountain Arts, a dot-com company that was purchased for one billion dollars in cash and stock because it was expected to corner the market on electronic greetings cards? The buyer, by the way, has long since shut its doors, although the seller is living comfortably in Colorado.

Speaking of value, one should ask who gains from the optimistic focus on embryos’ stem cells? The answer is a few companies and a variety of universities and scientists who hope the technology will lead to higher stock prices on Wall Street, more federal grants, and greater prestige in the science community. Already, scientists working on adults’ stem cells say on the record—and with evidence to back them up—that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) favors the embryo stem cell technology that was developed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. (This, of course, is no surprise to Tommy Th-

ompson, the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, who previously served as governor of Wisconsin and who, in 2000, offered \$150 million in state funds to boost local research on the technology.)

The NIH’s focus on this technology also serves the interests of the embryo scientists—and their many fans among science reporters—who want to use cloned embryos to learn more about early human development, both because of their desire to know and because of their desire to control the genetics of early human development. One hopes that such control would be used to develop various cures for diseases involving new types of drugs, for example. But it might be used for another purpose, such as earning plaudits needed for academic prizes. Or it could be used to win patents for the nascent genetic engineering industry, which hopes to profit from parents-to-be who are interested in shaping the development of their child while it is still in the un-human petri-dish stage of life.

One should also ask who loses if the focus remains on long-term research into human development. Arguably, the losers are the scientists who need grants to further develop the technology of adults’ stem cells and today’s patients who need short-term cures to save them before they die. That’s the not-implausible claim made from a wheelchair by James Kelly, who wants some of the money spent on using stem cells to repair spinal cords, including his own. Disillusioned by the NIH’s spending, he’s looking overseas for an adult stem cell cure. Even some advocates in the “patients groups”—mostly funded and overseen by the professionals and managers who treat the patients—have spoken out against the false promises of early cures from embryo research.

When translated back into the familiar terms of coverage of the dot-com bust, the media’s focus on embryo work is akin to reporting that vaporware—software that does not exist—is better than partly tested software. It is little different from reporting that a dot-com’s ambitious hopes to dominate

online retail make it a better investment than retail chains with expertise, warehouses, customers and revenue.

Have journalists not learned from the dot-com bubble? Can we, as reporters, not restrain our wildest dreams in favor of accurately describing the limited, but still wonderful, progress that we observe?

Our key error seems to be unwarranted deference to professionals in the universities and sciences. This fosters a widespread reluctance to treat scientists (whether they're sources, subscribers or friends) as who they really are—university-based entrepreneurs working in a complex of professional and commercial interests. Most scientists, along with many other pro-

professionals, prefer to downplay wealth while they compete for and then advertise the professional status that is often the key to wealth and further professional status.

The media's deference to the scientists' self-image is not universal, but it is routine. For example, both Rick Weiss at The Washington Post and Nicholas Wade at The New York Times—who report many of these stories—explained that they usually did not include in their articles mention of the financial interests of the scientists because these interests are so commonplace. In my interview with Wade, which I conducted while writing a freelance piece for The Washington Monthly, he also told me that readers are not inter-

ested in financial matters. And the approach these influential reporters take is similar to that taken by the vast majority of journalists who write and edit these stories.

But financial matters and professional rivalries are not merely “fit to print.” They're central to the story of biotech, science and cloning. ■

Neil Munro covers the politics of science and technology for the National Journal in Washington, D.C. Previously, he covered the dot-com bubble for Washington Technology and the U.S. Department of Defense for Defense News.

✉ nmunro@njdc.com

Reporting the Cloning Story: From Hype to Healthy Skepticism

Journalists can produce stronger stories by scrutinizing the motives, finances and personalities of researchers.

By Aaron Zitner

The scene was the National Academy of Sciences, the palace of the American scientific establishment. Marble columns. Walnut paneling. One of the neoclassical buildings that give Washington, D.C. its imperial feel. Only on this day, the building was home more to circus than science. That's how it felt to be in the throng of reporters chasing three self-described cloning researchers around the foyers and Great Hall, trying to press them on their alleged plans to clone human beings.

It was August 2001, and the press was beginning to grapple with the prospect of human cloning. The three “cloners” had been invited to speak at a conference on the subject, and at each break we would pounce. We chased Brigitte Boisselier into a dimly lit stairway, where she'd hoped to con-

fer with her lawyer. We chased Italian fertility doctor, Severino Antinori, to the men's bathroom and then—in one of the day's few gestures of restraint—waited outside as he conducted his business. When he emerged, Antinori was greeted by a crowd of reporters and a half-dozen camera lights.

Of course, this is just what Boisselier and the other cloning advocates wanted. They were there to gain attention and ultimately, I believe, to make money on their cloning claims by attracting investors or clients. And we obliged them with stories that introduced their names to people around the world—Antinori, his then-colleague Panos Zavos, and Boisselier, an official with the once-obscure Raelian Movement, a religious group fixated on sex and UFO's. We, in the media, made them famous.

Hyping the Cloning Story

In itself, I saw nothing wrong with this. Personality is a key ingredient in the cloning story, which is also a rich combination of science, sex, business, ethics and very serious questions about legal constraints on disease research—spiced with a generous dollop of creepiness. It's an irresistible mix for any reporter. Besides, it was the national academy that gave the cloning advocates the podium that day; the media followed the academy's lead. (And, before that, Zavos, Boisselier and her religious mentor, who goes by the name Rael, had been called to testify by none other than the House of Representatives.)

But as we chased this rich story, as journalists we could—and should—have done much better for news con-

sumers. Cloning truly presented a dilemma for the press. Usually—but not always—the standard for determining that a scientific claim is valid and newsworthy is its appearance in a peer-reviewed journal. These journals require that independent scientists review an experiment’s methodology and results: They reject papers that fail to measure up. Even then, good reporters need to ask around to make sure that a published paper represents good science.

Clearly, that standard seemed too fastidious for the human cloning story. A reporter who waited for Antinori or Boisselier to publish findings in a journal might wait forever, since there was little evidence that these people really intended to clone anything. At the same time, to do so would be taking a pass on an important story. Merely by stating an intent to clone, Antinori, Zavos and Boisselier had touched off a national (and fascinating) ethics and public policy debate, not only about producing cloned children, but also about whether cloning should remain legal as a tool for making stem cells for disease research.

But too often our stories seemed to lack any standards at all. On several occasions, Antinori, Zavos and Boisselier made Page One of major newspapers merely by restating their claim of an intent to start cloning. What evidence did we present that they were even trying? What was the evidence they might succeed? None of them had experience with animal cloning. And when scientists with deep experience tried producing cloned human embryos, they either got nowhere or produced embryos with only a few cells.

When we did challenge their claims, reporters often fell into a simplistic is-not, is-too style of reporting that gave equal footing to the “cloners” and their better-credentialed doubters. This kind of “balance” is not always helpful or credible because it elevates dubious or unsubstantiated claims beyond their merit. At the national academy meeting, for example, Boisselier claimed she had found a set of genes that could tell her which cloned embryos would turn into healthy children and which

were destined to be deformed. Under traditional circumstances, a scientist who failed to show the evidence for repeated claims like this would be dismissed out of hand, banished from serious debate. And yet the press continued to report and promote Boisselier’s cloning claims.

Some of us reported frivolity along the way, such as Antinori’s hunger strike to protest “persecution” by Italian authorities. What was the low point? Undoubtedly, it was CNN’s decision to give live and uninterrupted coverage to Boisselier’s announcement that she had produced the world’s first cloned child—a claim that has never been backed with even a proffer of evidence. By presenting this unsubstantiated claim to such a wide audience, CNN’s decision surely forced other media to report on it, as well.

Good Reporting on Cloning

There has been a lot of good journalism about cloning, even though many reporters are unschooled in the science. We’ve felt our way through the complexities of cloning as well as the related issues of stem cell research and the broader “new biology” of the gene. But even as we did this, we might have looked for a few lessons from the world of political reporting.

Like political candidates, Antinori, Zavos and the Raelians put themselves on the public stage and made claims as to why they deserved trust and power—in this case, the power to step into a possibly dangerous science without oversight. When people make a bid for power, journalists try to check them out thoroughly. Whether covering a campaign for president or town council, we go after some basic information about the people who want power: Who are they? Where does their money come from? What skills do they really have? And what does their history tell us about how they would use power?

A check of Zavos’s background, for example, shows that a Kentucky hospital had once terminated an employment contract with him, alleging “unethical and illegal” behavior. A watchdog board at another former

employer, the University of Kentucky, cited Zavos for failing to follow federal rules that protect people in medical experiments. His lawyer was disbarred, in part for helping Zavos hide assets after he was ordered to pay damages in a civil suit. When Zavos swore out a criminal complaint against one of his own employees, a judge, in an unusual rebuke, said the action was “vindictive” and not in good faith.

Zavos was given hours of television time to defend his cloning plans, and he appeared in countless news reports. But these other details about his professional life were rarely mentioned. If news consumers had been told about them, they would have been in a better position to judge his claim that he could be trusted with the potentially dangerous technology of human cloning. Most scientists, after all, claim that cloning could well lead to deformed children, at least with current techniques. And, in undertaking cloning, Zavos said his goal was to offer hope to infertile couples—people who may be vulnerable and willing to pay large sums in their hopes for a child. (Zavos has denied wrongdoing in his professional life and has maintained that his actions were legal.)

Similarly, a more thorough background check on Boisselier and the Raelians would have left consumers better prepared for the colossal claim of the first cloned child. Well before they started talking up cloning, the Raelians had a long history of conducting stunts to gain press attention. They handed out condoms at high schools. They bought a billboard advertisement welcoming spacemen to earth. They issued endless press releases on the news of the day. For consumers trying to judge whether the group had truly produced a cloned baby, this history of publicity stunts was important context. But it, too, was often absent from news stories.

Moreover, the group had tried a cloning stunt once before, setting up a “company” to offer cloning services for a hefty fee. In reality, it was nothing more than a post office box in the Bahamas, something Rael admitted in a book he wrote on cloning. “For a

minimal investment, it got us media coverage worth more than \$15 million," he wrote. "I am still laughing."

We could have also better explored why the Raelians had an interest in cloning to begin with. My theory, after talking to group members and former members, is that the claims about cloning were all about helping Rael keep control of his group. It takes money to run a religious sect, and the Raelians rely on their members to make donations and to sell Rael's books. But keeping people engaged is difficult. Members get bored, drift away, and cut off the stream of money and free labor.

Cloning was a perfect antidote. It gave Raelians a sense that they were part of a historic project and that it was worth staying engaged. When Congress and the media took the group's cloning plans seriously, it confirmed for many members that Rael's vision of a coming scientific utopia was accurate. It told them that their hard work for the group was worthwhile. And it exposed the Raelians to a wide audience, potentially bringing in new members.

Keeping a sharper focus on motive, finances and personality can produce good stories throughout our coverage of science. In showing that many of us missed some good reporting opportunities, journalist Neil Munro has noted how we often fail to explore the commercial interests of scientists who enter the public debate. [See Munro's story on page 23.] His critiques, in the *National Journal* in 2001 and *The Washington Monthly* in 2002, examined the multiple and overlaying interests of medical researchers who were arguing for freedom to use human embryonic stem cells and cloning techniques.

In many cases, Munro found, these scientists had major stakes in private companies that were involved with stem cell research. But, in most cases, reporters and scientific associations identified them only by their university affiliations. These commercial interests did not necessarily invalidate their arguments for broad scientific freedom. But they added color, and we would not have left similar information out of our reporting on people seeking po-

litical power.

In the news trade, few things make us happier than a shift in political power. Power shifts give us plenty to write about, and we know how to cover these stories well. Today, science is offering another kind of power shift: We are gaining the power to reshape life through genetic manipulation, stem cells and cloning, a power once held only by nature, or God, or fate. It is an important change and one that tends to produce overhyped claims about future cures or scientific results.

Often, journalists cannot ignore these big claims. But asking the familiar questions about personality, motive and finances will produce stronger stories and provide the kind of transparency news consumers deserve. ■

Aaron Zitner covers science policy for the Los Angeles Times, working out of the newspaper's Washington, D.C. bureau.

✉ aaron.zitner@latimes.com

Transforming Medical Science Into Public Policy

An editorial writer describes her role in helping readers understand the issues.

By Barbara Egbert

Tension between scientific research and public policy is natural and even desirable. The conflicts enveloping policymaking about stem cell research have resulted, however, in a Gordian knot of red tape. A consequence: reduced support for cutting-edge research and hobbled prospects for the growth of biotechnology in the United States. Dimensions of this costly and counterproductive maze became clearer to me last October when a senior policy adviser at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) guided me and other journalists attending a stem cell research seminar through regulations that governed scientists who received federal funding.

As an editorial writer at the San Jose Mercury News focused on writing about medical and health issues, I was aware that in August 2001 President Bush had placed significant barriers in the path of such research by limiting it to already existing lines of stem cells. Before attending this seminar, however, I hadn't realized to what extent he had, in just a few words, created the need for such a massive structure of rules, documents, timelines, supplements and accounting procedures.

illuminating Policy Debates

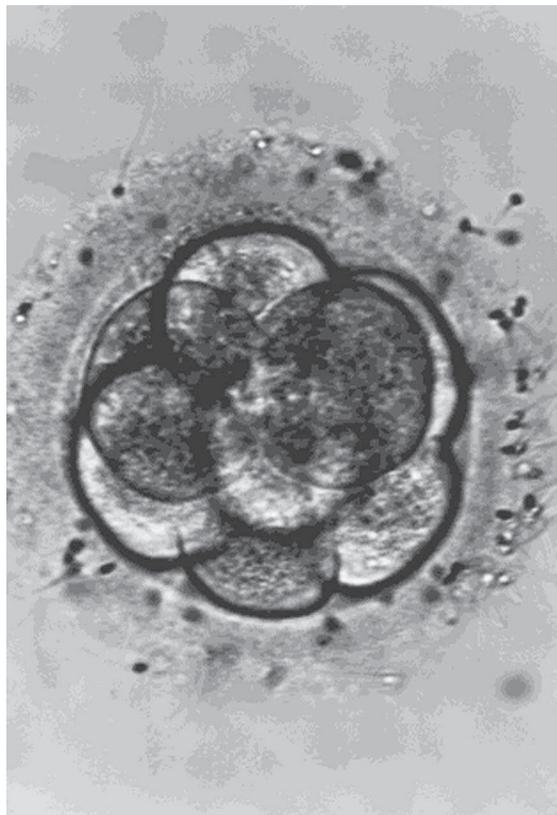
Therein lies, of course, one of the main reasons for attending such a seminar.

While science writers have the job of explaining science, my job is to delve into the political decisions that affect what scientists get to do with our tax dollars. Behind the whiz-bang stories of far-reaching discoveries and cosmic breakthroughs are the little-noticed policy debates that shape the future of research in this country. The ways in which politics is allowed to trump science in this country is something that seldom makes the "science and technology" sections, but that I believe readers ought to know. In-depth seminars provide time to delve into these issues. And in the dim recesses of this NIH meeting room, I began to imagine this intertwined mass of requirements

growing like an enormous tumor and impeding serious research far into the future. How much better it would be if, like Alexander in Anatolia, someone could seize a sword and slash through the knot.

Earlier in this seminar, sponsored by the Knight Center for Specialized Journalism, Washington Post science writer Rick Weiss had referred to stem cell research as a form of guaranteed employment for journalists. But Bush's directive to the NIH, I concluded, had created a similar guaranteed employment program for a certain breed of federal workers. They'd spend months writing regulations intended to prevent scientists from using a penny of federal funds for examining cells from lines other than those on the NIH human embryonic stem cell registry. They'd provide unique codes for each cell line, assuring that each cell existed before 9 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on August 9, 2001. They would also devote some of their energies to "parsing facilities and administrative costs for eligible research from ineligible research," in the words of this senior policy adviser, all the while believing they were advancing the cause of science.

Since that seminar, issues involving stem cell research and its new cousin, "therapeutic cloning," have become, if anything, even murkier. Much of the political resistance to such research is based on religious beliefs against the idea of manipulating human life, which supposedly begins at the moment of conception. But is that the moment? Or is it the moment of implantation? Or of cell differentiation? There are differing views that shape different answers to these and other questions. As someone who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area—and tries to reflect and inform public opinion—I am attuned, perhaps more than most Americans, to the wide variety of views on humanity, the individual, and community held by Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others. In our readership, the portion of residents who agree with President Bush on this issue is small.



An eight-cell embryo is shown three days after insemination. *Photo by Eastern Virginia Medical School/The Associated Press.*

President Bush might have thought he had forged an ideal compromise between science and religion when he announced his policy. But this compromise turned out to be more like what King Solomon suggested to the two women squabbling about an infant: Cut the baby in half and each gets an equal part. In this case, the metaphorical sword is more like Solomon's than Alexander's.

This seminar provided many "aha" moments similar to these and, since I've returned to my job, I've struggled to keep up with—and explain to readers—implications of the most current research, policy initiatives, and international competition in biotechnology. For someone who majored in English, as I did, simply keeping up with scientific news about stem cell research and cloning has proved challenging. When I took biology courses in high school and college, mitochondria's role was steeped in mystery, and the first heart transplant had just occurred. Genetic

causes of many diseases weren't even suspected, much less explored. Now, to write editorials, I am trying to understand how cells from a blastocyst could be coaxed into producing insulin and how a nucleus could be teased out of one cell and introduced into a human egg, creating potential life—without conception.

Because I am a journalist from California, at this seminar I fielded many questions from colleagues on my state's encouragement of stem cell research. Weeks earlier, I'd written an editorial applauding California's forward-looking legislature and governor for approving a bill endorsing research on stem cells and allowing so-called therapeutic cloning, which many proponents prefer to call somatic cell nuclear transfer. (California, along with nearly everyone except the Raelian cultists, opposes reproductive cloning of humans.) Another Californian, Senator Dianne Feinstein, is a leader among those calling for federal legislation allowing research involving stem cells and nuclear transfer, while banning reproductive cloning. I explained to the other journalists that California's move was purely symbolic—a point I had made in my editorial, since future federal legislation would trump state law and the lack of federal funding would cripple research that called for creation of new stem lines.

I was wrong to portray California's policy as being so modest. Symbolism turned out to be stronger than I thought it was. Since September 2002, several states have followed California's lead. Of course, several other states have gone the opposite direction by banning all cloning. In the states calling for the freedom to pursue research, the proponents have made it clear that congressional action to ban stem cell research—as called for in a bill that twice passed the House but not the Senate—wouldn't reflect the opinion of most Americans.

As for the crippling effect of Bush's decision, I was a bit off the mark there, too. What I had not considered strongly

enough was the possibility that private funders would step in to finance such research. Several weeks after the seminar, Stanford University announced an anonymous grant of \$12 million in private seed money that would help to establish a new Institute for Cancer/ Stem Cell Biology and Medicine. And high-tech leader Andy Grove pledged five million dollars to help launch a new embryonic stem cell program at the University of California-San Francisco. Those amounts are far less than the billions of dollars that are available to the NIH. But, along with private firms such as Geron, they will help to keep Northern California in the forefront of research. And they give researchers even more ability and reason to resist federal restrictions.

Getting Past the Media Hype

The history of stem cell research is short. The future could hold tremendous promise. Or stem cells could be-

come the biological equivalent of cold fusion. So far, the media hype about them has far outrun their reality in terms of current applications. What has been most prominent to most readers, listeners and viewers in these debates about stem cells and cloning is the turmoil of false hopes and celebrity exploitation, as famous people like Michael J. Fox and Christopher Reeve arrive on Capitol Hill to testify. Religious ferment combined with the anti-intellectualist furor and political manipulation have also served to obscure what's really happening in the lab.

In trying to inform public debate about these issues, it doesn't help that so few people who aren't scientists or doctors understand the complex science involved or even know the difference between embryonic stem cells and cloned cells. On the other hand, many of the Mercury News's readers understand the science perfectly well because they are the scientists and technicians who are doing it. Luckily, my

editorials focus on policy and funding decisions—and while those decisions may be obscure, they reflect human nature, which anyone can understand.

Struggling to explain the science, the policy issues, and the ethical concerns is, indeed, as Rick Weiss reminded us, a sort of guaranteed employment for journalists. ■

Barbara Egbert is an editorial writer at the San Jose Mercury News. A graduate of San Francisco State University, she has also worked for the Nevada Appeal (in Carson City), Reno Gazette-Journal, and Alameda (Calif.) Newspaper Group. Her interest in health care and medicine was sparked by a year working as a volunteer at People's Community Health Center in Baltimore, Maryland.

✉ begbert@mercurynews.com

Covering Ethical Debates About Medical Issues

Journalists in Nebraska played a role in informing people about the complexities of the science and ethics of medical research.

By Kathleen Rutledge

Nebraskans know what to expect from the arrival of spring: sandhill cranes returning to the Platte River, forsythia bursting into yellow bloom, the Cornhusker football team rolling onto the practice field. But three years ago, spring brought with it news of something so new—and some would say so contrary to the rhythms of nature—that it stirred a troubled debate.

The revelation: Researchers at the state's medical center in Omaha had been using tissue from aborted fetuses to seek cures for diseases such as Parkinson's. Pro-life, pro-choice and other forces soon were fully engaged in strident discourse. State senators

also began a contentious debate about whether to forbid the research. In the span of a few weeks, ordinary Nebraskans went from not even knowing that such experiments were possible to the discomfort of grappling with the ethics of what was happening.

It was during that troubled Nebraska spring that the idea for a reporting project called "Medical Ethics: Tough Choices" was born.

Journalists Inform the Public

The editorial board of the Lincoln Journal Star had asked for a briefing on the fetal tissue research from people who worked at the University of Nebraska

Medical Center in Omaha. In the closing moments of that meeting, a medical center official predicted this was just the beginning of ethical debates over state-sponsored medical research. This year debate focused on the use of fetal tissue. In future years, genetic profiling or animal organ transplants might be medical issues that spark discussion and debate.

Wouldn't it be better, I mused, if Nebraskans weren't startled by the next medical revelation? Wouldn't it be better if they had an opportunity to learn now about medical research at their state-financed medical center that some day might place before them issues that involve difficult ethical questions?

Wouldn't debate be more informed, and perhaps more civil, if people had more information about aspects of medical research before it was underway?

No one could argue with the premise that it would be better to get people the information they need to weigh these ethical and political decisions.

Coming up with these ideas was the easy part. Out of these ideas grew our mission: to inform citizens and engage them in a thoughtful and civil discussion of the ethical implications of medical research. Now we needed to determine how best to do this. We settled on using the approach of civic journalism, because we wanted to reach not just scientists and other experts who have a natural interest in these topics, but also other members of our community. We wanted to encourage ordinary people to think and talk about these issues that sometimes seem disconnected from their lives. To engage the broader community, we joined forces with two local television stations and used the Internet. Through this partnership, and with the assistance of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, we worked to reinforce the sense that these are topics that a broader audience could—and should—ponder.

What follows are the basic elements of our series:

- A series of in-depth reports that appeared in the Lincoln Journal Star on four successive Sundays in January 2001. University of Nebraska Medical Center scientists explored gene therapy, stem cell research, xenotransplantation and cloning.
- A survey of opinion in Nebraska about these areas of research.
- A televised public forum in which people who weren't specialists pondered the ethical implications of medical research. A panel of citizens sat on the stage of the auditorium. As needed, the moderators called on experts seated in the audience—doctors, ethicists, interest group representatives, state senators—to further the discussion. The moderators were careful to keep the momentum with the citizens, not with

All articles and photos are protected under copyright law. Lincoln Journal Star photos and articles may not be placed on websites

Panelists from the community watch as a video about xenotransplantation starts off the medical ethics town hall meeting at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. *Photo courtesy of the Lincoln Journal Star.*

the experts.

- A Web site (http://net.unl.edu/newsFeat/med_eth/me_index.html) where much of our work is archived, along with a discussion board, lesson plans for teachers, and links to other resources.

Lessons Learned Inside the Newsroom

While we were working to prepare ordinary Nebraskans to grapple with tough decisions about medical ethics, we were also making tough choices as journalists.

These included:

- Working to overcome “the egghead factor”: Medical and science reporters know how easy it can be to lose the reader among the white lab coats and the test tubes. So we worked hard to understand complex issues so that we could then make the information accessible to readers. Our strategy, not a novel one, was to try to put a human face on each story: We profiled a family coping with a rare genetic disease and a young mother who had a stem cell transplant. And we paired these per-

sonal dimensions with what we learned about the science. Stories we did about cloning presented a particular challenge because the medical center wasn't doing research in that area. Reporter JoAnne Young had a good idea: Use identical twins as an example, since they are nature's clones.

- Finding space in the newspaper, time for the extra reporting, and money to support this extra effort: These situations are perennial struggles for journalists, especially for those at small- and medium-sized newspapers. A \$23,500 grant from Pew helped to fund these additional demands.
- Working with other media partners: Print journalists and broadcast journalists don't think alike and they work on different deadlines. These differences can be stimulating, but they can also be frustrating. We worked hard to collaborate and communicate. Sometimes we failed. Mostly, it worked.
- Keeping the focus on the future: We aimed this series at a range of medical issues, rather than getting entangled in the polarized debate on fetal tissue research.

- Being balanced and fair: As with other abortion-related issues, we had to be particularly attentive to representing the various viewpoints fairly and choosing words carefully. For example, what do you call a clump of cells that is the result of fertilization? The label matters mightily depending on one's views about abortion. Our challenge was to maintain balance and fairness without bogging the reader down in the all-too-familiar political battles.
- Selecting the broadcast panels: Nebraska Educational Television was responsible for arranging the citizen and expert panels for the broadcast; we played a consulting role as a cosponsor of the broadcast. The services of a research firm were used to help recruit thoughtful people for the citizens' panel. (After the broadcast, the director of Nebraska Right to Life criticized the balance of viewpoints, arguing that the pro-life members were not strongly enough pro-life.)
- Maintaining our objectivity: The medical center was immensely cooperative, providing us with background materials, arranging an extensive tour of the center, and granting us valuable time with researchers. While the center made no attempt to interfere with our editorial decisions, we were mindful of our responsibility to maintain objectivity, even as we took full advantage of the access offered.

Selecting panel members was one of the more difficult aspects of our work on this project. A point of contention was whether to allow a staff member from the Nebraska Catholic Conference to be on the experts' panel. Initially, he was left off because of concerns that he might lead the discussion into a rehash of the legislative debate on fetal tissue research. Ultimately, he was allowed to participate and brought a valuable perspective. In hindsight, he should not have had to struggle to get on the panel.

Our goal was to educate and engage ordinary Nebraskans in issues of great medical and ethical complexity. The

All articles and photos are protected under copyright law. Lincoln Journal Star photos and articles may not be placed on websites

Dr. Margaret Kessinger from the University of Nebraska Medical Center, wire-rimmed glasses, was one of a panel of experts who listened and contributed during the medical ethics town hall meeting at the university. *Photo courtesy of the Lincoln Journal Star.*

newspaper received a number of congratulatory messages about the series, many from people involved in these subjects. About 6,000 viewers tuned in to the broadcast on KMTV, an Omaha television station. Nebraska Educa-

tional Television, which broadcast the forum statewide, received a record number of calls after the program and the Web site had more than 8,000 hits in its first three months.

State senators told us they found the

All articles and photos are protected under copyright law. Lincoln Journal Star photos and articles may not be placed on websites

Moderator David Iverson poses a question during the medical ethics town hall meeting. *Photo courtesy of the Lincoln Journal Star.*

project helped them as they grappled with legislation to ban fetal tissue research. The legislature did not vote on the measure in 2001. Still now, no ban has been passed.

This was an ambitious undertaking for a newspaper of our size—84,000 circulation on Sunday. We don't have a project team, so we had to pull reporters off regular beats for weeks at a time to report and write the four-part series. Virtually everyone—editors, writers, photographer, graphic artist, even the marketing manager who promoted the project—found this work exhilarating. We were fortunate to be able to assign to this project a medical writer who had training in pre-med, two reporters who were not trained in medicine but who previously covered health and

medicine for our paper, and a reporter whose beat is religion, values and ethics. But for several members of the team, it was the first time they'd been inside of medical research labs. Our reporters spent many hours interviewing scientists, ethicists and families whose medical circumstances had brought them to these new arenas of medical experimentation.

The time and effort we invested in this project means our newspaper staff is better able to handle these issues as breaking news, as topics for opinion pieces, and as material for feature stories. We haven't done another civic journalism project on medical ethics, but these reporters now have better sources and a better sense of the science and issues. Their editors also know

more than just a smidgen about these topics, so they can ask more incisive questions and coach reporters on how to frame stories.

Within six months after our series appeared, stem cell research was on President Bush's agenda and stories about this and other related medical issues were on covers of national news magazines. Nebraskans who had read our series or watched the televised forum were better prepared to evaluate both the President's proposal and the political, medical and ethical debates that have inevitably followed. ■

Kathleen Rutledge is the editor of the Lincoln (Nebraska) Journal Star.

✉ krutledge@journalstar.com

WATCHDOG

Digging Beneath What Is Said to Be the Truth

'It puts the journalist in the position of challenging the source directly, a position no reporter or editor finds comfortable.'

By Philip J. Hilts

It is said that journalism is a blunt tool and has trouble handling the subtleties of issues. Maybe. But there are times when the hardest things for journalists to handle are not subtleties, but the most blatant falsehoods, the biggest whoppers.

That is because reporters daily pass on what leaders say with a fair amount of trust in those who are speaking. When government officials, or the think tanks that sometimes support them, issue reports and hold press conferences, it is assumed that some essential academic honesty is present in the research and recitation of facts. Details or arguments might be debatable. But reporters are handy at finding opposing views and counterfactuals for those.

Challenging Falsehoods

It is when the tales being put out are cut from whole cloth, from big as-

sumptions to fine details, that the reporting becomes much harder. Reporting that a new study is, in essence, a blatant falsehood is actually quite hard. It puts the journalist in the position of challenging the source directly, a position no reporter or editor finds comfortable. Reporters in the mainstream media are trained to be observers, chroniclers, not combatants. And to knock down larger falsehoods requires not just a day or two of calls and interviews. It requires some real digging.

Some excellent examples of reporters trying to combat larger falsehoods come from the field of government regulation. In America, where conservative market economics is king, some of the greatest whoppers are told about the dreaded "federal government regulators." I followed the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as part of my beat for 20 years, first for The Washington Post and then for The New York

Times, and I can tell you that there is a good bit of blarney spoken of the FDA.

Let me cite one example first to make the point. From late 1994 to 1996, an intense "anti-regulatory" campaign was carried out in Washington, led chiefly by Representative Newt Gingrich and a number of very conservative foundations. They put millions of dollars into attack advertising and attack P.R. campaigns against the FDA. One example of the ads was the one run by the Washington Legal Foundation that read: "If a murderer kills you, it's homicide. If the FDA kills you, it's just being cautious." Use of the phrase "deadly regulation" to refer to the FDA became common. Gingrich called FDA commissioner David Kessler "a thug and a bully."

As part of this campaign, bills were proposed in Congress to strip the FDA of its regulatory powers and to end the "murder by regulation." What the new

regime proposed was to let drug companies police themselves by hiring their own reviewers to check the safety and effectiveness of their products. In aid of this “FDA reform” the pharmaceutical manufacturers of America staged a “fly-in”—bringing 140 “real people” who had been hurt by the FDA to Washington to testify and to visit Congress.

To many reporters covering health and science in Washington, this fly-in had a bad smell about it, as did the wild

without substantive examples provided.

Since most newspapers and broadcast programs don’t have specialists reporting on what are considered second-tier agencies, and the reporters who cover them often aren’t given the time to report deeply on such issues, the general weakness of the coverage is not surprising. Most news is telegraphic, bulletin-like. Readers who want more have to search out the more thorough stories. Of course, this sounds

time the application came in. As for the numbers: In the entire decade between 1968 and 1978, 28,000 people died of TB, largely because they were diagnosed late in their disease.

- Gingrich and the conservative Washington Legal Foundation said Americans were suffering greatly when the FDA didn’t approve a new medical device called the CardioPump. It was to be used instead of regular human CPR techniques. In national advertisements, the foundation said 14,000 people died because of the FDA failure to approve the device. Gingrich railed against the FDA. But medical studies never showed the expensive device worked any better than regular CPR; early studies showed that it caused some damage to the chest and, in 18 percent of cases, it slipped off and valuable time was lost in resuscitation.
- The Washington Legal Foundation also wrote in national advertisements about the drug tacrine. It is now used to give very small and temporary memory improvements in early Alzheimer’s cases. The foundation said: “During the seven years it took to approve tacrine, thousands of Alzheimer’s patients gradually lost their memories. Nobody knows how many died.” Tacrine would not have prevented *any* deaths. Nor does it halt the progress of Alzheimer’s. Worse, it was the FDA that was first in the world to approve this marginal drug.

The story of “runaway regulation” repeated in conservative political mythology over the past 25 years has another side. Not only are the regulators bad, but also the companies that are regulated are, in fact, the chief risk-takers, the ones who really bring life-saving drugs to Americans. The government is just a barrier to such development.

But history does not bear out this argument. Two prominent examples:

- The greatest drug breakthrough of the century, penicillin, is often counted as an example of a coup of

Reporters in the mainstream media are trained to be observers, chroniclers, not combatants. And to knock down larger falsehoods requires not just a day or two of calls and interviews. It requires some real digging.

claims of the death and injury caused by FDA regulation. But few reporters had the nerve or time to challenge the rising tide of anti-regulatory rhetoric.

One who did do the work was John Schwartz of The Washington Post. He decided to take the time to interview a number of the people flown in. The pharmaceutical companies gave him a list, presumably their very best examples. But when Schwartz interviewed them, it turned out that they were not damaged by FDA policies and would not be helped by the “FDA Reform” being proposed, either. Most of the patients’ problems were, in fact, with their insurance. The drugs they wanted had been approved by the FDA, but the insurance companies wouldn’t pay for them. The whole “reform” fly-in turned out to be a whopper.

The Schwartz story was unusual then and would still be considered so today. Back then, I recall there were occasional news stories that got behind the veil on this issue, one in The Washington Monthly and one in The New York Times. But, overall, the coverage was superficial. Many read like this: “. . . the conservatives say the agency is holding up life-saving drugs and their opponents said the reform bills would gut the agency and threaten safety,” all said

like criticism of journalistic practices in general, but it is hard to imagine a journalistic system that would be much different. For the most part, news organizations do provide just the alerts; magazines, books and scholarly work must be relied on for the rest.

Misinformation About the FDA

In covering various medical and science issues during the past three decades, I believe more such misinformed campaigns have been mounted against the FDA, and perhaps the Environmental Protection Agency, than any other agencies. This is, perhaps, in some way related to the level of journalistic scrutiny that I alluded to above, which these agencies are usually given.

I have accumulated dozens of FDA examples in my files. Here are just a few historical examples:

- Ronald Reagan suggested at a press conference that the FDA might have killed 40,000 Americans because the agency had not approved a new tuberculosis drug. In fact, the FDA had approved the drug five years before Reagan’s press conference and had approved it within months of the

CANCER CAN BE CURED

I WANT TO SEND TO ALL SUFFERERS FROM CANCER, THESE TWO BIG BOOKS ABSOLUTELY FREE

and these statements prove it

My 125 Page Testimonial Book

Read the Proof

Dr. JOHNSON REMEDY CO. Dr. O.A. Johnson, President Kansas City, Mo.

This 1908 fraudulent newspaper ad led to a Supreme Court decision that the FDA could not crack down on therapeutic claims. In response, President William H. Taft asked Congress to override the decision. It did, but prosecuting such claims remains difficult. *Courtesy of The Office of History at the Food and Drug Administration.*

drug company research and manufacturing. In fact, when British scientists had the first batches of a workable penicillin in hand in May 1940, they took them to one drug company after another, offering the brilliant discovery for free to any company that would do the development and marketing. British companies turned them down, and the scientists flew to the United States, certain that the wealthy Americans would jump at a chance to market the miracle drug. American companies turned them down flat. Too risky an investment, they said. Instead, the scientists turned to scientists working in government labs; they accepted the challenge the same day it was offered, and during the next year carried out the most crucial work in the drug's development. Then, after the United States entered the war, the U.S. government asked the companies to join in now that important progress had been made. The companies still balked. Finally, they were all but ordered to

work on penicillin for the sake of the troops. The companies were given financial incentives as well and, finally, belatedly, agreed to work on penicillin.

- After the AIDS epidemic started and was identified as a viral plague, scientists and public health advocates urged American companies to begin work making anti-AIDS drugs. But the companies balked; the investment was too risky. Perhaps the epidemic would go away, or not enough people would get sick to make a drug profitable, analysts said. So it was that the first three vital drugs against AIDS came not from industry but from work in government laboratories.

Reading the record of regulation closely, it appears that the tale of the terrible regulators is just that, a tale. It has sprung from a belief in a too-simple theory of economics, the market ideal. But this belief holds great sway in America in these times.

Disputing the 'Tale'

Because of the conflict between the tales and the facts of food and drug regulation that I kept finding in my reporting, eventually I decided to document it in a book. I found that the true story of regulation and business has been that modern medical science has moved forward by willing and unwilling cooperation between them. Modern medicine could not have happened without this synergy. The role of the regulator was not that of a barrier; it was that of a goad. Regulation set high scientific standards that businesses never would have set or met on their own, and progress has depended on high research standards. Without them, the proof that an advance is really an advance might never come.

Of course, the tales of the terrible regulators go on. And young journalists are faced with the same difficult choices. They can quote those who are telling the "tale" and move on, while trying to bring to bear skepticism they might feel. Or they can take a risk—ask for extra time and try to dig up facts that can put these "tales" in their proper context. Take this route and they might irritate editors, sources and the organizations they are questioning. And they might mark themselves as problem cases, especially if they fail to document their suspicions and end up with a weak story or no story.

Chasing this second kind of story is a lot harder. But once in a while, setting the record straight on one or two whoppers can make the risk worth it. ■

Philip J. Hilts, a 1985 Nieman Fellow, has covered health and science for The New York Times and The Washington Post. He is the author of five books. His most recent is "Protecting America's Health: The FDA, Business and One Hundred Years of Regulation" (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

✉ philts@botsnet.bw

WATCHDOG

Acting as Watchdog on Cancer Research

A small newsletter can create big waves with its long and complicated stories.

By Paul Goldberg

In January 2002, soon after our little weekly newsletter broke a big story about troubles at a biotechnology company called ImClone Systems Inc., I got a call from a reporter from one of the major dailies. The reporter had a problem: He had a copy of *The Cancer Letter* in front of him, but was unable to find the material that was making ImClone's stock drop precipitously.

"Look at the confidence interval in the middle of the first column on page four," I suggested.

"The middle of page four?" the reporter said. "Why isn't it in the lead?"

On some level, I sympathize with this reporter's inadvertent criticism: Why wait until page four of a complicated, technical story before quoting an important document issued by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)? This document turned out to be a "refusal to file" letter informing ImClone that its application for approval of its much-hyped colorectal cancer agent Erbitux was so badly flawed that it defied scientific evaluation.

Ultimately, our publication of this letter led to a congressional investigation and the continuation of a broad inquiry that came to involve the home design guru Martha Stewart, an ImClone investor and a friend of the company founder, Samuel Waksal.

Of course, I knew from the outset that this was a major story, which made it all the more important to write it in a measured tone, with a one-sentence reference to the FDA letter in the lead, a bullet-format summary on page two, and the rest in due course. In setting the stage for this revelation, I began by describing and analyzing the history of the controversy so that readers would be able to compare the text of the FDA's letter with its characterization by the company. ImClone executives claimed that FDA was making a routine, bureaucratic request for a "train

of documentation." In reality, the agency said the problems with the clinical trials were structural, and that meant new trials would be required.

The Cancer Letter's Approach

We assume that our readers appreciate the Talmudic complexity of cancer research, that they share our passion for finding the truth, and that they are capable of staying awake while reading a thoroughly reported, calmly paced news story. Through the years, we have earned a reputation as a watchdog publication. Yet, many of our readers are in the mainstream of cancer research: They are physicians, scientists, pharmaceutical company executives, bureaucrats, Wall Street analysts, lawyers, patient advocates, and "oncopoliticians." And, yes, journalists read it, too.

The politics of cancer can be blinding, in part because of the tradition of promising the impossible. Had President Richard Nixon's promises at the outset of his War on Cancer panned out, *The Cancer Letter* would have become historically irrelevant in 1976. Similarly, interferon, antiangiogenesis agents, and targeted drugs should have made cancer a memory, or at least a chronic disease.

Of course, scientists, when given enough adoration, are as prone as anyone to start to believe in their greatness. Meanwhile, their skeptical colleagues and onlookers have to pick their battles carefully, which means that the majority can be expected to stand by in silence, or even superficially support positions they privately disagree with. Yet, deep inside, they know that cancer is a multitude of stubborn diseases that has largely resisted both treatment and grandstanding. These people pay us \$305 a year to

give them the unvarnished news. We have about 1,200 individual subscribers and eight institutions—cancer centers and pharmaceutical companies—hold site licenses to distribute the newsletter to employers. They don't need hype. They need rigorous, detailed coverage.

The Cancer Letter has been around for three decades. It was started by my father-in-law, Jerry Boyd, in 1974. Formerly a community newspaper publisher, Jerry saw a journalistic opportunity, as do my wife, Kirsten Boyd Goldberg, and I. Every week, working from the basement of our Northwest Washington home, we produce an eight-page newsletter. Often, the entire news hole is filled with just one story: about 5,000 words. If eight pages aren't enough, we go up to 12 pages or 16. Kirsten, who is the editor and publisher, covers the National Cancer Institute and the National Institutes of Health. I cover the FDA and the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries. Some areas of coverage—Capitol Hill and patient advocacy—bounce between us.

As owners of *The Cancer Letter*, we have no targets for growth of our business. If, during some years, our gross revenues or profitability remain flat, or if we lose a subscriber or two as a result of publishing a hard-hitting story, we don't panic. The majority of our stories would be likely to put an average reader to sleep. Sometimes, when I try to interest colleagues in picking up stories I consider important, I hear unsuccessfully suppressed yawns. Reporters who call us for quick answers to complicated questions tend to be disappointed. Like it or not, the cancer field is built on nuance.

We write about the gears of the system of research and drug development. How are scientific programs selected to receive funds? How are drugs

selected for clinical trials? What are the criteria used in drug approval? Are they scientifically valid?

The ImClone Story

Consider the ImClone story. Our opportunity to write about that company was brief. The ImClone lead agent Erbitux was gathering a following among oncologists, patients, Wall Street analysts, and business and science writers. The name of the company president and chief executive, Sam Waksal, was popping up in society pages. Bristol-Myers Squibb paid about two billion dollars for a stake in Erbitux.

Yet, to us, preclinical development and early clinical trials usually fall outside the boundaries of coverage. Until a drug is subjected to rigorous review, we ignore it. It's not that we were missing the boat on ImClone; we were simply letting the boat drift by in the fog. Before approval by FDA, a drug falls into a regulatory no-man's land, which means that it can be hyped with relative impunity. FDA authority begins at the time of approval.

While drugs are under review, the agency has no authority to stop companies from making unsubstantiated claims. By law, the FDA is precluded from contacting the Securities and Exchange Commission to say that a company is making unsubstantiated claims and talking up the value of its stock.

As soon as rigorous review of an agent begins, The Cancer Letter becomes intensely interested in both how the agent is measuring up and in the criteria used in its evaluation. Less than a week after the FDA notified ImClone that its application was unintelligible, I obtained the agency's letter, quoting much of its text in two consecutive news stories, which we published over two weeks. While the ImClone scandal exploded on financial pages of the daily newspapers, I paid little attention to the allegations of insider trading and focused on the structure of the clinical trials that the company conducted and on the proprietary protocols that were used.

With my limited understanding of clinical trials, which I picked up entirely on the job, I could see that ImClone's trail was unclear in defining the eligibility criteria. Also, the trial seemed to have been altered from a shot-in-the-dark experiment conducted for generating hypotheses to a "registration trial" intended to support approval by the FDA. The result was about as informative as the score from a game that has no clear criteria for selection of players and where the sport changes at halftime from football to soccer to satisfy the wishes of the referee.

As I stared at the ImClone protocol, I knew that journalistic analysis would take me only so far. To make the story definitive, I called three acknowledged

experts and asked them to review the protocol. Rather than using a few quotes, I asked each of them to write about 650 words. We published the critiques in their entirety, with the reviewers' names included. Tongue-in-cheek, we call this technique "investigation by peer review." It's an excellent method for presenting technical information to a sophisticated readership.

While the three reviews and the story that accompanied them were excessive for a general audience, their publication allowed The Cancer Letter to once again alter the level of discussion of the ImClone controversy. In turn, our stories helped to inform the Congressional investigation and prompted stories in The New York Times, on National Public Radio, and CNN.

With the ImClone story, our watchdog publication, through specialized coverage, was able to communicate complicated scientific analysis to a broader audience by getting this information to reporters in the mainstream media. ■

Paul Goldberg, along with his wife, Kirsten Boyd Goldberg, produce a weekly watchdog newsletter, "The Cancer Letter," which won the 2002 Robert D.G. Lewis Award of the Washington chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

✉ paul@cancerletter.com

The Emotional Toll of Reporting on a Cancer Trial

'I'd essentially planned to do a story about dying people with no real hope of a cure acting as guinea pigs.'

By Jenni Laidman

I never realized how seductive a molecule could be. But as I listened to the director of the Medical College of Ohio Cancer Institute speak about this mosaic of proteins, I was surely falling into its spell. It was beguiling, this tiny bit of antibody. In laboratory tests and in rodent studies,

it appeared effective against a wide variety of cancers. Sure, the cure rate for mice with cancer is in the miraculous zone when you compare mouse results to results in humans. I knew that. But this antibody—well, maybe it was different.

It seemed to avoid some of the sig-

nificant pitfalls of other cancer-fighting antibodies. For one thing, it was fully human, with no bits of mouse protein woven into its structure to excite a patient's immune response. Researchers derived it, in fact, from the antibodies of people with cancer. Also significant was its structure. If you think

of the antibody's well-known Y shape, you'll recall that it's the two arms of the Y that vary from one antibody to the next. The rest of the antibody remains the same, no matter what the target. This experimental antibody streamlines the situation, discarding everything but one arm—the variable segment of the antibody that grabs the target cell.

Making a Molecule Into a Story

Perhaps it was my fascination with the science of this antibody that prevented me from thinking clearly about the emotional cost of what I was proposing to my editors at *The (Toledo) Blade*. The antibody, referred to as H11 by its Canadian manufacturer, Viventia Biotech Inc., was in Phase I clinical trials at the Medical College of Ohio. My proposal: Follow the patients in this trial and see what happens. Let's use their stories to tell the story of cancer. What it is, how it grows, how we fight it, and how it so often wins.

Two years later, I'm amazed at my naiveté. Think of what I was setting myself up for—not just me, but photographer Jetta Fraser, as well. I knew the basics of the trial: The 12 enrollees were to be people with end-stage disease, people for whom traditional cancer therapies were failing. Although the trial was open to patients with all types of cancers, as long as they lacked central nervous system metastases and maintained reasonably good liver and kidney function, its target were those with no real hope. The bottom line: They should be able to survive three months beyond their treatment.

This was—as is the case with all Phase I trials—not an experiment to see if the new drug worked but an effort to look for adverse reactions and determine a safe dose. In fact, this scrap of antibody would carry no killing agent with it. Although preliminary tests in humans demonstrated H11 targeted tumor cells—and plans were to use it eventually in conjunction with chemotherapy—this step in the process of vetting a promising compound included no lethal accompaniment. There was no reason to think H11



Cissi Jackson worked to finish a wedding dress. During her illness, she continued to create custom-made apparel and upholstery.



Jackson and her daughter Heather at the Infusion Center at the Medical College of Ohio during one of her treatments for breast cancer.

Photos by Jetta Fraser/The (Toledo) Blade.

would help patients at all.

I'd essentially planned to do a story about dying people with no real hope of a cure acting as guinea pigs. Intellectually, I think I understood that. Emotionally, I was utterly blind. Seven of the 12 trial participants agreed to let us track their progress. The structure of the final stories dictated including only five of them in the narrative. It focused

tightly on two, Cissi Jackson, battling breast cancer since 1992, and Pat Krzeminski, diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer five years earlier.

Cancer as a Central Character

From the start, I wanted to make cancer a main character in this series. So



Pat Krzeminski's husband, Ed, kisses her goodbye before she heads into surgery for her ovarian cancer.



After shaving her head to have it read "Dr. Fanning No. 1," Krzeminski smiles. Photos by Jetta Fraser/The (Toledo) Blade.

my reporting proceeded on two tracks. On one hand, I was interviewing researchers and reading cancer texts and journal articles. This was a challenging world where intricate signals changed the course of a life. I sensed some researchers trying to keep it simple for me, hesitant—no matter how I pushed—to go into the details of their

work. Others spent literally hours talking about a world where cells passed messages, evolution's signature was obvious, and a change in a single protein triggered devastating molecular dominoes.

This world became my emotional haven from the demands of the other reporting track, which required full

immersion in the lives of the patients. Jetta and I spent as much time as possible with each patient. We met their families. Some invited us to their doctor's appointments. Pat Krzeminski in particular welcomed us everywhere. The first time I asked if she'd like us to leave the room when she got into a gown for examination, she laughed. And, no, we shouldn't leave during her pelvic exam, either.

I don't think either Jetta or I were prepared for how quickly we snapped into orbit around these women. Each of them entered the trial with impossible hopes. Each could tell me that they signed a consent form that said this was not a test for drug efficacy. And each was certain that this could be their lucky chance.

Pat gave the series its name one day as we followed her in for a doctor's appointment. She'd just had the back of her head shaved so that it read, "Dr. Fanning No. 1"—James Fanning was her gynecological-oncologist—and if that didn't draw looks, her cackle did. She stopped to chat with a new patient.

"Don't you worry about it," Pat told the newbie as she walked off. "Cause I'm working on a cure." Our five-day series was called, "Working on a Cure: Cancer on Trial." Against all logic, that's how these patients saw it.

Emotional Entanglements of Coverage

Of course, I knew better. During this trial, had you asked me about Pat's chances, or the chances of any of these patients, I could have told you the grim truth, as I told editors and co-workers as the story progressed. But those were just words. As I grew more entangled with these women, I was swept in the tsunami of hope that carried them.

Then Cissi Jackson started getting better.

I remember whispering to Jetta early in the reporting that we'd lose Cissi first. She weighed a little over 100 pounds and looked as though one careless jostle would crack her like a dry stick. She was easily the sickest in the initial group of patients we met. Her breast cancer had raged for years. It

was in her bones, wrapping her chest and pushing the breath from her lungs.

I confess it drove me a little crazy to listen to her sometimes. In the face of enormous evidence of devastating illness, she exhibited certain hope. She believed lots of things I consider superstitious. Once, she told me, she knew angels sat with her at her sewing table while she worked. And I was puzzled—and privately judgmental—about how little she knew or understood about her disease or its treatment. So when she started to claim she was getting better, I didn't believe her. I wasn't the only one.

But she was getting better. Visible lumps of tumor on her head and back vanished. The chest-squeezing shield of tumor disappeared and she stopped using oxygen at night. She gained weight, and the color came back to her face. At one point, her oncologist could find no more sign of cancer.

This went against every predictable outcome for this trial. In the months that followed, her oncologist seemed as puzzled by this turn of events as we were. The oncologist changed her mind more than once about whether it was the H11 behind this turnaround, or another drug Cissi was taking.

No one else had that kind of response to H11. Because of it, Cissi received 100 doses of the antibody, five times more than the trial called for. Her doctor took her off H11 after 10 months and, although Cissi and her husband, Dave, fought to get her back on it, by the time she won that battle, it was too late. Cissi's liver function crashed. When Jetta and I visited her in late summer—during her effort to go back on the antibody—she was anxious to show us how healthy she was, even jumping on her mini trampoline for our benefit. Maybe she didn't think we'd notice how winded this demonstration made her, or that we'd miss the huge lump her liver made beneath her shirt.

By this time, I knew a heck of a lot about cancer. I'd interviewed experts all over the country, so I could tell its tale. I also knew that all my college-freshman-psychology-class-certainty about how patients should face disease



Pat Krzeminski sits with the protocol coordinator after receiving her daily dosage of H11, an experimental cancer treatment.



Krzeminski looks at the Memory Book of fellow patient Cissi Jackson as Cissi's husband, Dave, looks on.

Photos by Jetta Fraser/The (Toledo) Blade.

was utter bullshit. I watched people in the grips of what many folks called denial, and I saw how denial worked for them. These weren't stupid people. Cissi decided to know what she needed

to know about her disease, and that served her incredibly well. Did it keep her alive longer? Who knows? But it kept her happy and, remarkably, heroically peaceful until her death two years

after the trial began.

Pat, too, used denial to good ends. Jetta and I were with Pat a lot in the last few weeks of her life. Whenever I visited, if there wasn't a crowd of others around, she wanted me to interview her. She was relentless. "Ask me another question, Jenni. Ask me another question. Ask me anything. I don't care. Anything," she'd say. And I did. But I'd held back on one question until now. It was the thing I was having the hardest time accepting. Pat and I were almost the same age. (I was 48.) I'm making plans, millions of plans, for the future. How did Pat feel about it all ending so soon, so early, too early?

"Does it ever make you mad, that at your age, when you should still have so much time, that it's all coming to a close now?"

She sucked in her breath. "Oh, that was one thing I don't want to think about." She hesitated and teared up a bit, fanning her hands in front of her. "But I said ask anything. So okay, here's my answer," she said. "I just don't think about that. I don't think about it. And I'm not going to think about it again. I'm going to forget the question. See, I've already forgotten it."

She wasn't kidding. Maybe the continuous morphine drip helped her forget, but she'd offered me a glimpse at how she managed the last seven years, by not focusing on what she couldn't change.

A few days later, she was still begging me to ask her questions, but she couldn't stay awake for her own answers. She'd fall asleep mid-sentence, then suddenly wake up and say something entirely unrelated. "Do you want white meat?" she asked me once. Then she'd realize what she said and laugh until she passed out again. Once she woke up singing the "Cracker Jack" song. Again, she laughed herself to sleep. Those were almost her last words to me, "buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jacks." She died two days later, death number nine among the 12 who took part in the trial. Three patients are still alive and active, two years after their experimental therapy.

Supposedly, the molecule that seduced us all, H11, is going into Phase II



Krzeminski and her daughter Keri in the kitchen of their St. Petersburg, Michigan home.



Krzeminski has an EKG done at the cancer center.

Photos by Jetta Fraser/The (Toledo) Blade.

trials for breast cancer. But I've been told this for more than a year now, so I'm not certain it will actually happen.

I started out so seduced by this molecule. I ended up seduced by hope, by human effort and human frailty. As I wrote in the last installment of the series, after I'd explained to readers how cancer mutations offer cells a sort of eternal life: "If humans had the persistence of cancer, we'd chisel statues to them. Such creative determination

is the stuff of heroes. Few of us measure up to the indomitable development of cells run amok. The cruel irony is, cancer requires people of such resolution." ■

Jenni Laidman is a science writer at The (Toledo) Blade.

✉ Jenni@theblade.com

Why We Did This Cancer Project

Former Managing Editor Mark Baldwin wrote in our grant application to the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, “The Star-Gazette is embarking on a year-long public journalism project aimed at encouraging residents of our community to take control of their own health by reducing their risk of cancer.” While the state couldn’t prove a link between cancer and the school, we felt we could at least arm our readers with information vital to their health. We approached our Elmira TV partner, WETM Channel 18, an NBC affiliate, and the area PBS TV and radio affiliate, WSKG Public Broadcasting in Binghamton, New York. Both wanted to join us in working on this project.

Our approach would bring a bit of a twist to the traditional civic journalism model. In this case, rather than setting out with an expectation that we could help people to stop or cure cancer, we’d simply inform them about steps they could take to possibly prevent cancer. The goal for us became educating the public on the various kinds and known causes of cancer and looking at how various types are treated, including the cost and consequences of this disease.

As we began, we had several decisions to make:

- Determining how to involve the local cancer community in this project.
- Learning how much people in our community already knew about cancer and its causes.
- Deciding how we’d tell the stories we found in the community.
- Figuring out where to begin our reporting.

The Star-Gazette is a 29,000-circulation paper with a staff of about a dozen reporters who cover small municipalities, schools, cops and businesses. We don’t have medical writers or science writers, though in the process of reporting these stories, many of our reporters became quite knowledgeable about this disease. And even though we had done civic journalism before,

we’d never taken on a project of this magnitude.

How We Reported the Stories

On September 21, 2000, staff from the Star-Gazette held an informal dinner meeting at the American Cancer Society’s office in Elmira. A group of reporters, editors and producers filled our plates with fresh fruits and salads, and we sat among cancer patients, nurses, physicians and cancer educators. During the next two hours, we listened and took notes, and by the time our get-together ended, we’d found plenty of story ideas. Included among them were: defining cancer, coping with cancer, paying the bills, smoking and cancer, diet and cancer, environmental concerns, and educating children. These ideas became the spine of our yearlong project.

Every month we focused on one topic, such as cancer and the environment that we featured in May. Our main story that month was about brownfield sites, properties where use or development might be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant or contaminant. We reported on former industrial sites in our community and their legacies. On two inside pages, readers found an interview with Jan Schlichtmann, the lawyer whose legal work in the Woburn, Massachusetts case was featured in the book and film, “A Civil Action.” He talked about how Hollywood has glamorized the complexities of environmental cancer cases with movies such as “Erin Brockovich.” Another sidebar focused on environmental laws that a new steel fabricating company moving into our area needed to meet. Readers were also given shorter stories and locations on a map of the United States of communities—including Elmira—where people are trying to or have established a link between industry and cancer or disease.

The group we’d met with in September also became our advisory board. Often, reporters and editors called them to help find local sources or to clarify medical terminology. And, when

we needed journalism advice, the Star-Gazette newsroom met with Eric Newhouse, projects editor for the Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for a project on alcoholism. [Newhouse’s article on his reporting on alcoholism appeared in *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2003.] Advisory board members also helped us establish what I’ll call the “furniture” of our monthly print packages. Each month there was a Question & Answer section between a reader and expert (in May, the question was “How much cancer is caused by environmental factors?”), a list of area support groups, and a spotlight on a respected cancer-related Web site, such as the American Cancer Society, Harvard University’s cancer risk calculator, and the New York State Department of Health. These features provided a steady stream of information that we were able to bring to the community as well as resources where they could search for more.

By late 2000—with assistance from the Pew grant—many on our staff were immersed in cancer reporting. An editor, reporter, photographer, designer and graphic artist were working on the first installment of “Living With Cancer.” Following the example of how Newhouse approached his coverage of alcoholism at the Great Falls Tribune, our opening day installment would profile a day-in-the-life of cancer in our community. We also worked with Zogby International, a polling firm based in Utica, New York, to develop questions for a community-wide telephone survey on cancer.

Reporters and editors were surprised at the outpouring of community support that came as soon as the project began. During the telephone survey, nearly everyone contacted agreed to allow the media to get in touch with them again for future articles. Local physicians, who are usually hard to reach, returned phone calls and offered to make themselves available for interviews for future articles. Support groups began calling to ask how they could contribute to our reporting; when we focused attention on ways of coping with cancer, hearing from support group members was invaluable.

In response to this outpouring of interest from the community, the Star-Gazette created a “source form” for groups to distribute to their members.

Lessons Learned

As I look back on this reporting project, there are lessons we learned that would be of value for news organizations considering such a project:

1. **Find and cultivate community support.** We couldn’t have attempted this project without full community support. We found this support as soon as we let our readers and viewers know—through an interview broadcast on Channel 18—that the project was beginning. And the help offered by the local and regional offices of the American Cancer Society proved to be invaluable: They gave us permission to print cancer quizzes from the organization’s Web site and put us in contact with experts for the monthly Q. and A.’s. Any fears we had about finding sources disappeared quickly. With the support of the area medical community, our reporters were given access to two cancer treatment centers. A visit by Star-Gazette reporter Margaret Costello and staff photographer Maria Strinni provided some of the series’ most poignant words and images. We knew we needed to tell about cancer through the voices of area people. These early experiences of our reporter and photographer solidified that approach. During the year, we revisited the people we originally profiled and updated their conditions. We cheered with one patient as he was cleared of cancer and mourned when he died a week after a doctor told him the cancer had returned. By the end of the series, three cancer patients who were part of the series—including one who served on our advisory board—had died. A fourth source died in early 2002.
2. **Show your hand.** The community can help tell a story if you let them know what story it is you are trying

to tell.

3. **Be willing to adapt story selection.** When we started the project, we knew which stories we intended to do and when. We didn’t share the story order with the public, but we did share it with our media partners and advisory board. Members of the board advised us to swap the dates of two installments so that they would coincide with tobacco awareness month and skin cancer prevention screenings that were scheduled.
4. **If your news organization is going to create an advisory board, keep them in the loop and listen to them.**
5. **Schedule a mid-month run date.** Don’t plan on running a monthly package on the last weekend of the month; other news might bump it off your front page.
6. **Get each installment done early.** Relying on advice from Newhouse, we set early deadlines and stuck to them. Stories, photos and graphics were due early to allow for good editing; designers got the packages on time to ensure inspired design. As the main editor on the project, I edited story drafts at my kitchen table and took packages with me on vacations. Often I was in the office on quiet Sunday mornings to read stories and write cut lines. This extra work paid off, too, when editors and reporters didn’t have to scramble to finish their work on this project when a breaking story demanded their full attention. And, with a small staff, retaining this kind of flexibility is essential. In February 2001, when a student entered Southside High School—the same high school that started the project—armed with guns and bombs, we were able to give that story its full coverage even though it occurred four days before the second installment of the cancer project was scheduled to appear. And in September 2001, with our cancer project installment scheduled to run September 16th, it was fully edited by Sunday, September 9th. After the terrorist attacks on September 11th, our paper stayed with reporting on

the terrorism story and the cancer project publication date was moved to September 23rd.

7. **Create a concrete plan with partnering news organizations.** The most complex part of this project was ensuring that each news organization found ways to fully participate. The newspaper took the lead role in shaping and reporting the project, but several times during the year “Living with Cancer” was featured on the NBC affiliate’s local Sunday news show. This series was also the subject of news and call-in shows on the local PBS affiliate; in one instance, a local PBS producer wrote a first-person article about his colonoscopy, which was also featured on a locally produced PBS TV show. The Star-Gazette and Channel 18, the NBC affiliate, each promoted the series in advertisements, articles and promotions. The local PBS affiliate directed viewers from its Web site to the newspaper’s site for more on the series. In retrospect, this partnership could have been stronger. The newspaper was immersed in the project while the other news organizations were on the outside, with little direct involvement in shaping the content of the story. To improve this process, better plans need to be drawn up at the outset. To do this, one person at each news organization should be put in charge of securing commitments about how much each will contribute to the project. Then, as the work is ready for publication or broadcast, these people work to find ways for each entity to draw attention to the combined work.
8. **Think about the future.** If we had to do this all over again, we would have included in our initial grant application a request for funds for a follow-up community survey. Results from it could have told us if and how our reporting efforts influenced members of the community. Also, because reporter turnover is high at small-market newspapers, it is important to develop expertise among a mix of reporters, both new and veteran, as a way of ensuring that

the stories will all be told with the same depth, detail and care.

“Living with Cancer” provided our readers and viewers with a compelling report about cancer. By reading it, they could explore in very personal ways how their neighbors were coping with the disease and learn about resources to lessen the chances they would have to deal with cancer. But there are still many families in our community dealing with cancer’s unknown origins.

The cancer investigation at Southside High School that instigated our project has yet to conclude. Last fall the Star-Gazette reported that the school district’s survey of high school alumni wasn’t complete, and no deadline for its completion had been set. The state health department reported that tests of soil around the school showed it was safe. But further investi-

gation efforts were diverted to handle the aftermath of September 11th. We continue to follow the story, but news has slowed to a trickle after three years.

And a little more than a year after “Living With Cancer” ended, we continue to give Page One presence to news about cancer discoveries. However, we tend to be more probing and critical in our reporting about these medical studies because of what reporters and editors learned in doing this series. The Star-Gazette plans a follow-up story this summer in which we hope to learn through our community sources if and how our series affected how people care for their health.

Weathered articles reminding people how to eat a more healthy diet hang on residents’ refrigerators. We know that some people underwent cancer screenings—such as having a colonoscopy—after reading newspa-

per articles. Even now, 15 months after the project was put to bed, Internet surfers still come across the package on the Star-Gazette Web site at www.stargazettenews.com/lwc and send us e-mail. We can’t be certain of the long-term effects of our effort, but we can be certain we touched lives. ■

Lois Wilson is deputy metro editor at the Star-Gazette, in Elmira, New York. Prior to joining the Star-Gazette as an editor, she was a reporter at the Palladium-Item in Richmond, Indiana from 1991-1997.

✉ lowilson@stargazette.com

Weighing Anecdotal Evidence Against the Studies

A reporter explores connections between increased rates of cancer and the changing lifestyle of Alaska Natives.

By Diana Campbell

Larry Aiken took it upon himself to pull up sunken military equipment from the depths of a lagoon in Barrow, Alaska. Outfitted in the outdoor gear he’d purchased and working from a boat the community provided, each time he brought up a vehicle or a car battery or a barrel that once contained some mysterious substance he felt an injury to his soul. For many generations, his people used this lagoon to gather fish, birds and plants for food.

“I’m very concerned,” Aiken, an Inupiat Eskimo, said during a spring meeting of Alaska Natives looking to address contamination in their villages. “My people hunt from this lagoon.”

In 1963, an arctic storm sank about 18 ships in the Barrow lagoon. They had been loaded with 899,000 pounds

of military equipment. At first, the military refused to salvage the wreckage, so members of the community were left to clean up the mess. Now the military provides small grants to assist this work, and to date Aiken estimates that about 10,000 pounds of material have been pulled out. He wonders if cancer and other illnesses popping up on the North Slope have been caused by contamination left by the wreckage. Across the state, other Alaska Natives wonder the same thing, and strongly suspect a link to cancer from contamination that is linked to actions and activities of either the military or other government or private entity.

A 30-year study from the Alaska Native Tumor Registry, funded by the National Cancer Institute, confirms cancer is the leading cause of death for

Alaska Natives, who now have some of the highest mortality and incidence rates of this disease in the nation. But the registry does not provide overwhelming evidence of contamination-caused cancers. Instead, the leading culprit is tobacco: Lung cancer is responsible for 30 percent of Alaska Native cancer deaths, according to reports based on the registry. The second highest rates come from digestive cancers. Of that group, the highest is colorectal. The study’s authors suspect a low fruit and vegetable consumption and high alcohol use might be among the reasons.

Weighing the Evidence

Some of the pitfalls that Ragnar Levi and Lewis Cope suggest that reporters

avoid while reporting on these medical stories have become tangible obstacles for me. [See pages 61 and 64 for their stories.] As a reporter working on stories about Alaska Natives and cancer, I'm faced with weighing anecdotal evidence against medical investigations that don't support what I see and hear. It's hard to ignore the stories of so much sickness. It's also hard to ignore the belief among a growing number of Alaska Natives that their illnesses are caused by something sinister and unnatural in the land and water of their communities. But it is hard to ignore the weight of data that contradict that belief.

I came to reporting this story because of Darlene Demientieff, a 37-year-old Athabascan wife and mother of two, who died of cervical cancer in 1997. She became one of many Alaska Natives I know who have had cancer or have died of cancer. When I started asking questions, I soon found myself overwhelmed with information but few answers. Many times native people from places scattered across Alaska have counted off to me the number of family members who've dealt with cancer. However, in many families, the cancers don't exhibit any obvious pattern. For example, a mother might have experienced breast cancer, whereas her sibling or child might be dealing with lung, kidney, stomach or cervical cancer.

I knew early on that I couldn't rely only on collecting the sad stories of families dealing with cancer. I would need to better understand the workings of public health agencies, the Alaska Native Tumor Registry, and state and federal studies. They are the official and authoritative sources that track the incidence of cancer. But I also knew I had to take concerns that Alaska Natives had about cancer seriously. I'd heard elders recount stories about never seeing the disease in their communities. (Tobacco was not used by Alaska Natives until Western culture made its way north.) Clearly, Alaska's indigenous peoples are struggling with a changing lifestyle, but many of them still eat traditional foods as much as possible, especially those who live in

remote communities. Alaska Native leaders have explained to me that with the loss of aspects of their traditional culture comes the loss of spirituality and connection to the land. These changes and disconnections contribute greatly to the deteriorating health of Alaska Native people.

Eyes and Ears of the Community

I don't have a medical background, nor have I done much reporting on medical stories. I worked most recently as a business reporter for the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, with a daily circulation of about 17,000 (21,000 on Sunday). Even though I might have begun work on this story without the skills I will need to fully report it, I have felt the responsibility to both report this story and tell it accurately. What keeps me chasing this story is my belief that people have a right to know what might be happening in their communities, especially when it involves health issues. Information is power, particularly for people who seemingly have little else. I take my role as a reporter seriously, and because of that I am the eyes and ears of the community on this story and the interpreter of information people might have a hard time understanding.

After I did several cancer stories, people began coming to me with alarming tales of sickness, making it impossible for me to not continue my investigation. That's why I applied for and ultimately won the Alicia Patterson Journalism Fellowship, which will give me a year to further examine and write about aspects of this story.

I remember well what Seattle Times investigative reporter Byron V. Acohido told me when people asked him if he had an aviation background to help him pursue his Pulitzer Prize-winning stories about problems with Boeing 737's rudder system. "No," he said, "I'm a reporter." It's likely in my reporting that I will not entirely close the gap between anecdotal evidence and contrary data, but I can try to explain it and accept that that's all I might be able to do, for now.

I can also wait and do more reporting on this story in the future. As reporters, what we learn now ought to be used to make us more alert to significant changes and enable us to report on them accurately when they occur. Meanwhile, public health officials, who are charged with developing programs to prevent illnesses and educate the public about the disease, will need to find ways to address the increasing disbelief that Alaska Natives appear to have in the reasons being offered for their cancers. How this situation is handled could well lead to more information and insights about the incidence of cancer among Alaska Natives.

There is a sense of urgency, too. According to the tumor registry study, high cancer rates among Alaska Natives are likely to continue. In the 1950's, cancer was rare in natives. Now Alaska Natives face a 30 percent higher risk of dying from cancer than do U.S. whites, according to the most recent registry study. Yet the Indian Health Service, the federal agency that provides health care for American Indians and Alaska Natives, is underfunded by 40 percent, according to the Intercultural Cancer Council, a national tribal organization dedicated to addressing the causes of the disproportionate cancer burden of Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

In Barrow, Larry Aiken feels he is fighting against things bigger than his ability to conquer them. His father died of cancer. He was a man who never smoked and lived a traditional Inupiat Eskimo lifestyle. "My heart is so heavy toward the people dying of cancer," he explained. "It's so hard to talk about." Perhaps the stories I report and the evidence I can bring to families like Aiken's will give some relief by answering questions that right now seem unanswerable. ■

Diana Campbell is a 2003 Alicia Patterson Fellow who is spending her fellowship year investigating cancer among Alaska Natives. She is on leave as a reporter with the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, and she is an Alaska Native.

✉ dcampbell@newsminer.com

Documenting Native Approaches to Wellness

With images and words, a journalist tells the story of a tribe's effort to prevent and control Type II diabetes.

"In North America, Indians are like the canaries in a coal mine. We foretell the future for the entire population." —As told by an Ojibwe elder.

By Mary Annette Pember

When I chose to attend the journalism school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, my great dream was to report and tell stories that depicted people of color, especially Native Americans, in a realistic and holistic manner as members of their community.

In 1999, after spending nearly 15 years at daily newspapers as a photographer, photo editor and writer, I began working freelance as a photojournalist. My work focuses on native issues, except for occasional forays I make into the mainstream world for business purposes. Gradually, through this work, I've come to know myself again as an Indian woman readjusting to the rhythm of Indian country. From this experience and my work in mainstream media, I've gained insight into what makes native and non-native people distinct and what we all share as human beings.

As I traveled throughout Indian country, I quickly became aware of the pervasiveness of Type II diabetes. Among some native people, I discovered innovative approaches that communities were using to address the issue. Community leaders and health care workers adamantly agreed that they were engaged in a fight for the survival of Indian people. It was clear that decades of mainstream medical practices weren't working. Health worker Lorelei DeCora demonstrated this to me when she shared a story with me about seeing the floor of an Indian Health Service clinic that was littered with Type II diabetes prevention pam-

phlets. All the patients at this Indian Health Service facility were being treated for diabetes-related problems. DeCora knew that informational pamphlets weren't going to change lives.

So DeCora and a group of reservation leaders embarked on addressing this epidemic in their community. I was struck by the scrappy, grass-roots quality of their work and the unique "Indian way" in which they approached it. They identified a problem, saw what didn't work, and created solutions of their own that were accepted and practiced by members of the community. And their efforts worked. In "Whirling Thunder," diabetics and those at risk participate in an exercise program, diet counseling, and cooking classes. For those who want to more effectively control their disease, there are intensive three to five day "Talking Circles." More than 35 percent of the tribal members who participated in the "Talking Circles" reported weight loss and improved glucose levels.

I found this work incredibly inspiring and realized this story needed to be told. What I saw in this community's work had the distinct possibility of helping other Native Americans and people of color. I spent a lot of time hanging out on the Ho-Chunk "rez" in Nebraska waiting for the visual storytelling elements to emerge. And they did, slowly and deeply, sometimes unexpectedly. When an eagle swooped over their home, the Little Owl family rushed outside to blow their just arrived eagle bone whistles. The eagle responded with his distinct cry. This was a moment that captured the sense of a deeply felt cultural connection. I paused in the Hy-Vee grocery store with Brigette Little Owl as she carefully read the ingredients of regular vs. low-fat Bisquick. I sat in her kitchen as she and her husband, Orville, injected their daily insulin shots.

As the project unfolded, I began to see people's lifestyles and their relationship to food as being deeply woven into their lives and cultural background. Foods that natives describe as "normal and comfortable" are inexplicably tied to cultural or spiritual experiences. To make lifestyle changes is difficult for native and non-native people. For the Ho-Chunk people, a wellness program needed to recognize their spiritual connection to their daily lifestyle and their food and then address them, preferably in a manner that is culturally relevant.

Recently I learned that Johnson & Johnson awarded \$50,000 dollars to the Ho-Chunk nation's "Whirling Thunder" program, largely based on the information from the story, "The Ho-Chunk Way," that I did in *The Washington Post*. In that story, I profiled the high incidence of Type II diabetes among native people and focused on the Ho-Chunk tribe's approach to diabetes prevention, control and management through a unique regimen that preserves their cultural traditions.

With this story—and news of this award to the tribe—I feel I've taken another small step towards realizing the dream I had when I entered journalism school. It's not often that I experience this type of gratification as a journalist, and I am savoring it. ■

Mary Annette Pember is a freelance journalist based in Cincinnati. Her work has appeared in Life, Time, Newsweek, The New York Times, Native Peoples, Indian Country Today, and other publications. She is a member of the Red Cliff Band of Wisconsin Ojibwe and executive director of the Native American Journalists Association. Her work is at www.mapember.com.

✉ mpember@fuse.net

Participants in the “Team Up” project on the Winnebago Reservation in Nebraska share their feelings during a Talking Circle held after a feast celebrating their successful completion of the program. During the emotional event, members expressed gratitude and a growing sense of hope about living with diabetes. The project is a grass-roots effort by tribal health workers to influence lifestyle change among the community’s diabetics. The circle is an important symbol among native people and is emblematic of their belief system. The Little Owl family participated in the “Team Up” project.



Georgia Gomez kisses her mother, Mabel Denny St. Cyr, as she lies in her bed in a tribal nursing home. Mabel died of blood sepsis during dialysis due to diabetes. In her last days Mabel could neither eat nor drink. She received all nourishment via intravenous tubes. Georgia, an emergency medical technician for the tribe, has dedicated herself to educating her people about diabetes prevention.



Kendall Little Owl winces at the unexpected tartness of his fat-free, sugar-free frozen yogurt cone. The family works hard at making a healthy diet a natural part of their lives.



Photos by Mary Annette Pember.

Brigette Little Owl carefully reads labels of food she buys for the family. She is comparing regular vs. light Bisquick.



Kendall Little Owl tests his blood sugar level. This testing is very much a part of his family's life. Both of his parents are insulin dependent. His younger brother has tested positive for acanthosis nigricans, a predictor of insulin resistance. The family struggles to create and maintain lifestyle changes to reduce the chances that the sons will develop the disease and improve the parents' chances for longer lives.



Kendall Little Owl shows indications of acanthosis nigricans. A dark spot, which is an indicator, was discovered during routine screenings done at the tribal school. This discovery offers an opportunity for early diabetes prevention in children.

Photos by Mary Annette Pember.

Orville and Brigette Little Owl sit at their kitchen table as they prepare their second insulin injections of the day.



Orville Little Owl teaches his son Kendall how to blow an eagle bone whistle. The whistle is an important element in Plains Indian ceremonies. Ho-Chunk culture plays a significant role in the family's daily life.

Photos by Mary Annette Pember.

Constraints on China's Coverage of SARS

For a variety of reasons, neither the government nor the press handled the medical crisis well.

By Philip J. Cunningham

During the explosive spread of the SARS virus, in the land of its origin, the media were preoccupied with weighty political stories. Changes in China's domestic leadership at home, along with the distraction of America's preemptive war on Iraq, dominated the news, making it easy for a "local" medical story in southern China's Guangdong region to slip under the radar all but unnoticed, for reasons inadvertent and intentional.

Bookended by the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in November (which was dominated by the change of guard from third to fourth generation of Chinese Communist leadership, a once in a generation event) and twin meetings of the China National People's Consultative Congress and the National People's Congress in March, the mystery disease—soon to be known as SARS—spread while attention was focused elsewhere. There wasn't much space in newspapers or broadcast time available for any story, especially a gloomy one, as the state media kicked into good-news gear to shower people with confidence-building stories and political theater. Even the relatively racy tabloid press, which gave the changing of the guard story short shrift, failed to focus on SARS as exotic military matters in Iraq and North Korea were boosting newsstand sales.

Missing Its Own Story

During the walk-up to the Iraq war and while it was being waged, CCTV (China's state-run television station), in particular, benefited from the nation's relatively neutral stance to provide balanced, factual reporting on military and diplomatic developments in a way that seemed to herald the



Chinese people go to work with masks in Beijing, China. Public alarm about the SARS virus soared as reports surfaced of a much higher SARS figure and authorities cranked up an anti-SARS propaganda drive—one of China's most aggressive and sweeping campaigns in years. *Photo by Ng Han Guan/The Associated Press.*

arrival of serious TV journalism in China. [See our story on China's press coverage of the Iraq war on page 98.] The tragedy, however, is that while CCTV's coverage rose to that occasion to present news that was in some respects equal to or even superior to the patriotic pabulum being broadcast by U.S. stations, a huge story was brewing in CCTV's backyard, and it went almost entirely unreported.

The chronic emergence of influenza strains during the cold season made it possible for the SARS outbreak to be cast as just another seasonal flu story, putting it on the back burner until it exploded and couldn't be ignored any longer. CCTV (and other local news organizations) offered only infrequent, vague accounts of the bad flu that hit

Guangdong, giving the impression it was a regional sickness that wreaked havoc and disappeared. For a while, it did disappear, at least from news reports. Then SAR (Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong) got hit by something that was, ironically, named SARS. This served to strengthen the impression that this was a problem centered on Hong Kong and unrelated to China.

To the world, this illness was an Asian thing; in Asia, a Chinese thing; in China, a Hong Kong thing; in Hong Kong, a Kowloon thing; in Kowloon, a Metropole Hotel thing; in The Metropole Hotel, a ninth-floor thing, and on the ninth floor, it was a sneeze from a doctor who picked it up in Guangdong. In Guangdong, it was a

Foshan thing; in Foshan it was blamed on a chef, and so on. While the exact ground zero of SARS is unknown, the blame game was being practiced at every level.

The Chinese Government's Role

While the weight of scientific opinion pointed heavily to Guangdong as the origin of this mysterious “Chinese fever,” face-conscious Chinese officials claimed that Hong Kong’s SARS was an unrelated disease, and they subsequently made feverish attempts to downplay scientific evidence and give rise to rumors suggesting SARS was from somewhere else. (It is certainly possible some Chinese health experts believed the flu in Guangdong to be unrelated to the SARS in Hong Kong because so much was unknown about the disease, with its shifting patterns of infection and uncertainty about its infectious agent.) There was media speculation suggesting the cause might be bioterrorism and somehow linked to the war.

Some health officials even slyly started suggesting SARS was an import, even a “foreign thing,” and a malicious disinformation program went into full swing. The Chinese Ministry of Health and its media minions exploited the fact that several publicly scrutinized SARS deaths involved Europeans—Italian doctor Carlos Urbani and Finnish International Labor Organization official Pekka Aro—not so subtly portraying the disease as a foreign import. It was a case of using the facts to confuse instead of elucidate. (Urbani got ill caring for SARS patients in Hanoi and died in Bangkok, but the outbreak in Hanoi is traceable to Guangdong. Aro was said to have picked up the bug on a Thai Airways International plane from Bangkok, but experts can trace the airplane-borne infections to China as well.) In both of these high-profile



Cyclists wear masks to protect themselves from SARS in Beijing. *Photo by Kyodo News/The Associated Press.*

cases, by telling only half the story the media made it seem that China was uninvolved and exonerated.

From the outset, politics, psychology and science played roles in how China’s government—and the media in China—handled this health crisis. To the extent that SARS was deliberately unreported it is a miscarriage of journalism and health administration. But even those guilty of suppressing news and statistics in the beginning could hardly have known how badly the gamble to downplay would turn out in the end. Even in a free society like Hong Kong, the SARS story was full of twists and turns, false alarms, and false hopes that it was over. That the disease would turn out to involve a ferocious species-jumping virus that in some people was resistant to top-notch medical care was hard to know at the outset. Who could have predicted the

course it would take and how it would frighten people throughout the world due to its mysterious mechanisms of infection?

Even as the disease ripped through Guangdong, causing a run on goods and panic, the story that made it to Beijing readers and viewers was largely a human interest one. Isn’t it curious how southerners panic and resort to home remedies when a bad flu goes around? It wasn’t until the Iraq war was nearly over that SARS hit the radar of public consciousness in Beijing in any substantial way. By then, the disease was so devastating to Hong Kong that news of it started to compete with war stories.

CCTV’s early SARS stories mostly involved trotting responsible officials before the camera to reassure the public that everything was under control and life could go on as normal. But nagging questions remained. Was SARS related to the flu that had hit Guangdong just before Chinese New Year when interprovince travel was at its peak? If so, why wasn’t

there any evidence of sickness in Beijing and other cities? Why was the first outbreak in Guangdong not covered in the press? Instead, news of it traveled largely on telephone text messaging to reach people in and out of China. Had the people of Guangdong made a big fuss about nothing or had they faced the same viral terror as the people in Hong Kong?

Enterprising local journalists tried to answer some of these questions and hit a wall, revealing later that there had been a memo ordering them off the story. Similarly, foreign reporters interested in the SARS story complained about lack of cooperation on the Chinese side. Even when the Health Ministry started to offer briefings, members of the Beijing press corps were frustrated by unresolved contradictions—sometimes the toll was said to include military hospitals, other times

it was said it didn't—and inaccurate statistics.

By late March, the Health Ministry had a choice—to admit it was lying or go on lying and compound the problem. It chose to go on lying and stonewalling. Officials from the World Health Organization (WHO) were given a cold reception in Beijing, and requests to visit Guangdong were put in abeyance. On March 25th, the Health Ministry announced, "We have not found a single case of atypical pneumonia in Beijing or any other place in China recently." The clay feet of China's Health Ministry were exposed when it turned out that Beijing was badly infected with SARS.

Rather than immediate and complete transparency to save lives and advance science, the public was kept in the dark by nervous officials hoping SARS would go away or at least go by unnoticed. The body of an American teacher who was dying of SARS in Shenzhen was whisked across the border to Hong Kong. This story gave rise to the impression that a foreigner with SARS was an unwanted hot potato and could expect little compassion from worried authorities. In fact, this teacher was being sent there belatedly and at his family's request. But the Orwellian overtones of a story, in which neither side of the boundary wanted the statistical burden of SARS death, had been established.

That the first few foreigners to succumb to SARS received considerable media attention in China, while the more numerous Chinese victims died unrecognized and unknown, served to propagate the official line that "there is no proof this disease is from China." Like China's clumsy handling of AIDS, it looked for a while like this one, too, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, would be blamed on foreigners.

By the end of March, China's media were giving mixed signals, a clear indication that the SARS crisis was provoking a political power struggle. President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, and Wu Yi (known as the "Iron Lady," one of the few women in top leader-

ship who would, in time, replace the health minister) were the first to speak out. Former President Jiang Zemin and his politburo proxies such as Zeng Qinghong and Jia Qingling were strangely silent. SARS seemed to sneak up and take these top government officials by surprise. Those responsible for the cover-up such as Health Minister Zhang Wenkang, Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong, and other Jiang protégés were subsequently fired, suggesting Hu and Wen—when they decided to act—risked their political careers to get rid of deadwood and tackle the SARS problem head on.

Cultural Influences on Media

What is impossible to know—because press coverage of such things is not allowed—is whether Jiang, who was leaving as president, wanted nothing to mar his political swan song and thus SARS was covered up maliciously. But what we do know is that just as streets were swept clean, houses of ill-repute temporarily padlocked, grass painted

From the outset, politics, psychology and science played roles in how China's government—and the media in China—handled this health crisis.

green and petty criminals rounded up, so, too, newspapers and airwaves got a superficial clean-up in November to celebrate the "success" of the scripted 16th Party Congress as it celebrated the Jiang era. It is also true that one of the many jobs of China's self-appointed guardians is to reassure and calm people, since the Chinese have a history of hysterical overreaction to perceived threats. Likewise, there is the customary whitewash, employed on ritual occasions, to block inauspicious things from view in order to present China in the best possible light.

So it might have been by coincidence rather than design that the curtain of silence came down on the press just as the virus was beginning to

spread. But once damage mounted, news reports of death and plague would surely have detracted from Jiang's farewell party and this celebration of his days in power. During these early stages, the government and media whitewash was not nearly as criminal in intent as the deliberate stonewalling, statistical understatement, and outright lying that happened later.

After the 16th Party Congress ended, restraints on behavior, including those put on journalists, loosened. Illegal CD's were back on the market. Street vendors camped on bridges and street corners and red lights glowed once again. And reporters, within reason, could begin to dig for stories. Soon stories from foreign media were being picked up and translated. Among them were reports about the mystery flu in southern China, and these stories—reported by independent press in Hong Kong and foreign news agencies—carried with them increased credibility.

Still, in China, the disease was swept under the rug until reports about SARS from Hong Kong, Vietnam, Taiwan and other secondary locations bounced back into China via the Internet, Phoenix satellite TV news, and word of mouth. Complacency was still being peddled by the spinmasters of China's state-controlled press.

Several Chinese reporters complained they were warned off the SARS story. There was also the unexplained closing of several Guangzhou-based publications, which some thought might have been related to this issue. Informed speculation about the closing of the 21st Century Herald hints at central government displeasure at a critique of lagging political reform, effectively silencing one of the most outspoken media outlets in Guangzhou, the first city hit by SARS. The author of an Internet communication claiming government statistics were lies got in trouble, and two Xinhua editors were reported to be sacked for publicizing a classified document on SARS, though they were reassigned jobs elsewhere in the news agency.

There was an additional cultural factor that delayed dissemination of bad news. In the middle of flu season, the Year of the Sheep was to be welcomed. Chinese New Year is the country's most important holiday and individuals, much like the government, believe that inauspicious topics should be avoided in favor of merriment. Family reunions are essential, and the seasonal movement involves mind-boggling numbers of people: Some 100 million migrant laborers travel by bus and train to homes in the countryside of China. This year's holiday, arriving on the heels of years of economic growth, political stability and visible prosperity, involved perhaps the largest movement of human beings in the history of the world as a nation of a billion people raced home. This presented the understandable, if risky, desire not to ruin the holiday by announcing the danger of disease and urging people not to travel or, perhaps, even canceling the holiday.

The Role the Internet Played

Hong Kong took the heat of being the epicenter of SARS not because it started there but because it was the disease's first outbreak in a place with a free press. The death toll and infection rate in Guangdong was not comprehensively reported, nor was the slightest indication given that a "regional" disease could have any impact on Beijing or the rest of China. When doctors in Hong Kong and China were initially quoted in press accounts, their pessimistic comments and dark scenarios were much out of tune with the public mood. The South China Morning Post in Hong Kong played a key role in the dissemination of information about SARS during this stage, since SARS was seen by the media and in medical terms as a "Hong Kong" story. Whatever happened in Guangdong was, for the time being, difficult to report and nearly impossible to research.

The Ministry of Health wasted hours of primetime television that was made available to tell their side of the story by making light of the whole matter. Deputy Minister Ma took a light-hearted, affable approach, saying

facemasks were unnecessary and it was much ado about nothing. It's as simple as "one, two, three, four, five, see, nothing to be afraid of," he said, as he tried to talk away fears by using party-line charm. His boss, Zhang Wenkang, went on record defying the facts.

Contributing to the dearth of reliable information about SARS was the weakened state of the Internet in China during the winter of 2003. Censorship of foreign news stories was quite heavy and Internet access limited. While the SARS virus was starting to spread, Internet cafés, tightly regulated and under observation, were just starting to be reopened after lengthy nationwide closures in the name of unregulated business and fire hazards. China boasts millions of Web surfers, but relatively few computer owners; public access computers in campus libraries and Internet cafés are essential to the Web having a vibrant role in information flow.

Many Web sites—including The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Daily Telegraph, ABC News, and CNN—were banned. But by using proxies and reading wire service accounts it was possible to get a pretty good idea about what the outside world was saying about China. But access was spotty and inconvenient. I wrote about this situation for the South China Morning Post in February, arguing that China had more to lose than gain by blocking credible news sites.

The ban on these sites and others was lifted a few weeks later, just as the season of Party Congresses was coming to a climax. Some have speculated on the timing, suggesting this gesture towards transparency marked the transition in generational leadership. If this is so, then perhaps transparency and increased media freedom can be expected to be part of the new administration's policy under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.

Courageous Voices Break the Story

In early April, several courageous Chinese individuals came forward to say that their government was lying. At this

time, the official line admitted to only a handful of "imported" cases. One doctor was reportedly fired for telling a wire service reporter about confirmed SARS cases in the capital. But the big breakthrough happened when a respected military doctor named Jiang Yanyong told foreign reporters on the record that he knew of more than 100 cases and seven deaths in Beijing, none of which had been reported by state officials or media outlets. (Chinese reporters would have had a hard time publishing this information.)

This was the turning point. If the government refused to admit it was wrong, there were fears that this courageous doctor would be punished, possibly imprisoned, and then other doctors would be afraid to speak out. Government bureaucrats, intent on protecting their turf and image, started to crank out propaganda, but it was strange and unconvincing. But at the top level of government, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao went into full gear. They fired recalcitrant officials and admitted, with considerably humility, the failure to grapple with the problem earlier. Strong measures were then put in place to stop the spread of SARS.

By late April, Beijing had become the epicenter of the SARS outbreak. The government has canceled holidays, banned student travel, closed cinemas and karaoke halls, and built emergency medical facilities to accommodate thousands of very sick people.

There's a Chinese expression about fixing the pen only after sheep escape, but there is also a saying that fixing it late is better than not fixing it at all. In its handling of SARS, China moved from dysfunctional underreaction to dynamic overreaction. And, along the way, the media in that country found themselves unable to inform the people about circumstances that could affect their lives. ■

Philip J. Cunningham, a 1998 Nieman Fellow, writes for the South China Morning Post and other publications with a focus on politics and culture in Asia.

✉ philip_j_cunningham@post.harvard.edu

WATCHDOG

Medical Reporting In a Highly Commercialized Environment

A family doctor prescribes eight guiding principles for accurate and fair coverage of research findings.

By John Abramson

The article about C-reactive protein (CRP) in the November 14, 2002 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM) made a great news story. A little known and inexpensive blood test that measures the level of inflammation in the body was found to better predict the risk of developing cardiovascular disease than the well-known cholesterol level.

The study found that among 28,000 women followed for eight years, the 20 percent with the highest CRP levels were 2.3 times more likely to develop cardiovascular disease than those in the lowest quintile. And much of this risk occurred independently of (and therefore would not have been identified by measuring only) cholesterol levels. The article concludes that identifying people with elevated CRP levels would allow “optimal targeting of statin therapy,” and that these people’s risk of developing cardiovascular disease may be decreased by the same statin drugs that are currently used to lower cholesterol.

This news provided an archetypal journalistic narrative: A widespread and previously unrecognized risk of serious disease can be identified by a breakthrough in medical research and treated with drugs already widely used to lower cholesterol.

My non-random sample of three newspapers—*The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*—and two news magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*—each carried at least one story based on this NEJM article. Collectively, the stories expressed great enthusiasm about the potential health benefit of the new test: “groundbreaking,” “the most promis-

ing advance in a long time,” “paradigm-shaking,” “extremely important,” “a home run.” In turn, coverage of this story certainly had great impact on increasing public understanding of the potential importance of measuring CRP levels routinely. Among those who read this news, it is likely that few want to miss out on the potential benefit of this medical breakthrough.

So what’s not to like? A closer look at the article in the NEJM and the news coverage that followed illustrates the terribly difficult challenges facing medical journalism today. Eight principles emerge that can and should be applied to reporting of research findings.

Principle 1: When only relative risks are reported, question the importance of the findings. The NEJM article reported that for women in the highest quintile of CRP level, the risk of developing cardiovascular disease was 2.3 times greater than it was for women in the lowest quintile. On the surface this sounds like a dramatic increase in the risk of serious disease. But how much does that really increase an individual’s risk? Nowhere in the NEJM article was the amount of increase in absolute risk reported. An answer can, however, be reconstructed from one of the graphs included in the article.

About one episode of cardiovascular disease developed among each 1,000 women in the lowest quintile of CRP levels each year. So the women in the highest CRP-level group would have had an absolute risk of approximately 2.3 episodes of cardiovascular disease per thousand women per year. This means that among 1,000 women with the highest quintile of CRP levels there

were only 1.3 more episodes of cardiovascular disease each year than there were among 1,000 women with the lowest CRP levels.

The population used in this study was at such low risk of heart disease that the well-publicized reduction in relative risk was, in fact, of very limited clinical importance. Yet the data were presented in a way that precluded all but the most fastidious and statistically savvy of reporters *and* doctors from understanding the minimal importance of this seemingly dramatic increase in relative risk of disease.

This serves as a reminder that the clinical importance of reduction of relative risk cannot be evaluated and should not be reported without being accompanied by the absolute reduction in risk. But the news stories covering the NEJM article reported only the relative risk associated with an elevated CRP level. (*The Washington Post* mentioned that “in absolute terms” the risk of heart attack was “very small.”) Unfortunately, this is not the exception but the rule in medical journalism: Eighty-three percent of news stories that report the quantitative benefit of a new product give only the relative benefit.

Principle 2: When financial ties exist between researchers and the medical industry, the results of a study are 3.6 times more likely to be pro-industry. Be suspicious.

No corporate funding for the NEJM article was noted. The lead author did, however, disclose that he is “named as a co-inventor on patents filed by Brigham and Women’s Hospital that relate to the use of inflammatory biologic markers in cardiovascular dis-

ease.” Relationships between researchers and the medical industry are not unusual. Seventy percent of clinical research is now funded by the manufacturers of the drugs and medical products being studied.

Notwithstanding their excellent public relations work, corporations undertake this research first and foremost as a business activity. Their primary responsibility is to investors, not to the public’s health or financial well-being. The commercial consequences of research published in prestigious medical journals and publicized by the press can be enormous. With many millions, even billions of dollars at stake, the drug and device industries hire the best and the brightest researchers, writers, business people, and public relations firms to spin research findings to their advantage.

In the case of the NEJM article about CRP, there was selective reporting of the results. (The relative risk of cardiovascular events was clearly reported to be higher in the women with higher CRP levels, but the overall risk of death, which is even more important than cardiovascular risk, was not reported.) And there was a notable absence of adjustment for exercise and diet, which might have diminished the predictive value of the CRP level.

One might think that it would be easy for a reporter or doctor to query the data that had been used in the NEJM article to answer such questions. And one might also reasonably assume that an essential component of good reporting—not to mention of protecting the integrity of medical research—is transparency. But with commercially sponsored medical research, there is not even a pretense of transparency. Research data with commercial value are not available to the public, and often the complete data are not even available to researchers who participate in writing the paper.

The commercial bias does not stop with the research, but affects the way the results are reported to the public as

well. In an interview for this piece (but not specifically in reference to the CRP article), Dr. Marcia Angell, former editor of the NEJM, told me that: “The authors of studies have every interest in presenting the results in the most spectacular possible way. The journals tend to go along with it. Medical research has gotten to be very much directed toward the media, just like everything else. Researchers want to get their studies covered by the media, which is sometimes parlayed into money for their institutions, as well as publicity for themselves.”

The techniques used to spin results can be very complicated and difficult if not impossible for most reporters to decipher without expert statistical assistance. These techniques are exquis-

Angell explained to me. “That leaves a hole big enough to drive a truck through.”

In the CRP case, two of the researchers had coauthored an article in 2001 that had been funded by the manufacturer of the statin drug Pravachol, Bristol-Myers Squibb. And only four days after the NEJM article was published, a major new study was announced to evaluate whether the drug manufacturer AstraZeneca’s not-yet-FDA-approved cholesterol lowering drug will reduce the risk of heart disease in people with elevated CRP and normal cholesterol levels. The lead author of the NEJM article will be in charge of this new study. The commercial synergy between encouraging widespread adoption of CRP testing and increasing the market for cholesterol-lowering drugs is obvious. This highlights the importance of inquiring directly about any conflicts of interest that might be relevant to a story such as this.

No experts should be quoted without clearly indicating, on the record, whether or not they have commercial ties to any companies that might benefit or be hurt by the issue at hand.

itely catalogued in a paper by Lisa Bero and Drummond Rennie, deputy editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), entitled “Influences on the quality of published drug studies,” which was published in 1996 by the International Journal of Technology Assessment in Health Care. This article should be mandatory reading and a frequently used reference source for medical journalists.

Principle 3: When no conflicts of interest are declared, there might still be conflicts of interest that should be reported. Beyond funding of the study being reported, researchers are asked by medical journals to report financial connections that might bias their work. Few researchers believe their objectivity is compromised by their financial relationships with drug companies and other medically related industries. “A conflict of interest is being defined as something that biases your work, and you get to decide whether it does,”

Principle 4: Read the accompanying editorial, if there is one. It might do a lot of your work for you. In the CRP case, this would have been beneficial since the editorial accompanying the NEJM article was far less enthusiastic than the article. “Any clinical significance of the added value of C-reactive protein over conventional markers of coronary heart disease is debatable,” the editorial said. Yet its less sensationalized view of the research findings was mentioned in only two of the five stories about CRP (The Boston Globe and The New York Times).

Principle 5: Financial ties of all experts quoted should be included in the story. Five of the six news reports about the CRP study quoted the lead author’s enthusiastic endorsement of this “breakthrough” discovery: “a huge paradigm shift in how we think about cardiovascular disease;” “very powerful and I would even argue an overwhelming demonstration of the fact that it’s time to move beyond cholesterol;”

“overwhelming evidence that inflammation is at least as important as LDL cholesterol,” and “continued reliance on LDL alone is not really serving our purpose very well.”

Only one of the five news stories (one of the two in *The Boston Globe*) mentioned that this researcher has any financial interest in advocating the widespread use of CRP testing or increased use of the statin drugs. Other experts, not involved with this study, also gave enthusiastic endorsement to the use of the new test, but no documentation of financial relationship that might influence their opinions was included in any of the stories. (The four newspaper stories also quoted experts who were less enthusiastic about widespread use of the CRP test; the magazines did not.)

When medical experts are quoted in news stories, the public reasonably assumes that their comments are guided solely by a desire to serve the public interest, reflect the integrity of their position and/or academic rank, and are independent of commercial relationships. But the intertwined nature of business and medical relationships is so pervasive today, and so poorly understood, that the public cannot reasonably evaluate expert comments without knowledge of the presence or absence of commercial ties. No experts should be quoted without clearly indicating, on the record, whether or not they have commercial ties to any companies that might benefit or be hurt by the issue at hand.

Principle 6: Place the research findings in the context of other research, especially about lifestyle changes. The women in the lowest CRP quintile had 57 percent less risk of developing cardiovascular disease than women in the highest quintile. A study published in the *NEJM* in 2000, with a population similar to the CRP study, showed that female nurses who exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, maintain a normal body weight, do not smoke, and drink alcohol moderately have 83 percent less risk of developing heart disease than women who don't do those things. And more than four out of five epi-

sodes of heart disease that developed in this study were due to lack of adherence to this healthy lifestyle.

Now that's news.

Other studies have shown that simply eating fish once a week reduces the risk of heart disease by as much as statins or even moderate exercise reduces the mortality rate by at least as much as statin drug treatment of people with high cholesterol. But there is no commercial push to remind people of the dramatic benefits—far greater than statins—of a healthy lifestyle.

Principle 7: Check previous research papers by the same authors. Unreported conflicts of interest and other issues that might be relevant to the current story often appear in other scientific papers by the same authors. In the CRP case, two of the authors published a paper in the *American Journal of Cardiology* based on the same data set only seven months before the *NEJM* paper. In the earlier paper, cigarette smoking was noted to be responsible for about half of the cardiovascular disease in middle-aged women, and the study found that CRP levels correlate significantly with the total number of cigarettes ever smoked—for both current and former smokers. The elevation of CRP found in former smokers was almost as great as that seen in current smokers. So any study, especially one involving middle-aged women that is undertaken to determine the power of CRP level to predict cardiovascular risk—independent of other obvious risk factors—would have to take into account whether a person is a current, former or non-smoker.

Even though these three categories for smoking status were available in the data used for the current *NEJM* article about CRP (according to yet another paper written by some of these authors and published in the *NEJM* in 2000), the category “former smoker” was not included in the most recent *NEJM* article. Women were categorized simply as being current smokers or non-smokers. This might seem academic, but the small absolute increase in the risk of cardiovascular disease seen in the women with the highest

levels of CRP could simply be a result of them being former smokers. If this were the case, adjusting the data for former smoking might significantly diminish the additional predictive power of CRP level.

Principle 8: Do the arithmetic on cost. A previous study coauthored by two of the authors of the current *NEJM* study on CRP showed that treatment with a statin drug, Pravachol (40 mg. per day) successfully lowers CRP levels. Assuming treatment of women in the highest quintile of CRP with a statin drug reduces their risk of cardiovascular disease by 40 percent (a generous assumption extrapolated from previous studies), and applying this percentage to the absolute risk above, then treatment with Pravachol would prevent fewer than one cardiovascular event per year in 1,000 women.

The yearly cost of treatment with this dose of Pravachol is \$1,572 per person (at the Northeast chain of CVS pharmacies). So the cost of each cardiovascular event prevented by treating women with the highest CRP levels with Pravachol would be more than \$1.7 million dollars in drugs alone, not including the lab tests and doctor visits necessary to monitor for adverse drug effects. This could be reduced to “only” about one million dollars if a lower dose of a less expensive statin drug was found to be effective.

Why Good Journalism Matters

The CRP article in *NEJM* got wide press coverage, but a far more important article that appeared in the *JAMA* one month later received almost none. The “Antihypertensive and Lipid-Lowering Treatment to Prevent Heart Attack Trial—Lipid Lowering Trial” (ALLHAT-LLT) was designed to determine whether more widespread use of statin drugs would be beneficial for people at high risk of developing cardiovascular disease. In this study, 10,000 people at high risk of developing cardiovascular disease were randomized either to be treated with a statin drug or continue with their “usual care” (about 20 per-

cent of this population took statins) and followed for about five years.

The results were quite surprising: Increased use of statins in this high-risk population has no significant benefit in reducing the risk of heart disease or death. In fact, the greater use of statins in the subgroup of people with normal LDL (bad) cholesterol levels, fewer than 130, was associated with an 18 percent *increase* in risk of death from all causes—not statistically significant, but very suggestive. Yet none of the publications in my sample reported this very important and unexpected but commercially disadvantageous story.

What might seem initially like pica-

yune and pedantic concerns about the CRP article and the resulting news coverage have enormous medical and economic consequences. The lead author of the NEJM article told The New York Times: “From 25 to 30 million healthy, middle-aged

Americans are at far higher risk than they and their doctors understand them to be, because we’re not taking inflammatory factors into account.” His comment suggests that many of these people might benefit from statin drugs, in addition to lifestyle changes. This comes on top of the 2001 guidelines for the evaluation and treatment of elevated cholesterol levels, recommending the number of Americans taking statin drugs increase from 13 to 33 million.

The additional cost of putting another 45 or 50 million Americans on statins would be between \$45 and \$75 billion per year for the drugs alone, not including the cost of screening all adults with CRP blood tests and the additional doctor visits and blood tests needed to monitor treatment with statins. This would increase total drug costs in the United States by 30 to 50 percent. Commercially backed justifi-

cations for wider use of these drugs saturate the paid media as well as news stories. At the same time, journalists place much less emphasis on major research like the ALLHAT-LLT study that suggests statins might not only be unhelpful in people for whom the national guidelines recommend drug therapy, but might actually be harmful for high-risk people with normal cholesterol levels. And journalists often fail to mention the evidence that healthy lifestyle changes appear to be far more effective than statins at preventing cardiovascular disease as well as decreasing the risk of breast and colon cancer and increasing longevity.

Our health care system is on the brink of collapse because of problems stemming from runaway costs. In the

Unraveling the commercial bias that colors much of our medical research is a complicated undertaking, at best. Journalists often don’t have the statistical and research expertise to cut through the pro-industry spin, nor are they given the time needed to analyze complex research data.

midst of this quickening crisis, medical journalism faces enormous structural challenges. Most clinical research is fundamentally commercial activity—albeit cloaked in the guise of public service—designed to maximize corporate profits. While publishers depend on advertising revenues from the drug companies and other medical industries, readers yearn for stories of scientific progress that can keep chronic and acute illnesses at bay.

Impediments to Good Reporting

Unraveling the commercial bias that colors much of our medical research is a complicated undertaking, at best. Journalists often don’t have the statistical and research expertise to cut through the pro-industry spin, nor are they given the time needed to analyze complex research data. Reliance on

press releases and news conferences gives voice primarily to commercial viewpoints, yet news organizations are under pressure to get news out to the public quickly on limited budgets. And there is also the lurking possibility of pressure from medical advertisers to present the news in ways that are consistent with their goals.

A middle ground is needed between simply passing on sensationalized, commercially generated versions of “breakthroughs” in medical science and undertaking time-consuming investigative reporting. Without this middle ground, the news media cannot fulfill their responsibility to the public to present well-reported and fair analyses of medical issues. When this is not possible, journalists have an obligation to let

readers, listeners and viewers know the constraints that have prevented them from presenting such an assessment of the news.

Hopefully, these eight principles will assist journalists in their efforts to

reach such ground and offer a fair and accurate picture of breaking medical news. Whether this is an achievable goal—within the customary practices of journalism today—is another story. ■

John Abramson, M.D., completed a two-year Robert Wood Johnson fellowship before practicing family medicine for 20 years in Hamilton, Massachusetts. He served as the chair of the Department of Family Practice at Labey Clinic and is a clinical instructor at Harvard Medical School. He is currently working full time on a book about the causes and consequences of the crisis in American health care.

✉ john_abramson@hms.harvard.edu

A Hard Look Finds a Network Script Fades to Blah

A journalist tracks where and how a medical story began and how its content came to be exaggerated.

By Mervin Block

I drink tea. A lot of it. Mug after mug. Day after day. Been drinking it since I was a kid. So I've been glad to hear tea may be good for us. But I'm teed off by stories that seem to have more holes than a sieve. Last September 24th, one such story caught my ear on the "CBS Evening News." It said: "There are several new studies out tonight on the health benefits of tea, especially the green and black varieties that are rich in antioxidants. Researchers found drinking tea can reduce levels of bad cholesterol and help prevent heart disease and cancer."

That's it, 41 words. Most arresting is the assertion about what researchers found. Listen again. "Researchers found drinking tea can reduce levels of bad cholesterol and help prevent heart disease and cancer."

Although we've been hearing for several years about possible benefits from drinking tea, hearing this made me wonder who conducted these "new studies." And I wondered how much tea it would take to do me any good. And how often I'd have to drink it. What kind of tea: powdered, bottled, bagged or loose leaf? Which variety? Assam? Darjeeling? Oolong? Made with what kind of water? At what temperature? And brewed for how long? Taken with sugar? Lemon? Milk, cream or straight? Can tea help *any* viewer? Can it help me? If so, am I drinking enough?

Also, I wondered how the new studies supported, differed from, or advanced the stories we've been hearing for several years. So I poked around the Internet and LexisNexis, and I made some phone calls.

Tracking This Tea Story

Two hours before the CBS newscast, at 4:23 p.m., Reuters sent out a story

based on a news conference held that day for the previous day's Third International Scientific Symposium on Tea and Human Health, held in Washington, D.C. The gathering had been sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the American Cancer Society, other scientific groups, as well as the Tea Council, representing the tea industry. The Reuters story began, "Solid evidence is mounting that drinking tea can prevent cell damage that leads to cancer, heart disease and perhaps other ills, scientists said on Tuesday."

The story went on to say the Agriculture Department also released a study "suggesting" that tea drinking can reduce the risk of heart disease by lowering cholesterol. It reported that the USDA's Human Nutrition Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland, had tested eight men and eight women who agreed to eat and drink for several weeks only what they were given at the lab. As a result, the director of the lab said, drinking tea had lowered their low-density lipoprotein ("bad" cholesterol) by up to 10 percent.

Although the script broadcast on CBS reported that researchers had found drinking tea can reduce "bad" cholesterol, here's what readers learned in the Reuters story:

1. Only 16 people were studied.
2. And for only a few weeks.
3. They ate only a special diet.
4. They experienced an average lowering of "bad" cholesterol by only up to 10 percent.

The study only "suggested" certain *possible* benefits.

Hardly the stuff of headlines, yet a news item on a network newscast is equivalent to a Page One story across

the country. If an editor at CBS had asked the writer of the news script, "Can you give me one good reason we should broadcast this—only one?" or the anchor had asked the producer, the story might not have run.

Cautions in Some Original Reporting

The Reuters article also told of another report at the day-long symposium: A researcher at the University of Arizona and the Arizona Cancer Center said she had tested 140 smokers to see whether drinking tea could affect levels of chemicals associated with DNA damage. The trial looked at a chemical, 8-OHdG, which Reuters reported is found in urine and linked to damage of DNA. For four months, the volunteers drank water, black tea or green tea. At the trial's end, the researcher said, her team found that those drinking only green tea underwent a 25 percent decrease in their 8-OHdG, an apparently favorable outcome.

The Reuters health and science correspondent, Maggie Fox, ended her 542-word article by cautioning, "*Much more research* [emphasis added] would be needed to see if lowering levels of 8-OHdG, or other markers of DNA damage, is actually associated with a lower risk of cancer."

Another account of the symposium was even more cautious. Several hours before Reuters moved its article, the Tea Council wrote a press release distributed on the PR Newswire at 9 a.m. The release said circumspectly: "The results of a new clinical study *suggest* [emphasis added] that tea consumption *may* [emphasis added] decrease LDL ['bad'] cholesterol by 10 percent when *combined* [emphasis added] with a 'Step 1' type diet, moderately low in

fat and cholesterol, as described by the American Heart Association and the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP). The study, conducted at the USDA Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center in Beltsville, Maryland, is the first investigation of tea in which the subjects' diets were precisely controlled by having them eat meals prepared at the research facility." (The then-acting director of the USDA Center, Joseph Judd, a research chemist, told me that that paragraph is "pretty accurate.")

Although the Tea Council's press release mentioned the special diet the participants followed, it didn't bother with other details that would dilute the findings further: Only 16 people were in the trial and for only a few weeks. Sixteen people might have entered the trial, but the abstract of the study says 15 finished the first two three-week stints. And for the third and final phase of the trial, the number of participants slipped to 12. The abstract also acknowledges the role of Unilever, which Judd told me provided "the treatment beverages and partial financial support for the study." He identified the "treatment beverages" as tea and placebos. Unilever makes Lipton tea.

Even when tea is accompanied by a healthful diet, the possible benefits may be limited. The Tea Council's press

release did not quote or paraphrase the key judgment in the abstract for the USDA study, "Based on this study, we conclude that black tea consumption as part of a[n] NCEP Step 1 type diet may reduce blood lipid risk factors for CVD [cardiovascular disease] in *mildly hypercholesterolemic adults* [emphasis added]." So they think tea—with a special diet—may help if your cholesterol is slightly high.

Creating a News Story

The network news writer had a tough assignment, even with the Reuters article about "solid evidence" that it said was "mounting." He had to boil down all the information into copy that ran about 15 seconds.

Not long after I heard that script on the air, I spent some time with Ed Bliss, a former news writer for CBS correspondent Edward R. Murrow, editor for Walter Cronkite, and author of "Writing News for Broadcast." I decided to conduct an experiment. I asked him to write a 15-second script based solely on the Reuters story. I didn't tell him about the original broadcast script, nor did I mention my curiosity about it. Bliss probably figured I was up to something, but was too polite to ask. (Bliss died in late November at the age of 90.)

A few days later, he e-mailed his

script and gave me permission to use it: "Drinking tea may be good for your health. Researchers have found evidence—no proof yet—that tea has ingredients that lower the risk of heart disease and cancer. This finding, announced today, is based on tests conducted by the University of Arizona and the Department of Agriculture." (Forty-seven words; the network's was 41.)

Bliss's choice of words indicates that he'd realized the story was flimsy. The first verb he uses is "may." And he stresses "no proof." But in the news story that was broadcast, the script said the efficacy of tea was proved: "Researchers found drinking tea can reduce levels of bad cholesterol and help prevent heart disease and cancer." Its lead sentence also contains problems. "Are ... out tonight" is weaker than dormitory tea. Because "are" and other forms of "to be" don't convey action or movement, listeners can't tell whether the studies came out an hour ago, a week ago, or a month ago. Besides, hundreds of thousands of studies "are out tonight." In fact, the studies mentioned in this broadcast script did not come out that night. And a few more problems: The script offers no clue about who conducted the studies or the name of the scientific body or journal that reported them.

If the assertions in the CBS script were true and newsworthy, it would have been better to write this lead: "Several new studies said today green and black tea may be good for you."

Is there a lesson to be learned by following this tea trail? Yes: Don't swallow everything you hear. ■

Mervin Block, a writing coach, is the author of "Writing Broadcast News—Shorter, Sharper, Stronger." He was a staff writer on the "CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite" and a staff writer on the "ABC Evening News with Frank Reynolds." He also wrote for NBC News. His Web site is www.mervinblock.com.

✉ merblo@aol.com

Tips for Writing Medical News

1. Never use the word "miracle." Leave that to ministers, mayonnaise-makers and sports-writers.
2. Don't use "breakthrough." Breakthroughs are infrequent and this word, like controversy, is so overused that it has lost much of its impact. And "major breakthrough" is redundant.
3. Avoid "cure." Announcements of cures are rare. They must be handled with utmost care. One cure is simple: the cure of hype.
4. "May" doesn't mean "will."
5. "Suggests" or "indicates" doesn't mean "finds" or "proves."
6. "Contributes to," "is associated with," or "is linked to" does not mean "causes."
7. If you have time, download the study you're writing about. Also look for the original news release. See what's what for yourself.
8. One study by itself seldom proves anything. Don't treat the results of a study as the last word.
9. Identify the source of the story. Attribution precedes assertion. Before telling what was said, tell who said it. If you start like this, "A new study says," then in the next sentence identify the publication or institution and proceed carefully.
10. Don't be an alarmist. Don't exaggerate. Don't speculate. Cogitate.
11. You can't believe everything you read, but you should believe everything you write. ■

A Doctor Examines a Journalist's Work

As she moves between being a doctor and a medical journalist, loyalties are divided.

By Perri Klass

Sometimes I envy the real journalists. I imagine them marching forthrightly into the hospital, the clinic, the doctor's office, declaring themselves as members of the press. They are welcomed—or they are treated with suspicion. They are given the run of the place—or they are fenced in by restrictions. But their identity, loyalties and job responsibilities are clear.

My identity is not always clear, nor my loyalties, nor even my job. Well, let's be honest. Most of the time my identity is perfectly clear—and it isn't "journalist." The "good stories" I see in the medical world—the crisis moments, the fascinating, terrifying times when disaster is just averted or the unforgettable crises when something goes irretrievably wrong—most of these I see because I am a doctor. When patients show fear or colleagues admit uncertainty, when families implode or doctors explode, I'm present not by virtue of a press credential but by right of medical license.

When I stumbled into medical journalism back in medical school, I made naive mistakes and upset people without meaning to: I literally told tales out of school, and many of my classmates felt that in criticizing my medical education, I was devaluing theirs. I had underestimated the power of the press—I hadn't expected male medical students to pore over an article in a women's magazine and trace the identity of my thinly veiled characters, taking offense at my humor. I'd worried about protecting the confidentiality of patients, but not of my peers.

I didn't really know the rules of reportage. I had no training as a journalist, and I found myself working with an editor who wanted to blur bound-

aries: Why not conflate a couple of stories as if they'd happened one after another? It was only when this editor suggested gently that my story would be much stronger if a patient actually *died* that I pulled myself together and began to set some rules: This is fact. That is fiction.

Now, in magazine articles or essays, I sometimes change identifying details and include notes telling readers that names and identifiers have been changed. But the truth is that a lot of medicine is *in* identifying details, which means there are a lot of great stories I just can't use. Occasionally, I do show a family something I've written, assuring them that if they don't want it published, it won't be. I once wrote an essay about taking care of an infant who had needed a liver transplant. I changed her name, but she was the

I can take. And I tell myself that real journalists are free of these conflicts and constraints but, in truth, I know that journalists do not necessarily breathe only the heady air of pure freedom and objectivity. Everyone brings to the job a complex mix of prejudice and experience and the desire to tell a good story, along with a set of standards. But if I can write only about heroic families and children who make good progress, and if I write about them knowing that I'm going to seek approval of parents, my writing is limited and changed, and not necessarily in a good professional direction.

But when people let you into their lives because you are a doctor, you can't turn around and say, "Oh, by the way, I'm also a journalist. Can I use what you said or did or what just happened to you?" Neither can you just go

ahead and write about them in ways that are at all recognizable. To do this would be to betray professional trust and violate some pretty old oaths and to act like a creep. So I save those "good stories" for fiction, in which I can change every identifying detail, conflate unrelated anecdotes, and even kill off a patient to make a stronger story.

When I pursue medical stories that don't arise out of my personal experiences, I often get access easily—into an operating room to watch a procedure, for example. Or maybe a doctor will open up to me because we've made common cause around iniquities of HMO paperwork or the vicissitudes of residency. I know, however, that certain professional promises are understood—I'm not out to axe the profession. I don't believe that the story will always be better if the patient dies, if

But when people let you into their lives because you are a doctor, you can't turn around and say, 'Oh, by the way, I'm also a journalist. Can I use what you said or did or what just happened to you?'

only child at our health center with this genetic disease and the only one with transplant scars on her abdomen and someone else's liver keeping her alive. Anyone at the health center could easily identify her. So I showed the essay to her mother; her only request was that I use her daughter's name and give her a copy. She was proud of her daughter's progress and her family's heroism.

That particular situation worked out perfectly well, but it suggests all kinds of constraints on what stories I can tell, which details I can use, and what tone

the doctor is incompetent, if the hospital is understaffed, or if the drug is dangerous.

As a medical student, I wrote in the somewhat obnoxious tones of the wiseass novice who saw clearly the hypocrisies, pomposities and peculiarities of her elders. Back then, my stock in trade was my outraged sensitivity, my ability to look at the medical profession with an outsider's eye. But that's long gone; I am as hypocritical and pompous and peculiar as any other elder.

My loyalties are divided. Most of the time I'm a doctor. And practicing medicine takes up great quantities of mental space with information and anxieties and the trailing threads of so many different lives. Maybe I could argue that much of the time I'm also a writer—I write fiction, after all, and I write

about knitting and food and rearing children—since writing also shapes my sensibilities and perceptions. But most of the time I can't say that I'm a medical journalist or, at least, a reputable medical journalist, since that designation carries a specific conscious and conscientious identity. It's an identity I inhabit at times, as an act of will, carefully hedged round with rules and regulations tailored to my peculiar circumstances.

And that isn't all bad. One of the more useful aspects of training in psychiatry is that they teach you to identify your reactions to a patient and use those reactions diagnostically: Does talking to this person leave you feeling happy and energetic or dull and sad? Instead of ignoring your subjectivity, you identify it and incorporate it into your professional persona. My goal as

a medical journalist is to recognize and incorporate the complexities of my professional subjectivity, to use my sense of identification, my accumulated experience, and my privileges of access, to tell slightly different stories, or to tell stories slightly differently. ■

Perri Klass, M.D., is assistant professor of pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine and medical director of Reach Out and Read. Her articles have been published in The New York Times Magazine, Vogue and Esquire, and she writes regularly for Parenting and Knitter's Magazine. Her most recent book is "Love and Modern Medicine" (Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

✉ pekclass@bmc.org

Critical Tools for Medical Reporting

A medical editor's book provides advice and guidance for journalists.

By Ragnar Levi

Journalists are supposed to ask probing questions, verify what sources say, then be selective in what they report. This is part of performing their journalistic mission. What this means for medical reporters is that they must work to separate scientific fact from science fiction. But, in daily coverage, such ideals are often betrayed.

In my book, "Medical Journalism—Exposing Fact, Fiction, Fraud," I illuminate many of the most common pitfalls in health and medical reporting. These include:

- Failing to question findings about treatment effects.
 - Extrapolating from research to clinical practice, such as hyping findings of basic research, animal studies, or clinical subgroup findings.
 - Mistaking risk factors for diseases and assuming that treatment of risk factors will do more good than harm.
 - Misjudging risks by failing to give a realistic idea of the actual odds involved.
- These pitfalls can be overcome when medical reporters keep four key questions in mind and conduct their reporting in a way that unearths answers to them:
1. Is this claim valid?
 2. Where is the evidence?
 3. Is the evidence strong and relevant?
 4. How can the news be reported fairly and accurately?

- Reducing reporting to dueling quotes, which results in "he said-she said" reports.
- Failing to ask sources to substantiate their claims by scientific evidence.
- Being misled by number games.
- Depending on anecdotes for evidence, rather than relying on scientific studies.



Is This Claim Valid?

To determine this, a reporter should figure out whether the promised effects or danger signals seem at all realistic. Here, the golden rule is that the greater the claim, the more reason to be skeptical. The stronger the claim, the more determined ought to be the demand for evidence. For example, if researchers claim they've developed a drug which cures Alzheimer's disease, the demand for evidence should be greater than if the claim centers on a drug that changes the behavior of brain-damaged rats.

Exposing unrealistic claims also calls for the ability to penetrate the rhetorical techniques some medical experts use to be persuasive. Be on the lookout, for example, when medical sources try to impress a reporter with the use of unnecessary technical jargon or excessively precise figures (4.86 percent instead of 5 percent). And, sometimes, untested medical technologies are successfully launched amid false accusations of a "conspiracy" against the technology. Such rhetoric can whet the appetite of a naive reporter, drawn to a more dramatic slant. And good medical reporters shine a light on vague hypotheses that are not supported by scientific evidence. For example, when a disease is shown to be associated with a particular genetic disorder, solid medical reporting tells readers that this does not support the hypothesis that a cure has been found.

Another key issue is whether an expert who makes a claim is sufficiently knowledgeable about the topic. In what specific field is he or she an expert? Since medical research is so highly specialized, reporters cannot assume that an expert on gastrointestinal cancer is sufficiently knowledgeable to also address gynecological tumors. What is the reputation of this expert among his or her colleagues? What type of research has he or she published? Especially important to find out—and report—is information about sponsoring organizations, companies or other important affiliations. Are factors such as potential research grants or media ex-

posure playing a role in the release of this information? Will the source gain from publicity? Some naive reporters might regard doctors and other medical experts as objective seekers of truth. However, figuring out if there is a hidden agenda is as essential in medical reporting as it is on any other beat.

Where Is the Evidence?

When medical reporters face tight deadlines, finding the evidence means acquiring at least a rough idea whether relevant studies are available to support the claim. Sweeping statements by experts, such as "breakthrough," or "research shows," should not be accepted or quoted unless evidence can be produced. Sources should be able to back up their claims by peer-reviewed articles in recognized journals. If they can't, then the absence of such evidence should be reported. Reporters should always ask to see the articles or references that experts cite.

There are questions medical journalists should be asking to get at this evidence. A few of these include:

1. Where is the evidence? (Ask to see articles or references. Are the journals well known?)
2. Who has been studied and who is affected? (What was the status of their disease, their age and gender, social/cultural background, and follow-up?)
3. Are the research methods reliable? (With regard to treatment methods, retrospective studies are generally weaker than prospective, uncontrolled studies generally weaker than controlled, and nonrandomized trials generally weaker than randomized.)
4. How great were the effects? (Changes should be reported not only in percentages, but also in absolute numbers. How many patients underwent treatment as compared with the number of successful cases?)
5. How precise are the results? (What is the margin of error? Are the results statistically significant or not? Beware of statements such as "up to"

or "as little as" if they are not presented together.)

6. How well do the conclusions concur with other studies? (Ask if other studies point in the same direction. If so, the results are probably more reliable. Small, single studies can be unreliable. Systematic reviews of many studies, sometimes including meta-analyses, are often more reliable.)

Reporters can use a handbook (such as "Clinical Evidence," published regularly by BMJ Publishing Group) as a starting point for important questions. Systematic reviews, such as Cochrane reviews (www.cochrane.org), cover a wide range of verified information and identify beneficial or harmful interventions. Other helpful resources include health technology assessments, including economic, social and ethical analyses (see, for example, <http://agatha.york.ac.uk>).

Is the Evidence Strong and Relevant?

Medical reporters are flooded with published research findings from sources who want to promote their products and ideas. Given the time pressure under which most journalists work, a complete assessment of scientific quality is unrealistic. However, a skeptical attitude and a few basic principles go a long way.

For example, good reporters realize that weak findings about treatments often emerge from studies that do not use control groups, have not been randomized, or are based on few observations or a narrow sample. Similarly, a high dropout rate among trial subjects often leads to false conclusions, as does an excessively short follow-up time. Many researchers draw conclusions about a method's benefits based solely on changes in lab values and test results, so-called surrogate endpoints. However, as a rule, special studies of hard endpoints—patients' symptoms, quality of life, and survival—are necessary to backup claims about the benefits and risks of an intervention. For

example, a study showing that a treatment reduces tumor size in cancer patients does not necessarily mean it also saves lives. It might, in fact, do more harm than good.

Judging whether or not the evidence is relevant to a larger group of patients involves asking who has been studied and who is affected by the condition. Therefore, the basic questions include: Do these results really apply to other patients? How do you know?

When looking for clues about what is weak scientific evidence for treatments, what follows is a list of familiar characteristics:

- Preliminary results (often presented at conferences and said to be “based on my experience”)
- No control group (only before and after measurements)
- No randomization (often resulting in systematic errors)
- Few observations (often making it impossible to draw conclusions)
- Biased samples (particularly sick/healthy or old/young, or narrow subgroups)
- Major dropout (resulting in systematic error)
- No use of blinding (allowing expectations to influence the results and how they are interpreted)
- Short follow-up (leading to premature judgments of treatment success or failure)
- Lab values only (rather than symptoms, quality of life, and survival, which matter the most to patients).

How Can the News Be Reported Fairly and Accurately?

Balance is often considered a hallmark of fair reporting. In the medical beat, this means, for example, reporting the effects and the side effects, as well as

the benefits and harm. Thus, when an expert discusses treatment from a single point of view, a good medical reporter will inquire about the other side of the issue and ask for such evidence.

Balance also means conveying im-

Seasoned medical reporters are distinguished from gullible ones by their ability to remain skeptical toward unproven claims—whether in interviews, in press releases, at conferences, in journal supplements, and on the Internet.

portant ambiguity and controversy. Both sides of an argument should be presented. More specifically, exposing a lack of scientific support for either side of an argument is equally important. In fair medical reporting, it is also important to learn how to choose typical examples. At times, medicine offers examples of odd phenomena—incurable diseases that mysteriously disappear after a treatment that has been shown to be ineffective or perfectly healthy people who die suddenly from a chemical that has been proven quite harmless. Given their rarity, these cases attract journalistic attention. But when reporting such events, journalists must make it clear that these are exceptions to the rule. And when interviewing a patient with a particular disease, the public needs to know whether the patient is a typical or an exceptional case.

Accurate reporting also entails helping the audience distinguish between correlation and cause. When two events occur at the same time—for example, a patient’s symptoms improve when a new treatment is started—this does not necessarily imply that one causes the other. Correlation is not causation. In reporting about a particular health risk, it may be helpful to give the odds, but to also compare them with the odds of other risks to allow the public to have information by which to compare. For example, the risk of acquiring cancer from a particular food can be compared to the risk of acquiring

cancer from smoking. Finally, good medical reporters return to important topics and follow-up their reports. They might reevaluate claims by approaching the subject from new angles.

Seasoned medical reporters are distinguished from gullible ones by their ability to remain skeptical toward unproven claims—whether in interviews, in press releases, at conferences, in journal supplements, and on the Internet.

While doing research for my textbook on medical journalism, I interviewed many excellent medical journalists. The lesson they had learned was clear: It does not take a medical degree to be a good medical reporter. What it requires is basic knowledge of a few scientific ground rules (many of which I describe in my book) and, above all, common sense and a whole lot of healthy skepticism.

As psychiatrist Thomas Szasz said, “Formerly, when religion was strong and science weak, men mistook magic for medicine; now, when science is strong and religion weak, men mistake medicine for magic.” Let us not add to the confusion, but try to help the audience by sorting the wheat from the chaff. ■

Ragnar Levi, M.D., is an award-winning medical editor with a background in both medicine and journalism. Since 1992, Levi has been the executive editor of “Science & Practice,” published by SBU, Sweden. He has written “Medical Journalism—Exposing Fact, Fiction, Fraud” (Iowa State Press, 2001) and also authored a monograph on evidence-based medicine.

✉ levi@pi.se

Helping Reporters Play the Medical Numbers Game

A journalist reminds us about how tricky putting 'facts' into perspective can be.

By Lewis Cope

As medical reporters, we laugh at the tale about the drug-treatment researcher who said, "Thirty-three percent were cured, 33 percent died—and the third mouse got away."

We know that the more patients (or mice) in a study, the better. Big numbers help make a study's findings "statistically significant." This term simply means it's unlikely that the study's key statistical findings are due to chance alone. But merely obtaining statistical significance doesn't prove that the study's conclusions are medically significant or correct. So, as reporters, we must probe further and be alert for the numbers games and other things that might lead us awry.

Two journalistic instincts—healthy skepticism and good questioning—come in handy on the medical beat. And, if you don't report in this area, a peek into what we do will make you a more astute consumer of medical news—and a more careful viewer of medical claims on the Internet.

Hints About Medical Coverage

What follows are thoughts I have about things that scientists and reporters must consider.

Remember the rooster who thought that his crowing made the sun rise? Even with impressive numbers, association doesn't prove causation. A virus found in a patient's body might be an innocent bystander, rather than the cause of the illness. A chemical in a town's water supply might not have caused illnesses there, either. More study and laboratory work are necessary to certify cause-and-effect links.

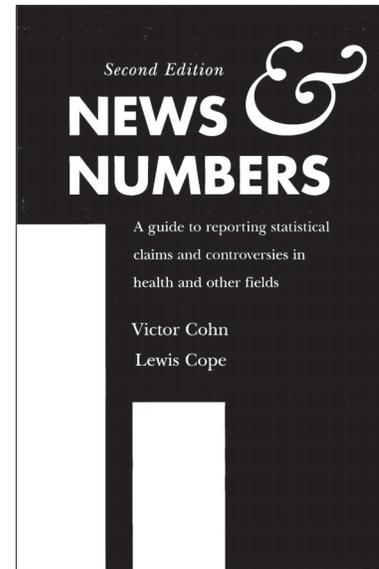
Let me cite one current case in which precisely this caution is needed. News reports have speculated about whether some childhood immunizations might be triggering many cases of autism. As

a reporter, this has the sound of coincidence, not causation. Autism tends to appear in children about the time they get a lot of their vaccines. Is additional study warranted? Probably. But there is concern that in the meantime parents will delay having children immunized against measles and other dangerous diseases. In a lot of the press reports, the missing figures are the tolls these childhood diseases took before vaccines were available.

Always take care in reporting claims of cures. The snake-oil salesman said, "You can suffer from the common cold for seven days, or take my drug and get well in one week." Patients with some other illness might be improving simply because their disease has run its natural course, not because of the experimental drug they're taking. Care is needed to sort claims made about what has cured a particular ailment.

In covering stories about disease outbreaks and patterns, be cautious about case numbers. There was a story recently about how Lyme disease cases have soared in some states. The article cited statistics, but buried some important cautions. Improved diagnosis and reporting of Lyme cases might be behind much of this increase. The journalistic antidote: Refer to such numbers as *reported* cases and explain why you are doing so.

Sort through when you might be dealing with the power of suggestion. A large federal study examining quality of life issues recently concluded that hormone therapy for menopause doesn't benefit women in many of the ways long taken for granted. How could so many women, for so long, have concluded that the hormone therapy made them more energetic and less depressed? A patient who wants and expects to see a drug work may mistakenly attribute all good feelings to the medication.



The "gold standard" of clinical research is a double-blind, placebo-controlled study, with patients randomly assigned to either a treatment group or to a comparison (no treatment) group. Blinding means that, until the study is completed, neither the researchers nor the patients know who is getting the experimental treatment and who is getting only a placebo. This keeps expectations and hopes from coloring reported results. Less rigorous studies still might be important, but findings from them require more questioning by journalists. When their findings are reported as news, the absence of the "gold standard" should be stated.

Side effects are a big part of medical coverage and need to be handled properly. Some drugs have been taken off the market after serious side effects were discovered, long after the original studies found no problems. A serious side effect that strikes only one in every 10,000 patients might have been missed in the original studies involving a few thousand patients. The problem becomes apparent only after the drug is marketed and then taken by more

and more people.

There is a danger in citing averages. Remember: People drown in lakes with an average depth of four feet when it's nine feet deep in the middle. We hear a claim that the average person in a weight-loss study lost 50 pounds. But maybe there were only three people in the study. A 400-pound man took off 150 pounds, but the other two patients couldn't shed a single pound. Still interesting. But the average figure didn't tell you the story.

When a reporter does a story about a new medical treatment, find out what it costs and whether the cost will be covered by most insurance plans. I've answered many phone calls from readers after reporting about some new medical treatment and forgetting to deal with the dollar figures. In reporting on research, cost estimates are important to our readers and viewers. Some treatments might be so expensive that they are unlikely ever to see widespread use.

Remind readers, listeners and viewers about the certainty of some uncertainty. Experts keep changing their minds about whether we should cut back on fats or carbs to keep our waistlines trim. In the eyes of some, these and other flip-flops give science a bad name. Actually, this is science working just as it is supposed to work, and it helps if we, as reporters, include this in our stories.

Readers, listeners and viewers should also know that science looks at the statistical probability of what's true. Few, if any, new treatments would ever reach patients if proof-positive were required. Many, many lives would be lost. Science builds on old research findings in seeking new advances. In the process, old ideas are continually retested and modified if necessary.

The Wisdom of Good Medical Journalists

Wise medical journalists tell their viewers and readers about the degree of uncertainty involved in what they are reporting. They use more words like "evidence indicates" and "concludes" and fewer words like "proof." I only

wish I had been wise more often during my career.

Keep in mind that when a study's findings agree with other scientific studies and knowledge, that's a big plus. When they don't fit with what's already known (or thought to be known), caution flags must be raised. The burden rests with those seeking to change medical dogma. But when that burden is met, there is a hell of a story to tell.

Big numbers aren't always needed to tell important stories. Small studies can open big research areas. It's just that reporting on these smaller studies require "early studies" warning labels. On the other hand, even the first few cases of a newly recognized disease (such as the mysterious respiratory illness called SARS) can be a concern. A single confirmed case of smallpox could be a looming disaster, signaling a new terrorist threat.

When we hear of a high number of cancer cases clustered in a neighborhood or town, more study might be needed, not panic spread. Statistically, there might be many more cases than expected. But wait. This could be happening by chance alone; with so many communities across our nation, a few will have more than their share of cancer cases. And with cancer, we hear about how experimental early-detection tests might find very tiny tumors. But is it early enough to make a difference? Or is treatment then the right approach? Extra caution, too, is needed in interpreting what treatment tests on lab animals tell us.

At this time, when so much medical information, scientific findings, and statistical claims readily accessible on the Internet, there is even more of an obligation on reporters to help consumers evaluate the source and consider possible bias. Reporters do this by always rigorously looking for the numbers and thinking about the points I've raised above about how figures can mislead.

Medical reporters don't have to know scientific answers. Their job obligates them to ask the right questions. And it can be even easier than that. Frequently, I've ended an interview by asking, "What's the question that I

What makes a good medical reporter?

The late Victor Cohn, a former science editor of The Washington Post, said: "A good medical reporter is, first of all, a reporter after a story, not just a medical story but an interesting and important story. A good medical reporter also has fun, fun talking to some of the world's most dedicated and interesting people, fun writing copy that zings and captures the reader, fun that injects passion into the job, for it is a job that needs passion. A good medical reporter reports for people, not for doctors, not for scientists, not even for editors or news directors. A good medical reporter is privileged to contribute to the great fabric of news that democracy requires. There is no more important job than giving people the information they need to work, to survive, to enjoy life, to participate in and maintain a free and democratic society." ■

Source: Council for the Advancement of Science Writing.

should have asked but didn't?"

I've often been surprised by how much I then learned. ■

Lewis Cope was a science reporter for the Star Tribune (Minn.) for 29 years and is a former president of the National Association of Science Writers. He is coauthor, with the late Victor Cohn, of the second edition of "News & Numbers: A Guide to Reporting Statistical Claims and Controversies in Health and Other Fields" (Iowa State Press, 2001). He is a board member of the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing.

✉ lcope@mn.rr.com

Learning To Be a Medical Journalist

‘If you already are a skilled reporter and writer, the transition to medical journalism should be relatively easy.’

By Thomas Linden

Talk to 10 medical journalists and you’ll find 10 different career paths. Common to most medical reporters is a love for writing and a deep interest in medicine and science. But how does someone prepare for a career in this field, a hybrid of science and art?

It’s really the same problem that the late and great physician essayist Lewis Thomas wrote about in 1978 for *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Only then Thomas was talking about pre-medical students. As he noted in his essay, “How to Fix the Premedical Curriculum,” the problem with many pre-medical students (and, dare I say, many doctors) is that they don’t study enough literature, language and history. Thomas’s proposal was to study classical Greek as “the centerpiece of undergraduate education The capacity to read Homer’s language closely enough to sense the terrifying poetry in some of the lines could serve as a shrewd test for the qualities of mind and character needed in a physician.”

Now I’m not proposing that aspiring medical journalists study Homer, although a little poetry can go a long way in a story. The theme here is that the best way to prepare for a career in medical journalism (as Thomas proposed for medicine) is to gain an appreciation for the poetry of language. So if you are a college student and want to be a medical journalist, take courses in the humanities (English, literature, foreign languages, history) as well as basic science courses in biology, chemistry, genetics and physics. The best preparation to be a journalist—any kind of journalist—is to read voraciously and write prolifically. Subscribe to at least one newspaper (in addition to the five you follow on the Web). Read a variety of magazines. If you don’t

have a pile of reading material at your bedside, ask yourself if you really want to be a journalist. Oh yes, and read books. Books about medicine and science are good, but don’t limit yourself to that field. Finally, be sure you have an English and a medical dictionary (I prefer *Stedman’s*) handy at all times. Words are the clay you work with, so choose them carefully.

Beyond words lies knowledge. An understanding of medical science is what separates medical journalists from general assignment reporters. “At its best, journalism mediates between the worlds of expertise and general knowledge,” Lee C. Bollinger, president of Columbia University, wrote in his 2003 Journalism Task Force Statement. “To do that well—to write for the present and to weave in broader meaning—is remarkably difficult. A necessary element is substantive knowledge, the kind of knowledge you cannot just pick up in the course of doing a story.”

What Bollinger is saying—and I agree—is that to really own the medical beat, you need to know the subject matter. You don’t need to be a scientist or a doctor, but you do need to understand how scientists think and be able to translate their jargon and their ideas into simple English.

So let’s jump ahead. You’re already a journalist, maybe a general assignment reporter with an interest in medicine and science. Or a health care provider who feels your creative energies are stifled by the tedium of daily practice. In other words, you’re thinking about becoming a medical journalist.

The first question you might ask is whether to pursue post-graduate medical journalism training. The answer is, “It depends.” If you’re a general assignment reporter with no background in the sciences, then a master’s course of

study in medical journalism might make sense. If you’re in the health care field with no prior journalistic experience, then you’ll need to learn how to write for the popular media. The advantage here lies with the journalist. If you already are a skilled reporter and writer, the transition to medical journalism should be relatively easy. Enrolling in a medical journalism program makes sense if you want to use the opportunity to deepen your background in health sciences and increase your knowledge of public health.

If you’re already in the health care field and want to retool, that’s a lot more difficult, especially if you’ve had limited writing or reporting experience. If you’re a doctor or nurse and fantasize about becoming the next Larry Altman or Atul Gawande, then start writing. Take a journalism course at your local community college or university. Submit articles to your local newspaper. Or apprentice yourself to a producer or reporter at your local television station. The bottom line is that if you’re a health care provider with little reporting experience then you must develop your journalistic skills. There’s no substitute for hours spent in the field gathering information, interviewing sources, and writing good copy.

Medical Journalism Programs

For some individuals, matriculating at a graduate-level medical journalism program is the way to go. In our master’s program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, about half of the entering students have worked as a full-time newspaper reporter or freelance magazine writer for at least one or more years after college. A few students have entered without formal

Medical Journalism Training

Medical Journalism Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Journalism and Mass Communication. As one of the nation's first master's programs in medical journalism, the two-year experience emphasizes writing skills for print and broadcast media. Thomas Linden, M.D., a former medical journalist, is director of the program. Additional information is at www.jomc.unc.edu/medicaljournalism.

The Knight Center for Science and Medical Journalism at Boston University, College of Communication, is supported by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. There is a three-

semester master's degree program in science journalism that prepares journalists for careers in science, medical and public health reporting, and various programs for mid-career journalists. The center is codirected by Ellen Ruppel Shell and Douglass Starr. Additional information can be found at www.bu.edu/com/jo/science.

Health Journalism Program at University of Minnesota, School of Journalism and Mass Communication and School of Public Health. This is the only program in the country that balances study across the disciplines of journalism and public health. The one-year master's program covers a broad

spectrum of medical topics, including coverage of health policy issues, health economics, and medical news ethics. Additional information can be found at www.healthjournalism.umn.edu.

New York University's Department of Journalism offers "Medical Writing" as a course. Other journalism programs—at Columbia University, Texas A&M, Iowa University, University of California-Berkeley, Arizona State University, Northwestern University, and Purdue University—also have classes on various aspects of medical reporting and writing. Additional information can be found at <http://murrow.journalism.wisc.edu/dsc>. ■

journalism education or reporting experience. About half of the students have majored in a science-related field. Interestingly, I have received several inquiries from physicians who want to either switch careers or pursue a combined career in medicine and medical journalism. So far, none has applied.

If you have some writing experience and decide to pursue a post-graduate program, what should you look for? First, make sure the people who will teach you have worked in the field. Second, talk to enrolled students and ask them what they're learning. If they don't mention "writing" in the first few sentences, then look elsewhere. As for the course curriculum, make sure you'll have lots of writing practice with teachers who are willing and available to critique your work. Be sure courses train you to write for a variety of media including print, broadcast (television and radio), and the Web. Inquire whether the program offers courses in public health (including epidemiology) so you'll know how to interpret and evaluate medical studies and put research findings in context. Check out the syllabi for the medical journalism courses offered. Make sure you'll read some of the best writers in the field—

Oliver Sacks, Lewis Thomas, Randy Shilts, Jon Franklin, and Laurie Garrett, to name just a few.

If you're broadcast-oriented, make sure your program offers courses in print journalism. If you're print-oriented, be sure to take a broadcast course. Some of my first-year master's students in medical television reporting were sure they wanted to be print journalists until they produced their first medical television report. Then, some of them realized the power of the broadcast media to put a "face" on their medical stories. We're all aware of the limitations of the 90-second television package replete with eight-second sound bites and simple story lines, but don't underestimate the poetry of good television storytelling. You can have enormous impact. A survey conducted in 1997 by Roper Starch Worldwide, Inc. for the National Health Council and PBS's "HealthWeek" showed that Americans rate television ahead of health professionals, magazines, journals and newspapers as their principal source for most medical information.

Lastly, ask yourself if you really want to embrace the life of a medical reporter. There will be hours spent analyzing generally poorly written medi-

cal journal articles. You will place repeated phone calls to health professionals who often don't want to talk to you. There will be a lack of appreciation from newspaper editors and television news directors and not enough column inches or broadcast airtime to adequately tell your story. And the pay will be not at all commensurate with your skills or level of education.

If none of the above deters you, if you find science and medicine inherently fascinating, and if you write just for the joy of turning a good phrase, then medical journalism is for you. ■

Thomas Linden, M.D., is director of the Medical Journalism Program and Glaxo Wellcome Distinguished Professor of Medical Journalism at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Linden was the first health and science correspondent for CNBC, medical reporter for KRON-TV in San Francisco, medical editor of Fox 11 News in Los Angeles, and co-anchor of "Physicians' Journal Update" on Lifetime Medical Television.

✉ linden@unc.edu

Coverage of War

It's always been a tug-of-war between secretive government officials and those whose job it is—the press—to hold them and their actions accountable. In peaceful times, no elected leaders, no appointed administrators want their decisions rigorously examined, policies held up to criticism, or actions questioned. In times of war, government leaders evoke patriotism to shield against what they regard as press intrusion. Ask probing questions, push for unforthcoming answers, and journalists find government officials clamping down on access and public support of their mission diminishing.

This journalistic scenario—as well as many other issues of government/press relations—surfaced as the Bush administration prepared to fight the war in Iraq. On the following pages, journalists write about how well the press, both print and broadcast, performed. In their words, and in quotes excerpted from commentaries and articles published before and during the Iraq War, there is opportunity to think critically about how well the press did and what aspects of their coverage could use improvement.

Paul McMasters, the First Amendment ombudsman at the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center, describes how governmental news managers exploit the public's low regard for the press and journalists' timidity during times of national distress. "Unless and until the Washington press corps challenges the system of news manipulation, the risk is that the American press, in general, will become less and less a component of democratic decision-making and more and more an irrelevance to citizens seeking to serve as real partners in their own governance," he writes.

Murrey Marder, former chief diplomatic correspondent for The Washington Post, explores consequences that have occurred when journalists have held back from probing policies and actions for which government officials should have been held more accountable. "There has always been a compelling need for the press to be on maximum alert, especially when war is in the air . . .," he writes. "When war is near, the burden on the press is greater than usual to be skeptical about official pronouncements and to ask probing questions." Yet, in the wake of the September 11th attacks, Marder observed that the administration, already unusually secretive, implied "a lack of patriotism to critics who questioned its restrictions on antiterrorist information," and this likely influenced press interactions with the President.

Michael Getler, ombudsman for The Washington Post, praises, for the most part, news coverage of the Iraq War and the Pentagon's decision to embed reporters with U.S. forces. Where he finds fault is in reporting that led up to the war. He raises questions and shares observations about what the public failed to learn because the press didn't report it. For example, he writes: "The United States told the world it had hard intelligence [about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq]. The Iraqis undoubtedly had some capabilities. But were they exaggerated in the telling? Did news organizations press hard enough for answers and evidence to back up these claims?"

In a lecture he gave at the University of Kentucky, **Bob Edwards**, host of National Public Radio's "Morning Edition," criticized the White House press corps for its timid questioning of the President at his press conference before the war. In an article adapted from his lecture, he sets forth questions he would have asked and worries about why tougher questions weren't asked. **Sam Donaldson**, who twice worked as ABC News White House correspondent, picks up on this theme by explaining how reporters on this beat can ask better questions. He advises, for example, "Don't ask multiple part questions. Ask one question. Make it simple and pointed. . . . [Ask a multiple-part question] and the President has the option of answering part a, part b, part c, or none of the above."

New York Times reporter **Chris Hedges** delivered the Nieman Foundation's Joe Alex Morris, Jr. Memorial Lecture in March and spoke about his experiences covering war and, in excerpts from it, he speaks about how, as a reporter, he was "drawn into the world of war . . . War's sickness had become mine." **Nancy Bernhard**, who teaches "Reporting From the Front" in Harvard's Expository Writing Program, writes about how the Pentagon's decision to embed reporters might change public perception about the role of the press. "[T]o the extent that it dispels the perception of journalists as spoilers, it opens a small window to more tolerance for genuine democratic debate."

Danny Schechter, who writes the daily "news dissector's" Weblog, describes the value of being able to immediately compare and contrast U.S. and foreign coverage of the war. Being saturated in this mix of coverage "forces me to conclude that much of what passes for journalism here is seen as nothing but propaganda by people in other countries, and by an increasing number of Americans, who are turning to international Web sites to find the kind of news they can no longer get here." In a column we reprint, **Rami G. Khouri**, executive editor of The Daily Star in Beirut, Lebanon, explains why using American or Arab media alone as primary sources of news and analysis doesn't work. "[W]atch both sides to get a complete view of events on the ground and in people's minds," he says.

Gwen Lister, editor of The Namibian, also shares a column in which she wrote critically of U.S. policy and war coverage, expressing her view that U.S. reporters were being manipulated by their government. "It is evident," she writes, "that objective journalism has been lost in the 'us' and 'them' scenario, in which Iraq is openly referred to as 'the enemy.'" From Thailand, **Songpol Kaopatuntip**, an editor at the Bangkok Post who writes a Web column called "Eye on the Thai Press," shows us how media in his country reported on and editorialized about the war. From China, **Yuan Feng**, an editor with China Women's News, describes how coverage of the war in Iraq "has unleashed the Chinese media and let them release their long-constrained impulse to act as real news media." Television news, in particular, drew increased viewership. And from Germany, **Martin Gehlen**, a political writer at Der Tagesspiegel in Berlin, reports that "In its daily coverage, the German media's focus was very much on the horrors of war and of the potential casualties of the air bombardments, the propaganda being put forth by both sides, and on the worldwide protests of the peace movement." ■

WATCHDOG

Blurring the Line Between Journalist and Publicist

For things to change, the Washington press corps needs to lead the way.

By Paul McMasters

New communications technology and the Pentagon's bold policy of embedding 600 journalists inside military units transfixed Americans with a war in Iraq drenched in immediacy. Confronted with such compelling content, it was possible for Americans to mistake noise for news and TV screens awash in battle images for comprehensive coverage. It also was possible for the public and the press alike to ignore or minimize the ways that governmental news management could distort the first draft of history that the press was charged with dispatching from the frontlines.

Alongside its successful war plan, the Pentagon deployed an impressive form of news management. Military officials from the top ranks to the bottom stuck doggedly to the message of the day, aggressively confronted negative news and criticism, and expertly blended political and military messages.

This official imprint on press coverage of the war was achieved through a smart combination of incentives and threats. The price for more intimate and productive access to the frontlines for the press was steep: agreement to a long list of ground rules, submission to unit commanders' authority over their reports, and practical neutralization of independent reporting. In addition, journalists were wholly dependent on the military for basic necessities, transportation and protection, not to mention the news itself. All of this made the press susceptible to the military's idea of what was proper to report and what wasn't. Despite these conditions and restraints, however, the American press generally turned in remarkably professional, if somewhat sanitized, coverage of this war.

The genius of news management is that it compromises the press while securing its enthusiastic participation. Indeed, some aspects of news manage-

ment are fairly benign. Some are not. It ranges from the facilitation of newsgathering, to tightly controlled briefings and interviews, to press releases, to propaganda—and occasionally to disinformation campaigns directed at the enemy but capable of causing collateral damage in the United States in an era of instant global dissemination of information.

Government's 'Ground Rules' for the Press

The press experience in Iraq should come as no surprise. The military was merely borrowing from White House and federal agency information policies that have marked press-government relations for some time. These techniques belong to no particular administration, party or persuasion. They have evolved over the years as the most effective way for government to turn the press to its needs.

Public officials regularly require reporters in the Washington press corps to run a gauntlet of public affairs and other screening mechanisms for even the most routine of interviews. Some will speak only as an anonymous source. Others invoke arcane and slippery definitions of "off the record" and "deep background." Government wordsmiths vet and revise officials' quotes before they are released.

White House, department and agency spokespersons are well schooled in the art of staying on message, making no news other than that intended, and reminding reporters who's in charge. On occasion, they call up network and newspaper executives to warn or scold them about coverage, or publicly harangue reporters who get out of line. Those reporters who ask impertinent questions face banishment to the back of the room. Prime-time presidential press conferences are

not viewed as a responsibility to report regularly to the American people, but rather as a tool for advancing an agenda. They have been rare events in the Bush administration. The most recent was openly "scripted." Other presidential "press opportunities" are carefully timed and controlled.

As was the case in Iraq, the press has little room to protest any of these impositions on the standards that guide their practice. Federal officials, after all, have what journalists need: the news. A journalist's usefulness to her news organization flames out if she burns a source by complaining about the ground rules, let alone resists abiding by them: Sources dry up, phone calls go unreturned, questions go unrecognized, and requests for interviews rot in the in-box.

There are sobering examples of worse things that can happen to journalists who don't play by these rules. For example, a clear signal was sent to the press in March of this year when the U.S. Customs Service seized and turned over to the FBI a Federal Express package containing an eight-year-old unclassified FBI report sent by Associated Press reporter Jim Gomez in Manila to his colleague John Solomon in Washington, D.C. The two A.P. reporters were working on an investigative report on terrorism. In May 2001, the U.S. Department of Justice had seized Solomon's telephone records while he was working on a different story. The federal government sent an even more chilling message for journalists—and those who provide the press information outside authorized channels—in January of this year, when Jonathan Randel, a Drug Enforcement Agency analyst in Atlanta, was sentenced to one year in prison for providing sensitive but unclassified material to a newspaper. No federal employee has ever been imprisoned for leaking similar

information.

Then there is the crucial problem of access to government information, a fundamental need of members of Congress, the public, and the press. The current administration, especially, is obsessed with secrecy and suffers a deep conviction that to share information is to weaken the executive. It has put in place some of the most onerous restrictions on access to government information since passage of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 37 years ago.

These restrictions were fought valiantly by organizations representing the press and others, but the reporting press rarely showed up for the battle by covering these events as they do many other newsworthy policy changes. Typically, news reports seldom acknowledge the fact that the amount of access to government information granted the public and the press is the best measure of a democracy's true dimensions—and a predictor of its survival.

Trying to Assert Journalistic Standards

Given this environment, it is little wonder that journalists in the Washington press corps find themselves in a continual struggle to distinguish what they do working their beats from what publicists do serving their clients. More and more the Washington press corps finds itself herded by news-management techniques into “hand-out journalism” or “pack journalism” or “process journalism” or “stenographic journalism.”

Complicating the matter even further is self-doubt and self-interest among journalists. Many worry, with good reason, about being considered un-American—or not sufficiently pro-American—if they probe too aggressively into our national security vulnerabilities or question too harshly those charged with protecting the nation from harm. Many of their bosses worry, with good reason, about losing readers and ratings when Americans increasingly turn to news outlets they perceive as projecting their own worldviews. In today's world, that self-doubt and self-

interest can lead to self-censorship—or at least a decided reluctance to vigorously cover certain aspects of the war on terrorism.

In the weeks before the war in Iraq, for example, news about the war in Afghanistan and the search for Osama bin Laden nearly disappeared from the front pages and the evening news. Coverage of the rationale for and run-up to the war in Iraq ranged from one-dimensional to barely adequate. As *The Washington Post's* ombudsman, Michael Getler, wrote on April 11th: “If the proverbial visitor from Mars were to look at the Pulitzers as a reflection of what was going on in the world in 2002, he, she or it would have no idea that this storm had been gathering. Maybe that's all explainable, and certainly there was a lot of strong coverage of Iraq and other issues. But maybe it means that the press could have done better, focusing on the prospect of war to a point that it would have jumped out as prescient coverage worthy of note.” [See Getler's story on page 77.]

But coverage deficiencies are apparent in other areas as well. In the panicked aftermath of September 11th, the press did little to explicate the provisions of the USA Patriot Act and its potential impact on citizens' constitutional rights before it was rushed into law. Also getting short shrift in the news were President Bush's executive order eviscerating the Presidential Records Act and Attorney General John Ashcroft's memo turning on its head the presumption of openness in the FOIA. News coverage of a sweeping exemption to the FOIA contained in the Homeland Security Act came too little, too late. Coverage of anti-war activities was ragged. Dissenting viewpoints found it difficult to break into op-ed pages. Added to this is a long list of somewhat more esoteric but significant news that got scanted, including the alleged bugging of U.N. diplomats whose countries hadn't signed on to the U.S. march toward Baghdad or the possible falsification of documents about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq provided to U.N. inspectors by the United States.

Not surprisingly, when the press are

constantly in a defensive crouch, their spine can weaken. Journalists also find it difficult to examine in any meaningful way—or invite or encourage others to examine—their own failings, not to mention the deliberate and advancing disruption of the democratic process that news management threatens. Without such a public examination, however, the news management apparatus continues to grow more effective and pervasive. Government officials, elected and unelected, also accrue increasing power to set or advance an agenda, as well as to derail or defang criticism.

The Need to Challenge News Management

Governmental news managers perceive the press as mere conduits for government messages and exploit the press's low regard in the public mind, their lack of resources and time, and reluctance to challenge those in power during times of national distress. Unless and until the Washington press corps challenges this system of news manipulation, the risk is that the American press, in general, will become less and less a component of democratic decision-making and more and more an irrelevance to citizens seeking to serve as real partners in their own governance.

During times of national stress, when Congress is acquiescent, the courts deferential and the citizenry mute and afraid, the role of the press becomes even more vital. The press have a constitutional franchise not just because they report and deliver the news but because the ways in which they do this provide context, organize and prioritize information, and hold accountable those who are in power and their policies. When the national agenda is set without active participation of the citizenry, informed by an independent press, the democratic process is compromised.

One doesn't have to claim that news management is a government plot or the result of a conspiracy on the part of political or military officials to understand that the damage is not just to the press's credibility but also to demo-

cratic discourse and the making and execution of government policy. No-where is the potential for such damage more acute than in the formulation of a policy of preemptive military action and the run-up to a war of choice. Yet as the Bush administration advanced its new policy of preemptive war and carried the nation along into the Iraq war, press coverage failed to fully explore the importance and scope of these developments.

No matter how dire the threat or wise our leaders, news management as government policy is fatally flawed. It is designed to disguise and distort democratic realities for political ends. Truth devolves into mere propaganda when the providers of information also get to frame and construct the context.

It is left largely to the press in general, but the Washington press corps in particular, to raise and examine the questions that this governmental news management presents: Is it appropriate? How does it affect the democratic dynamic? How does it devalue traditions and violate core democratic principles?

Leaders who develop and champion a system of news management fail to realize that no matter how well they shape the present to their ends, they cannot lie to history—nor can they muzzle it. And the press and its advocates must confront the hard reality that the press cannot serve as an instrument of freedom when they become a tool of government. ■

Paul McMasters is the First Amendment ombudsman at the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center and a former editorial page editor at USA Today. He writes and speaks extensively on First Amendment and freedom of information issues and has testified before Congress on several occasions. McMasters is a former national president of the Society of Professional Journalists, a charter member of the National FOIA Hall of Fame, and current president of the Virginia Coalition for Open Government.

✉ Pmcmasters@freedomforum.org

What Should News Organizations Do for Access?

Revelations by CNN's Eason Jordan spark a debate among journalists.

On April 11, 2003, two days after the fall of Baghdad, Eason Jordan, CNN's chief news executive, revealed in a New York Times op-ed, "The News We Kept to Ourselves," that he had withheld information about how Saddam Hussein's regime had intimidated and tortured Iraqis who had assisted CNN over the years. His revelations ushered in a debate among journalists about how CNN handled this situation and ways in which other news organizations should deal with similar difficult situations. An excerpt from Jordan's op-ed and a memo he wrote to his staff four days later lead this section. Reaction to his words and actions follow.

"Over the last dozen years I made 13 trips to Baghdad to lobby the government to keep CNN's Baghdad bureau open and to arrange interviews with Iraqi leaders. Each time I visited, I became more distressed by what I saw and heard—awful things that could not be reported because doing so would have jeopardized the lives of Iraqis, particularly those on our Baghdad staff." —Eason Jordan, "The News We Kept to Ourselves."

"Knowing the personal stories I knew about the brutality of the regime, I had three options:

- "1. Never repeat such horror stories.
- "2. Tell the stories sooner and, as a result, see innocent people killed.
- "3. Tell the stories after the downfall of the Saddam Hussein regime.

"I chose option three and could never imagine doing anything else." —

Eason Jordan's memo to CNN staff on April 15, 2003.

"To the Editor: Re 'The News We Kept to Ourselves' (Op-Ed, April 11):

"Eason Jordan of CNN 'felt awful' about keeping silent about the stories he knew of the horror of the Iraqi government. Yet he doesn't seem to acknowledge the destruction his silence has done to the credibility of his news organization. About which other countries is the network keeping the truth 'bottled up inside' for fear of reprisals?

"At the very least, all of CNN's news reports about sensitive regions should be prefaced by a disclaimer that its policy is not to broadcast information that might be offensive to those who issue credible threats against its reporters or staff." —Theodore Alper, Palo Alto, California, in a New York Times Letter to the Editor, published on April 13, 2003.

WATCHDOG

What Happens When Journalists Don't Probe?

They fail to 'fulfill their obligation to the public interest as counterweights in the American system.'

By Murrey Marder

"Always mystify, mislead, and surprise the enemy, if possible." —Civil War General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson's strategic motto.

In war no less than in peace, the acid test for freedom of the press is the critical crossroads where secrecy and democracy collide head-on. Leaders of democratic nations who launch surprise attacks mislead not only enemies but also congresses and parlia-

ments, the press and the public, all in the name of protecting national interests.

When war is near, the burden on the press is greater than usual to be skeptical about official pronouncements and to ask probing questions. But in times of stress, televised press conferences can lead many Americans to misconstrue intensive questioning as harassment of the President or other officials. To forestall such a public rebound,

less-experienced reporters may avoid hard questions, as happened in President Bush's last press conference before the war in Iraq began. [See Bob Edwards' story on page 81 and Sam Donaldson's story on page 83 for more about journalists' performance at that pre-war press conference.] To compound the problem, the profound shock to the nation from the September 11th terrorist attacks caused an administration noted for unusual se-

"I'm disturbed by [Jordan's actions]. It really took the wind out of me. There were probably strategic business decisions about CNN's relationship with the government, but this seems to me to be allowing the ethics of other endeavors to trump the ethics of journalism: to seek the truth and make it available." —*Bill Kovach, former Nieman Foundation Curator and chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, quoted in an April 14, 2003 USA Today article, "CNN Takes Heat for Action, Inaction," by Peter Johnson.*

"It may be that he bent too far [to obtain access], but I've got a feeling that everybody is bent. That goes with being in a terrible place." —*Alex Jones, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, quoted on April 15, 2003 in media critic Dan Kennedy's Media Log (www.dankennedy.net).*

"Every news organization, and every reporter, makes difficult, morally am-

biguous decisions when working in a totalitarian state. There are no hard and fast rules about where to draw the line between legitimate cooperation with authorities and outright collaboration. Some of the time it is right to let readers and viewers make intelligent inferences, as long as a sentence stating that 'this reporter was operating under the rules of local censorship' is inserted into an article or broadcast report." —*The Washington Post, from an editorial, "Truth-Telling," published on April 15, 2003.*

"Reading Mr. Jordan now, you get the impression that CNN had no ethical option other than to soft-pedal. But there were alternatives. CNN could have abandoned Baghdad. Not only would they have stopped recycling lies, they could have focused more intently on obtaining the truth about Saddam. They could have diverted resources to Kurdistan and Jordan [the country], where recently arrived Iraqis could speak without fear of death. They could have exploited exile groups with underground contacts." —*Franklin Foer, associate editor of The New Republic,*

writing in a Wall Street Journal op-ed, "CNN's Access of Evil," on April 14, 2003.

"The controversy has highlighted an uncomfortable reality. Covering totalitarian states forces a journalist to act in compromising ways. Anyone who has reported from such countries knows that it is one of the most challenging tasks a journalist faces, involving daily calculations over access, honesty, freedom of movement, and fear of reprisal. Some governments assume a foreign journalist is a spy. The way they treat you forces you to act like one. ...

"It's easy to say Mr. Jordan and CNN made the wrong choice. It certainly allows for a comforting moral clarity. And it may be that they stepped over a line in pandering to Iraqi officials. But I, for one, would be very slow in condemning them. Anyone who has faced the choices forced on journalists in those circumstances knows exactly what I mean." —*Ethan Bonner, writing in The New York Times on April 21, 2003, "The Rules for Covering Brutal Dictatorships Aren't Black and White."*

crecy to imply a lack of patriotism to critics who questioned its restrictions on antiterrorist information.

Journalists' Tunnel Vision

From the outset of the Iraq war crisis, the bulk of the American press looked on it with tunnel vision as solely a military struggle to be won or lost on the battlefield. But military defeat of long-battered Iraq, with its obsolete defenses, by superpower America was never doubted by U.S. or British strategists. In three weeks of lopsided warfare, the only possible Iraqi weapon of significant threat to coalition forces—chemical warfare—never appeared.

The critical test of Bush administration strategy always was destined to come afterward—following the iconic toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue and dictatorial regime. Restoring order in a shattered, ancient nation of 25 million deeply divided people, and creating the foundation for a democracy Iraq has never experienced, was a far greater challenge for American ability and resources. However, explaining just how it planned to cope with those formidable problems was the last thing the Bush administration wanted to do before Congress or the press.

When President Bush dramatically landed on the deck of the world's largest warship in Navy pilot's "Top Gun" attire, he acknowledged that "We have difficult work to do in Iraq," but avoided any time frame for it, as he called the military phase of the task "one victory in a war on terror that began on September 11, 2001 and still goes on."

Images are of major significance in war and politics, and the President's carefully planned descent on an aircraft carrier produced the ultimate image to carry into his reelection campaign, along with his commander in chief mantle. That gave him a double layer of insulation from criticism, which only wartime Presidents enjoy.

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson acquired far less durable insulation from questioning when Congress handed him a blank check to launch a major war in Vietnam. Years later, Democratic Senator J. William

Fulbright, the Foreign Relations Committee chairman, ruefully exclaimed that in spearheading the infamous Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to passage, he had been "hornswoggled" by President Johnson. When a President hornswoggles, or bamboozles, Congress and the press, historians will tell you, the greatest default rests with those being misled for their failure to fulfill their obligation to the public interest as counterweights in the American system.

The Failure to Inquire

Congress last October had warnings that it risked repeating grievous mistakes in the Vietnam War when it gave President Bush a blank check to make war against Iraq. Yet a month earlier, the Bush White House in September 2002 had made public the rationale for a new course in U.S. foreign policy. This new policy of preemptive military engagement reached far beyond Iraq, and it was never seriously examined or debated in Congress. The press, also, in the shorthand phrase popularized in the wake of September 11th, failed "to connect the dots," even though President Bush called it a new "doctrine"—the lofty term reserved for historic pronouncements such as the "Monroe Doctrine" and "Truman Doctrine."

Each administration routinely publishes its own national security strategy, a compilation of foreign policy positions drawn largely from Presidential speeches and position papers. The Bush publication followed that pattern, but with significant emphasis that escaped general attention. Early accounts in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, for example, noted that the Bush administration was expressing the right to conduct "preemptive war," but reported that senior officials explained that the United States long had reserved that military option. Neither the *Times* nor *Post* printed the text; each referred readers to its Web pages for that since the original was 35 pages long.

Many references to the Bush Doctrine and to "preemptive war" were

published elsewhere, without explanation of its true magnitude. The impact of the full text, however, helps to account for the caustic opposition to the American policy on Iraq that came from the French, the Germans, the Russians, and others in the United Nations Security Council.

The Bush Doctrine turns away from the half-century web of allied internationalism developed after World War II. It states, bluntly: "U.S. national security will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and national interests."

President Bush first used such language before West Point graduates on June 1, 2002, in a speech that began: "The United States possesses unprecedented—and unequalled—strength and influence in the world." To many Americans those words might sound like acceptable oratorical flourish before an admiring audience. But for the leader of the only remaining superpower to proclaim "a distinctly American internationalism" in a formal doctrine, growing out of a "war on terrorism," expanded to "rogue states and terrorists," and including "anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack," challenges existing standards of world order.

Not only does the doctrine embrace "preemptive" attacks against adversaries, it acknowledges that "preemption" normally requires "an imminent threat—most often a visible mobilization of armies, navies and air forces preparing to attack." But the United States will not be bound by that interpretation, the document shows. It specifies that: "We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries. Rogue states and terrorists do not seek to attack us using conventional means"

To many impartial military specialists that justification turns "preemptive war" into unlimited "preventive war," exemplified by the war against Iraq. Iraq was targeted by the Bush administration before the terrorist attacks on

the United States, as unfinished business from the Gulf War of 1991, which was led by the first Bush administration. While hailed as a great military success, that war ended with a badly botched cease-fire, on terms long obscured to the public.

The shattered Iraq military was granted permission by U.S. commanders to retain armed helicopters, supposedly to help administer their war-torn country. But when American-led forces left Iraq, the helicopters were prime weapons ruthlessly used by Saddam Hussein's forces to crush revolts of Shiites in southern Iraq and Kurds in the north, who had been encouraged by the first Bush administration to rise up against that regime. The toll was reported to be tens of thousands of Iraqis slain.

That tortured history, deep in the consciousness of Iraqis along with decades of dictatorial brutality, was reflected in the looting, shooting and basic disorder interspersed with the welcome that greeted American and British troops, coupled with calls for their early departure.

Coverage of the War

With the United States pledged to implant democracy there, even before the war started numerous journalistic veterans began asking why younger reporters at the White House, the Pentagon and elsewhere, were not raising basic questions about how that would be accomplished and at what cost. A week before the war, Tom Wicker, who covered politics and national affairs for The New York Times for more than 30 years and then was a Times' columnist, despairingly wrote an Editor & Publisher article listing questions unasked by the press. Among them:

- "Bush administration spokesmen have made several cases for waging war against Iraq, and the U.S. press has tended to present all those cases to the public as if they were gospel What kind of democracy allows the leaders to take it into war without fully specifying the reasons?"
- "Should a 'watchdog' press present

the supposed link between Iraq and al-Qaeda as if it had been demonstrated because President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell say so, or point out that it hasn't really been proven, even at the United Nations?"

Former Nieman Foundation Curator Bill Kovach, currently chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, said in a newspaper interview that he didn't "see enough of the skepticism we should expect of our journalists." Kovach was quoted as saying that he understands that the "emotional state of society" after September 11th induces "a reluctance to go against the grain. But that's made too many reporters reluctant to ask rude or embarrassing questions of the people shaping our future."

As the war was being waged, Greg Dyke, BBC director-general, said, "Personally, I was shocked while in the United States by how unquestioning the broadcast news media was during the war."

Surprising questions and observations were turning up on this nation's TV and radio call-in shows as Americans surfed TV channels and the Internet in this first electronic information war, comparing U.S. and foreign news. Typically in wartime, the U.S. public complains that the press discloses too much information. But in this war, some of the most strident complaints were just the opposite. Questions and comments ranged from "Why isn't the American press telling us why we are in this war?" to "Why is the American press sanitizing the news?" and "We see more complete news on BBC."

In addition to the networks and 24-hour cable news, acres of war news and photographs appeared in the major print press and on the imaginative, commercial-free C-Span channels and the Public Broadcasting System, along with comprehensive documentaries and public forums.

The innovation in news coverage, of course, was the Pentagon decision to "embed" nearly 600 reporters and photographers with military forces. This

evoked press reactions ranging from enthusiasm to caustic criticism that will be surveyed and argued for months and years. American press accompanying troops in war is by no means unprecedented, but these numbers were far larger, with reporters assigned to stay with designated units and to abide by military rules regarding coverage.

The format unquestionably served the Pentagon and White House's purposes for publicizing U.S. military prowess. Many reporters and photographers, especially those new to combat, said it well served their objectives. The American public gained a closer view of warfare than ever before, including some grim examples of the toll from what is euphemistically termed "friendly fire." But what appeared on TV screens also could be misleading for the future: This was not a typical war; one side rarely so dominates the other, or wins quickly with such few casualties.

What embedded journalists experienced depended on the units to which they were attached. One retired Army general, interviewed on C-Span, wryly remarked: "The Pentagon has weaponized the press." That gibe reflected widespread criticism that reporters were turned into publicists for the armed forces.

CNN's elated Walter Rodgers, with a tank unit, proudly proclaimed, "What you're seeing is truly historic television and journalism." ABC's veteran "Nightline" anchor, Ted Koppel, asked how any reporter could complain about "too much access," when "access and information are our life's blood." To be embedded with frontline units, he said, is "a reporter's dream," and it is up to reporters and their editors to decide how best to turn that dream into useful coverage. Koppel's status brought him a posting dream: Assigned to mechanized troops, with access to a commanding general's quarters, he sat in on top-level briefings, with the standard requirement that he could not disclose strategy or troop movements in advance.

Another veteran of many wars, George Wilson, military analyst for the small-circulation National Journal after retiring as The Washington Post's

chief Pentagon reporter, had a different experience and reaction. Assigned to rear-based heavy artillery, he could not switch to a frontline unit. His glum description of his view of the war was, "Moving with the artillery three times a night," with no eyewitness opportunity to produce "accountability" reports on the fighting.

Los Angeles Times managing editor Jim Kelly told media critic David Shaw that he was particularly critical of cable news networks that "plant a flag on their screens and try to stick a waving flag on virtually everything that moves, and the subtle implication is that the network has gone to war ... on the side of the U.S. troops" Such reporting, Kelly said, has "changed the expectations that many readers and viewers have about the proper role of journalists in war."

Perhaps the most repeated journalistic summation came from Tina Brown, the magazine world's buoyantly acer-

bic editor, who told The Times of London: "The more I watched television, the more its inability to deliver satisfaction drove me hungrily back to print. The New York Times's 12-page 'Nation At War' had to be gorged in full. Then the tabs in a strange new reading pattern—opinion pages first, trash-news second." The New York Post, she said, "Offered a bracing kick in the crotch for anyone worn out by the Times's many-sided thoughtfulness."

But even amid the surfeit of unceasing information, the glaring absence of some essential reporting about this war and this nation's policies was noticeable. There has always been a compelling need for the press to be on maximum alert, especially when war is in the air, a point that has gnawed at me since I checked out an Associated Press bulletin at The Washington Post one August night in 1964. The bulletin was about an attack on the USS Maddox by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the

Gulf of Tonkin. As a Marine Corps combat correspondent in World War II, I was familiar with torpedo boats; they are no match for destroyers. To risk attacking a destroyer, the adversary would have to be greatly provoked. But before any reporter could penetrate what turned out to be a secret American naval spying mission, Congress rubber-stamped the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The ultimate outcome is inscribed on a long wall on the Washington Mall. ■

Murrey Marder, a 1950 Nieman Fellow, is a former chief diplomatic correspondent for The Washington Post. In 1957, he was the first reporter for the embryonic Washington Post Foreign Service. His generous gift established the Watchdog Journalism Project at the Nieman Foundation.

✉ MurreyMar@aol.com

Are Journalists Asking the Right Questions?

'Too many of my sources of information have let me down.'

"The conflict in Iraq is the first test of a new theory that is a dramatic—I'd say radical—departure from the main-spring of American character. Unilateral or largely unilateral 'wars of choice' reverse the way Americans have believed about their power. It is that of the quiet cowboy: Never boastful, ever friendly and helpful, but deadly if provoked. National newspapers and networks, it seems to me, would serve our democracy nobly by testing the validity, value and consequences in blood, reputation and treasure of the first test of the new definition of American power." —*A message from Anniston (Ala.) Star Chairman and Publisher Brandt Ayers sent to Nieman Reports on March 23, 2003.*

"Whether or not the United States wages war on Iraq, this may be the

most important question, not just for now but in the future: Does a U.S. President really have the power 'to make war at his pleasure'? That question is seldom being asked by an American press that seems sometimes to be playing on the administration team rather than pursuing the necessary search for truth, wherever it may lead." —*Tom Wicker, writing a Guest Opinion column, "Press Isn't Asking Right Questions," in Editor & Publisher on March 11, 2003.*

"I feel less confident than ever that I understand how we as a nation moved to this point. Too many of my sources of information have let me down. I have never felt as much at sea as I do in this new sea of information." —*Bill Kovach, chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, quoted in*

the March 22, 2003 story, "Papers Can Filter the Facts, Fiction" by Tim Rutten of the Los Angeles Times.

"To see that our media, which are supposed to supply us with any information possible, are at the beck and call of our administration's agenda, infuriates me. I want both sides of the news, not just pro-war images and stories that gloss over the complexities of this situation." —*From a Letter to the Editor, written by Eleanor Doig, Brunswick, Maine and published in The New York Times on April 1, 2003.*

"I am discouraged by reporters' willingness to swallow most of what is being told to them. How can they keep referring to 'coalition forces' as if there were actually some sort of coalition?" —*Todd Gitlin, a professor of journal-*

WATCHDOG

Covering the War Before It Started

While Iraq war coverage worked well, did journalists probe enough about policies and evidence that led to this war being waged?

By Michael Getler

The war in Iraq lasted less than a month. Post-war conflicts and issues will undoubtedly last for years. But the expected American military victory was, as advertised, swift and skilled. Of course, as Gulf Wars I and II show, it helps to fight the Iraqis. So the United States needs to be careful in absorbing a sense of certainty about battlefield success. North Koreans would probably fight a lot harder.

The American news-consuming public, in the end, was also well served by the Pentagon's new policy of allowing hundreds of reporters to be "embed-

ded" with U.S. forces for the duration of the conflict. This was a bold gamble by the Bush administration and by news organizations as well, who could not be sure how it would work and who worried that their correspondents might wind up under such tight military control that they would not be able to do their jobs properly.

As it turned out, the access and ability to file also was as advertised. The coverage presented by major newspapers, in my view, was excellent. No punches were pulled, or restrictions imposed, even when things went

badly—as was shown, for example, in reports about the repulsing of the first attack by Apache helicopters by Iraqi ground fire. Readers and viewers were able to watch a war unfold in real time. Good use of experienced journalists in Washington, Baghdad, Basra and elsewhere provided context for the firsthand slices of combat reportage we were getting from the embedded correspondents on the frontline.

The conflict also helped ease three decades of acrimonious relations between the military and the media that was part of the legacy of Vietnam, when

ism and sociology at Columbia University, quoted in a New York Times article on March 31, 2003, "Reporters' New Battlefield Access Has Its Risks and Rewards," by David Carr.

"As Mr. Fleischer repeatedly suggested that the answers to questions lay elsewhere, the White House reporters who fancy themselves part of one of the mightiest journalistic corps on the planet realized that once again they were embedded in the wrong unit." —*David Carr, writing on March 23, 2003 in The New York Times, "Press Secretary Doles Out Answers, but Doesn't Give Away Much."*

"The [Pentagon] briefing is disguised as a forum for reporters to ask questions of officials, so they can write and broadcast knowledgeable stories about the events of the day. The real purpose is to give the official a chance to manage the news. In an administration that has taken news management to new heights, this is a critical mission." —

Robert G. Kaiser, writing in an article on March 22, 2003 in The Washington Post, "The Briefing, Rumsfeld's E Ring Circus."

"The 24-hour-a-day cycle of the cable news stations has been influential in shaping public knowledge of the war, but it is 'a monster that has to be fed,'" said Philip Seib, Lucius W. Nieman professor of journalism at Marquette University. The briefings help provide content for the networks, but showing them in full 'is not even journalism, it's a news organization acting as conveyor belt, which from the Pentagon's standpoint is splendid. Overall, I think the Pentagon has done a very good job of delivering the message it wants to deliver. I think the news media have done less than a good job of doing journalism.'" —*From Milwaukee Journal Sentinel article, "Pentagon Strategy for Media, Battle Have Traits in Common: Diverse Campaign Carefully Planned" by Alan Borsuk, on April 6, 2003.*

"It's more than justified for us to ask questions. And then you have the Pentagon flaying the media, saying it's unpatriotic to ask questions. I consider myself a patriot. But when there are questions to be asked, I'm going to ask them." —*Steve Capus, executive producer of "NBC Nightly News With Tom Brokaw," quoted in an April 20, 2003 New York Times story, "Spectacular Success or Incomplete Picture?" by Jim Rutenberg and Bill Carter.*

"It's not that I don't care who wins. I do think it's important who wins. I'm rooting for the United States against Saddam Hussein. But our job is to stand back from that and try to communicate as best we can what's really going on. To say that it's unpatriotic to look at both the pluses and the minuses is simply wrong." —*Paul Steiger, managing editor of The Wall Street Journal, quoted in an April 20, 2003 Los Angeles Times story, "Media Matters: A Skeptical Journalist Isn't an Unpatriotic One," by David Shaw. ■*

reporters could go wherever their courage took them. Ever since President Reagan took a page out of Margaret Thatcher's beat-the-press playbook in Britain's 1982 war in the Falkland Islands, U.S. military restrictions had gravely narrowed the ability of the American press to carry out its role as independent observer of this country at war. This was the case in Grenada, Panama, the first Persian Gulf War, and Afghanistan.

Now, not only may coverage of combat be better in the future, there will also be a trained corps of correspondents to report on conflict. Since President Nixon ended the draft in 1973, the number of reporters who have

served in the military has steadily diminished.

Reporting Before the War

In time, stories from the war that were missed will probably surface: a better account of Iraqi casualties; reports on what the CIA—which seems to have its own army and air force—was doing, and what some of the other Special Forces were up to.

It would be a mistake, however, if the success of the war, and the success at covering it, were to be the only lessons taken away from this conflict by American news organizations.

The more important, more difficult,

but more worthwhile area of scrutiny lies in the very long run-up to the war. This period of more than a year roughly spans the moment in December 2001, when Osama bin Laden is thought to have escaped the assault on Tora Bora in Afghanistan, to the moment in March 2003 when the first American bombs fell on a building in Baghdad where it was thought Saddam Hussein was hiding and from where he also might have escaped.

Here are some questions and observations I think about as I look back over that period:

- The Bush administration, very soon after Tora Bora, began to talk much

Examining Press Coverage of the War

'What is lacking in so much of the instantaneous coverage is verification and historical context, the things that turn coverage into reporting.'

"In the days before 24-hour news, wire services would send out early news flashes that would prove wrong and follow up with corrections. No one saw them except editors who made decisions about when things felt true enough to transmit. That duty now falls to the viewer. Switch between multiple news channels; don't believe anything until a credible source verifies it, if then; look at the blogger sites and, yes, print media; follow up on anything you think is important, because the facts are bound to change. And remember, it's only been a few days fighting. Even if the war gets worse, the reporting might yet get better." — *Jim Ledbetter, from a March 31, 2003 Time column, "Two Cheers for Embedding: War coverage has been high tech and low calorie, but don't blame the messengers."*

"What is lacking in so much of the instantaneous coverage is verification and historical context, the things that turn coverage into reporting. By my

reckoning, coalition casualties (while always tragic) were rather light during the first week of fighting compared with similar invasions in most previous modern wars. They were, for example, light compared with the weekly toll during most of the Vietnam War. But the first Gulf war reset popular expectations of what war constitutes. ... In the absence of context, the story of the war that reaches us seems less the story of battle than of a political campaign: the manipulation of expectation and images by all sides; the speculation on how these created expectations and images will affect the course of battle, as if it were an election." — *Jack Fuller, president of Tribune Publishing Co., writing in the Chicago Tribune on March 31, 2003.*

"This war was the first live war. That means that everything is speeded up. There is no time to think, no time to reflect, and the reporter is there to give you fast sound bites and glimpses of reality." — *Marvin Kalb, former CBS*

and NBC diplomatic correspondent, quoted in an April 13, 2003 article in The (Baltimore) Sun, "Media in Iraq Dances Uneasily on Ever-Shifting Sands of Battle: In Fast-paced World of Instant Coverage, Analyses Are Left to Blow in the Wind."

"It's classic for TV reporting to gravitate toward iconic images. Images are more appealing than an interview with a man on the street. When we hear words, we are skeptical and situate ourselves against them as we decide what we agree with and what we don't. Images are simple and memorable. They work in ways that don't engage the intellect. ... We are able to come to the core of the event much more readily with images than we can with words. Indeed, a few miles away from yesterday's fallen statue, the message was more complex and less happy. Gunfire still rang out elsewhere in Baghdad, a clear indication the statue revelers were only a part of the picture. And what media and government offi-

less about bin Laden and much more about Saddam Hussein. Did American news organizations pick up on this transition quickly enough and prominently enough?

- There was never any substantive evidence that linked Iraq and Saddam to the September 11th terrorists attacks or to bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Yet public opinion polls continually showed that Americans sensed or thought there was a connection. So the administration made its case, including the idea that Saddam was a threat to the United States, even though there was not much to support it. The question for news organizations is whether these claims

were reportorially tested and challenged sufficiently. Were news organizations inhibited to some degree in challenging for fear of seeming unpatriotic after September 11th? Or did the administration understand the connection in the public mind that ran from September 11th to Afghanistan to Iraq better than did the media?

- Somewhere along the line, did U.S. intelligence get politicized? Was the evidence really there that Saddam indeed had all these chemical and biological weapons and was reconstituting his nuclear program? What exactly was the evidence? The United States told the world it had hard

intelligence. The Iraqis undoubtedly had some capabilities. But were they exaggerated in the telling? Did news organizations press hard enough for answers and evidence to back up these claims?

- The administration's new policy of preemptive war was, of course, front-page news when it was unveiled last September. But did it get the in-depth attention and follow-up from the press that one might expect for such a bold policy in this new post-September 11th era? Were news organizations slow to realize that war, rather than just the use of force as a threat, was, in fact, very likely?
- What about the reporting of dissent?

cials were calling 'jubilation' in Firdos Square looked an awful lot like the looting taking place nearby. Footage of both activities showed gatherings verging on anarchy." —*Barbie Zelizer, author of "Journalism After September 11," quoted in a Boston Globe article on April 10, 2003, "Snap Judgments—Did Iconic Images from Baghdad Reveal More About the Media Than Iraq?" by Matthew Gilbert and Suzanne C. Ryan.*

"No one is suggesting that the networks, newspapers and cable channels commit to 24-7 coverage of developments in Iraq. Inevitably, a different story will come along to command the time, attention and resources of the nation's journalistic community. One always does. However, it also is true that, at the moment, interest in international affairs is high, and a recent Pew Center report shows eight of 10 Americans think the press has done a good job covering the war. Those results are a change from a few months ago, and all journalists should try to maintain that confidence level. A dramatic rollback in reporting from the Middle East would signal to the nation that the 'story' was over, and that Americans could, once again, return to a

position of benign neglect regarding world affairs. That outcome would be a shame, for it would leave unresolved a coherent explanation of the conditions that led us to war in the first place." —*Wendell Cochran, director of Journalism Department Division, School of Communication, American University, in his April 16, 2003 article in The American Observer, "The Press: Beyond Morgues and Mosques."*

"That the news divisions of NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN and Fox sanctioned this domination by military types was a further assault on what the public deserves: independent, balanced and impartial journalism. The tube turned into a parade ground for military men—all well-groomed white males—saluting the ethic that war is rational, that bombing and shooting are the way to win peace, and that their uniformed pals in Iraq were there to free people, not slaughter them. Perspective vanished, as if caught in a sandstorm of hype and war-whooping. If the U.S. military embedded journalists to report the war from Iraq, journalists back in network studios embedded militarists to explain it. Either way, it was one-version news." —*Colman McCarthy, a former Washington Post*

columnist who now directs the Center for Teaching Peace, in his April 19, 2003 Washington Post op-ed, "TV's Military 'Embeds.'"

"Why are all the network experts retired military and oil men assessing the success of firefights or assuring us we can cap the burning wells? There must be other categories of knowledge that would be useful to their viewers. ... Give me a talking head who can assess the impact on the children who hear the screams of bombs Tell me about the collateral damage to their minds. How does a three- or five-year-old comprehend a hundred Dresdens? Let's have a few charts and graphs with laser pointers to objectify their healing process." —*Lester Sloan, a Los Angeles-based photographer, in a message sent to Nieman Reports on March 25, 2003.*

"The coverage of this war is as close to the truth of this war as reality TV is to real life. At a moment like this, the media should be an irritant—shocking us, shaking us, making sure that we're as alert and uncomfortable as possible in the comfort of our living rooms." —*Joe Klein, from an April 7, 2003 Time essay, "The PG-Rated War." ■*

The anti-war movement that formed with respect to a preemptive war against Iraq was underreported and underplayed for quite a while in this country. Were news organizations slow to sense and take seriously the dissent on Iraq because there had been almost no dissent to going after bin Laden and the Taliban in Afghanistan after September 11th?

- Early Congressional hearings, the few that were held, also received relatively little attention, as did some of the commentaries by both Republican and Democrats challenging the administration's course in the initial build-up toward war. Why was that? Did these public events and statements not have much news value? Or were some news organizations not alert to the transition in policy and differences between Afghanistan and Iraq and to surfacing of dissent about the turn of policy toward Iraq?
- Later on, did the press too easily adopt administration language in

reporting about, for example, "coalition forces," or "Operation Iraqi Freedom," or "weapons of mass destruction," while eliminating the term "fedayeen" from the description of Iraqi combatants once the conflict started?

It is impossible to generalize about "the media." They are far too diverse these days, encompassing in the public mind everything from talk radio to the very best daily newspapers. But certainly one can say that when it comes to what could be called the "serious" press in this country—the newspapers, wire services, and major television news operations that develop and drive coverage and devote major resources to that coverage—the actual war in Iraq was a modern high point in informing the public. There was also, to be sure, a lot of tough, probing coverage by individual news organizations before the war.

Whatever one thinks of this war, it is unique and very important in many

ways. It is almost certain to change a region, and it might change the world. It has rattled some old alliances, reinforced the most important one with Britain, and formed some new ones. It has expanded the role of the United States abroad and altered the way it is perceived around the world. The war grew out of a new and still controversial policy and was driven by a very determined President. The lingering question in my mind is not whether the press recorded the outcome well. We did. Rather, the question is whether we in the press paid attention enough, probed enough, and asked enough questions early enough before the war began. ■

Michael Getler is ombudsman for The Washington Post. He was formerly the executive editor of the International Herald Tribune. Before that he was deputy managing editor of The Washington Post.

✉ ombudsman@washpost.com

Readers Question Editors' Judgments About War Coverage

'Where were these stories when, over the last year, Bush was building up his "case" for war?'

Michael Getler is the ombudsman for The Washington Post. On March 23, 2003, his column, entitled "Before, and After, the Shooting Started," was published. Excerpts from that column follow.

"Readers who oppose the President's policy—and, at times, the Post's coverage—continued to find fault, at least until the shooting started.

"Several of them wrote early last week, focusing on two stories. One appeared on Page A17 last Sunday under the headline 'U.S. Lacks Specifics on Banned Arms.' The other, which was on Page A13 on Tuesday, was headlined 'Bush Clings to Dubious Allegations About Iraq.' The first story, by

staff writer Walter Pincus, reported that 'U.S. intelligence agencies have been unable to give Congress or the Pentagon specific information about the amounts of banned [Iraqi] weapons or where they are hidden.' The second story, by Pincus and White House reporter Dana Milbank, said that attack preparations are being made 'on the basis of a number of allegations ... that have been challenged—and in some cases disproved—by the United Nations, European governments, and even U.S. intelligence reports.'

"Readers said they appreciated these stories. But they asked why they were not worthy of the front page and, as one reader put it, 'where were these

stories when, over the last year, Bush was building up his "case" for war?' Another asked, 'Why shouldn't Bush cling to dubious allegations? He gets to repeat them over and over in prime time in front of a huge national audience and your analysis of their truthfulness is tucked away on page 13. No wonder such a large percentage of Americans believe that Hussein was directly tied to 9/11.' ■

WATCHDOG

The Press and Freedom

A radio journalist spots disturbing trends in how the White House press corps reports on the Bush administration.

Bob Edwards is the host of National Public Radio's "Morning Edition." Edwards, a Louisville native, was inducted on April 8 into the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame. That day, he gave the annual Joe Creason Lecture at the University of Kentucky. The (Louisville) Courier-Journal then adapted his remarks for an op-ed that it published. What follows are excerpts from that op-ed.

By Bob Edwards

President George W. Bush has been in office for more than two years, and he's held exactly eight news conferences. At the same point in his presidency, George Bush the elder had held 58 news conferences. Of the current President's eight news conferences, only two have been in prime time.

But last month's news conference was remarkable for more than the fact that it happened at all. Reporters were ushered into the East Room in pairs—summoned two-by-two, like the animals boarding Noah's Ark. Once the news conference got underway, the President did not recognize reporters who raised their hands. Instead, he called their names from a list prepared by press secretary Ari Fleischer, the man who told reporters after September 11th that they should watch what they say. When CNN's John King attempted to ask a question, the President told him to wait because, the President said, "This is scripted." Then he called the next name on his list: John King. Then he taunted King for daring to ask a multi-part question. Among the names not called—and perhaps not on Ari Fleischer's list of approved questioners—were the reporters from Time, The Washington Post,



Cartoon by Malcolm Evans, Auckland, New Zealand. Reprinted by permission of Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate/cartoonweb.com.

USA Today, Newsweek and Kentucky's own Helen Thomas, who for decades has had the distinction of asking the first question and then closing the news conference by saying, "Thank you, Mr. President," which became the title of her autobiography. But Helen is no longer a reporter. She's now a columnist, paid to give opinions, and one of her recent opinions is that George W. Bush "is the worst President ever." Clearly, she did not watch what she said. Another White House tradition, the follow-up question, also appears to be history.

We can fault the President and Fleischer for all that—and I certainly do—but they are only part of the dynamic. You can't hold a press conference without the press, yet President Bush nearly did. Where were they that night? Some of those whose names were called might have bothered to ask a decent question. With the nation

about to enter a war that's decidedly unpopular everywhere but here, no one asked the hard questions. Instead, the President was asked if America should pray. He was asked if he worried in the wee small hours of the night. The first black reporter to get a chance to question the President since his decision to support a rollback of affirmative action asked him, "How is your faith guiding you?" One critic said this was the journalistic equivalent of, "Mr. President, you look great today. What's your secret?"

Questions I Would Have Asked the President

So, Bob, think you can do better? Well, yes, I do. So here's what I would ask the President of the United States if he were here tonight:

- "Mr. President, you're asking for \$76

billion to pay for this war, and you'll probably go back to Congress to ask for more. Given the fact that there'll be severe deficits for as long as you are President, why not let your tax cut slide?"

- "You offered an attractive bribe to Turkey in exchange for permission to use Turkey as a base from which to invade northern Iraq. Was the vote of the Turkish parliament to refuse the offer an example of the democracy you're trying to establish in the Middle East?"
- "How did you expect to win international approval for your plan to invade Iraq when you have repeatedly told the rest of the world that the United States is ready to act alone in virtually every field, as witnessed by your withdrawal from international treaties and agreements having to do with the environment, war crimes, and other matters that the rest of the world considers important?"
- "Mr. President, at your news conference last month, you mentioned the September 11th attacks no fewer than eight times, even though no one asked you about September 11th—they were asking you about the invasion of Iraq. The September 11th attacks were carried out by al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Will you please elaborate on the connection, if any, between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden who, if his videotapes are to be believed, has about as much affinity for Saddam Hussein as you do?"
- "Mr. President, you have spent billions of dollars on homeland security to see the nation's capital paralyzed by a North Carolina tobacco farmer driving his tractor onto the Mall. Did [Homeland Security] Secretary [Tom] Ridge miss a memo or two?"
- "Does preemptive military action without provocation set a bad example for other countries who can claim actual provocation? India and Pakistan over Kashmir, for example? Greece and Turkey over Cyprus? South Korea, provoked almost daily by North Korea?"

- "And speaking of North Korea, Mr. President, who is the worse dictator—Saddam Hussein or Kim Jong Il?"
- "Kim is weeks away from turning North Korea into a nuclear power, if he hasn't already done so. Saddam only dreams of becoming a nuclear power, so why is Iraq a bigger priority than North Korea? And why don't you send your so-called precision bombers to take out the one plant in North Korea that you know to be a potential source of nuclear weapons?"
- "When I interviewed your wife, Mr. President, she said the best byproduct of ousting the Taliban from Afghanistan was the liberation of Afghan women. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told me the same thing when I asked him what the United States achieved in its war in Afghanistan. If the liberation of Arab women is so important to your administration, then why is the United States not invading Saudi Arabia?"
- "Sir, would you say your policy of noninvolvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is working out? If so, for whom?"
- "Is it possible that the war in Iraq will result in regime change in Great Britain?"

Well, that's just a sampling of the questions I'd ask, though in more peaceful times I'd be likely to ask about labor laws, media ownership concentration, freedom of information, government secrecy, suspension of civil liberties, the environment, energy, corporate corruption and, most assuredly, health care reform.

Probing Questions and Patriotism

Now why are the tough questions not being asked? Do journalists wearing their flag lapel pins on TV not want to appear unpatriotic in time of war? The answer is yes. Av Westin said it very well last month. Westin goes back to the glory days of network television news. He was a producer at CBS for 20 years

and a producer at ABC for 21 more years. He said, "Since 9/11, the press has been watching the opinion polls almost as much as the administration, which explains why it has taken quite a while to assume the kind of normal adversarial relationship, much less the kind that was rampant during the Clinton years and the Nixon years." He added: "There is a considerable amount of self-censorship going on in terms of pushing government officials on certain topics. But I've always believed our job was to ask questions that need to be asked, regardless of official reaction or public opinion."

He's absolutely right. Being popular might be good for business at a time when newspapers are losing readers and TV networks are losing viewers. And the owners of today's media, who are business tycoons, not journalists, would like us to be good representatives of the corporate brands. But that is not our job. We are supposed to be surrogates for the public—the eyes and ears of citizens who don't have the access we have. We are to hold public officials to account, and if that makes them angry at us—well, that just goes with our job, and we have to take it. If pointed questions make public officials squirm—well, that just goes with their job, and they're supposed to take it. That's the price that comes with the privilege of serving the people.

The press didn't wait until the intern scandal to ask tough questions of Bill Clinton, so why is the incumbent getting a pass? The country deliberately decided not to have a king. We show the President some deference because of the office he holds. We call him "Mr. President." It is NPR policy never to refer to an incumbent President by last name only. He is "President Bush" or "Mr. Bush"—but never just "Bush." Yet he is not a king. He is a citizen temporarily serving us, living in our house, drawing our pay, spending our money, and acting in our name. We have the right and, yes, the duty, to expect him to perform at a high standard. If we don't do this, we're performing below the standard that should be expected of us.

When we were little, we thought it

would be really cool to be a newspaper reporter or a TV or radio correspondent. Well, sometimes it really is cool. But we don't deserve to enjoy the cool part of the job if we're not willing to do the heavy lifting that sometimes comes

with it. Public officials are measured by how well they perform in times of crisis. If they can't take the heat, they should be in another line of work. It should be the same way with journalists. We cannot take a dive just because

the country is at war. Indeed, our responsibility grows in times like these. It is not unpatriotic to expect the best from our leaders. Likewise, the public should expect no less than the best from us. ■

WATCHDOG

Presidential Secrecy and Reporters' Efforts to Breach It

A former White House correspondent suggests ways to ask more probing questions.

By Sam Donaldson

All Presidents resent the prying eyes of the press and all Presidents practice secrecy in matters beyond national security. But none in modern times has carried secrecy so far with such success as President George W. Bush. If the father once famously declared from the campaign stump "Message: I care," the son's message seems to be "It's none of your business."

You only had to watch President Bush's press conference of March 6, 2003, to understand this. He seldom strayed from the two or three messages he came to deliver, never mind the question. It was, as the President observed, a "scripted" event meant not so much to inform as to persuade. Reporters who were there to get information found themselves cast in the role of "spear carriers," made part of the "set."

Some very able reporters made valiant efforts to draw the President out on matters of importance, and it is not primarily their fault when they came away empty. But here are some thoughts on how to sharpen the effort when next the press has a chance to question the President:

- Be respectful, but blunt and direct. Several reporters began by thanking the President for calling on them, and a couple began by saying "Good evening, Mr. President." While all that is very polite, remember, this is not a social occasion. This is busi-

ness; believe me, that's how the President views it. And the press should not be there as supplicants, but as one side of a dialogue, the intent of which should be to truly inform the public.

- Don't ask multiple part questions. Ask one question. Make it simple and pointed. I sympathize with reporters, many of whom haven't had a chance to question the President for months, when a two- or three-part question tumbles out. But do that and the President has the option of answering part a, part b, part c, or none of the above. "Will you veto the military bill, sir," gives a reporter a better chance of getting an answer than asking, "Will you veto the military bill, and what about the dispute between the defense and state departments on aid to Turkey, and can you tell us when you might deliver your roadmap to peace in the Middle East?" Ask that kind of multiple part question and the answer might well be another expression by the President of how much he loves our country and how much he admires our brave troops. Who can remember that he didn't answer any of the questions? When asked directly, he might not say whether he intends to veto the military bill, but at least it will be glaringly obvious that he didn't answer the question.
- Do not help the President come up with an answer. Do not say "Sir,

everyone understands this is a sensitive subject, and you may not want to comment on it since other governments are involved, but" If the President wants to avoid answering by saying it is a sensitive subject, let him—he's a big boy who knows how to handle himself. Don't give him the chance to use you as his foil and, while I'm on this subject, don't ask the President if he would "care to comment." He has every right to answer "no," and where do you go from there? Just ask him the question and let him decide whether and how to answer.

- Follow up on a colleague's question if it's important and the President has dodged it. There are always more subjects to address than time to address them, and this is a judgment call. But occasionally the news is made in a second stab at the subject rather than the first. It's worth doing even if it doesn't sound that original to the boss.

All of this brings me to a final point addressed not to reporters but to their bosses. Reporters understand they are not in the White House press room to win a popularity contest. People feel strongly about a President and are either for him or against him, and reporters who ask pointed questions will displease a lot of people.

What the boss needs to do is back up the reporter when readers or viewers or White House aides complain. I was

very fortunate that the late Roone Arledge was head of ABC News when I covered Presidents Carter, Reagan and Clinton. Arledge listened to my critics but turned them aside when he found the criticism to be unjustified. That gave me the ability to ask my questions without worrying about whether they were politically correct.

I could then ask a tough question like the one I asked Ronald Reagan in the fall of 1982: "Mr. President, tonight

you have blamed this continuing recession on Congress and mistakes of the past. Doesn't any of the blame belong to you?"

'Yes,' replied President Reagan, 'I was once a Democrat.'"

Laughter, exit reporter. Oh, well, sometimes nothing works. But you've got to keep trying. ■

Sam Donaldson is host of "Sam Donaldson Live in America," a three-

hour weekday national radio program. He became a correspondent with ABC News in 1967 and has reported on all but one political convention since 1964 and seven presidential campaigns. He was twice White House correspondent (1977-1989 and 1998-99), a panelist on "This Week With David Brinkley," and co-anchor of "This Week."

In War, Journalists Become Part of the Problem

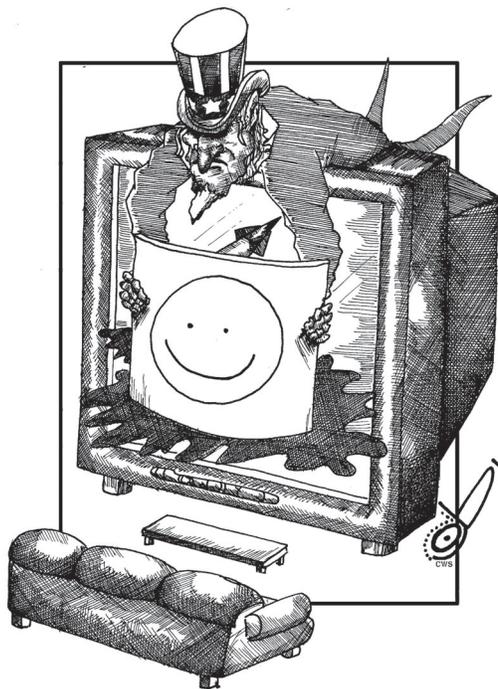
'It was horrifying, confusing, numbing and nothing like the myth I had been peddled.'

Chris Hedges, a 1995 Nieman Fellow, reporter for The New York Times, and author of "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning," gave the 22nd annual Joe Alex Morris, Jr. Memorial Lecture on March 13, 2003, at Harvard University. Here are some excerpts from that address.

By Chris Hedges

As I speak to you today, our nation prepares for war. Within a short time, young Americans and Iraqis will begin to die I come to you tonight to warn you that once the dogs of war are unleashed, we will not control them. War has a force and power of its own. It is a Pandora's box. Once this box is opened, we become pawns. Events we do not expect or anticipate spiral out of control. ...

War, we have come to believe, is a spectator sport. The military and the press—and remember, in wartime the press is almost always a part of the problem—have turned war into a vast video-arcade game. Its very essence, death, is hidden from public view. ... But in the age of live feeds and satellite television, the state and the military



Cartoon by Alejandro Rodriguez Gonzales, Mexico City, Mexico. Reprinted by permission of Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate/cartoonweb.com.

have affected the appearance of candor. Because we no longer understand war, no longer understand that it all can go horribly wrong. ... The chief institutions that peddle war are the state and the press. Nearly every war correspondent has seen his or her mission as sustaining civilian and army morale. The advent of photography

and film did little to alter the incentive to boost morale, for the lie in war is almost always the lie of a mission.

Mythic War Reporting

The blunders and senseless slaughter by our generals, the ruthless murder of prisoners and innocents, and the horror of wounds are rarely disclosed, at least during a mythic war, to the public. Only when the myth is punctured, as it was in Vietnam, does the media begin to report in a sensory rather than a mythic manner. It simply reacts to a public that has changed its perception of war. Newspaper and television station owners have always found that mythic war reporting sells papers and boosts ratings—look at CNN. Real reporting does not. The coverage in the Persian Gulf War was typical. ...

"The first casualty, when war comes," wrote [U.S.] Senator Hiram Johnson [R-Calif.] in 1917, "is truth." When Iraqi troops seized the Saudi border town of Khafji, sending Saudi soldiers fleeing out in a panic, the flight was covered up. Two French photographers and I watched as frantic Saudi soldiers raced away from the fighting. Dozens crowded on a fire truck that tore down the road. U.S.

Marines were called in to push the Iraqis back. We stood on rooftops with young Marine radio operators who called in air strikes as units fought their way through the streets under heavy fire. Yet back in Riyadh and Tehran, the world was told of our gallant Saudi allies who were defending their homeland. The press bus stopped a few miles down the road, allowed the pool television reporters to do standups with the distant sound of artillery and smoke as a backdrop for the lie the Pentagon wanted told. ...

The first time I was in an ambush was in the Salvadoran town of Suchitoto. It was a dreary peasant outpost made up of stucco and mud-walled huts off the main road. The town was surrounded by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front rebels who, when I arrived in El Salvador in 1983, were winning the war. The government forces kept a small garrison in the town, although its relief columns were regularly ambushed as they ambled down the small strip of asphalt surrounded by high grass. It was one of the most dangerous spots in El Salvador.

The rebels launched an attack to take the town. A convoy of reporters in cars marked with "TV" in masking tape on the windshields hightailed it to the small bridge that led to the lonely stretch of road into Suchitoto. ... [W]e moved slowly down the road, the odd round fired ahead or behind us. We made it to the edge of town, where we ran into rebel units, now accustomed to the follies of the press. On foot we moved through the deserted streets. The firing from the garrison became louder as we weaved our way with rebel units to the siege that had been set up. Then, as I rounded a corner, several full bursts of automatic fire rent the air. Bullets hit the mud wall behind me. We dove into the dirt. ...

The firefight seemed to go on for an eternity. I cannot say how long I lay there. It could have been a few minutes. It could have been an hour. Here was war—real war, sensory war, not the war of the movie and novels I had consumed in my youth. It was horrifying, confusing, numbing and nothing

The Safety of Journalists Who Cover Wars

'Communications have changed everything—on the battlefield and at home.'

"In the 21 years between 1954, when the French were defeated in Indo-China, and 1975, when the combat stopped in Vietnam, 63 journalists were killed. During the fighting in the Balkans from the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991 to the pacification of Kosovo in 1999, 61 were killed. Since the United States began bombarding Iraq three weeks ago, 12 journalists have been killed or died covering the fighting. If the conflict in Iraq were to last as long as the war in Southeast Asia—and current casualty rates remained constant—4,368 journalists would die" —*Los Angeles Times media reporter Tim Rutten, writing on April 9, 2003, "Covering Conflict Exact a Price."*

"I think the increased danger from so-called friendly fire is one of the major causes of this high casualty rate. It's made things very dangerous. [Another factor is that] pressure from editors and the home office is much heavier

than it's ever been before in any war, including the Balkans and Afghanistan. When I was a photographer in Vietnam, we didn't get cell phone calls from London or New York. We were lucky if we got a piece of paper every other week from Saigon. More important, judgment of our work was withheld until we returned from the field. Nowadays, our photographers are at the end of a mobile satellite telephone, and we hurry them from one place to another without respite. We see something on London TV, we immediately contact the closest photographer on the battlefield and ask them to move over there where the action is. Communications have changed everything—on the battlefield and at home." —*Horst Fass, a two-time Pulitzer winner now working out of AP's London bureau, quoted in Los Angeles Times's reporter Tim Rutten's April 9, 2003 article, "Covering Conflict Exact a Price."* ■

like the myth I had been peddled. I realized at once that it controlled me. I would never control it. ...

Most people, after such an experience, would learn to stay away. I was hooked. Drawn into the world of war, it becomes hard to escape. It perverts and destroys you. It pushes you closer and closer to your own annihilation—spiritual, emotional and finally physical. I covered the war in El Salvador from 1983 to 1988. By the end, I had a nervous twitch in my face. I was evacuated three times by the U.S. Embassy because of tips that the death squads planned to kill me. Yet, each time, I came back. I accepted with a grim fatalism that I would be killed in El Salvador. I could not articulate why I accepted my own destruction and cannot now. There came to be a part of me, maybe it is a part of all of us, which decided I would rather die like this than go back to the dull routine. ...

War's sickness had become mine.

What follows is an edited question and answer session that began after Chris Hedges' speech.

... **Natalie Pawelski, Nieman Fellow:** You mentioned that too often in war the media become part of the problem. Can you tell us times when you became part of the problem—or were tempted to?

Hedges: When I reported the war in Bosnia, I reported in a sensory [way]—I'm stealing a term from [Lawrence] LeShan, but I think he got it [right]. I would go into a town, and there were bodies laid out in a square and houses on fire. It was venal and dirty, and you wrote the story. If you were a Muslim or a Croat or a Serb going into a town that your forces had just taken, you always searched for a narrative: You

found the hometown hero. You found the refugees from your ethnic groups who had been liberated or had been cruelly treated. You documented the perfidious crimes of the enemy. You gave it a structure and a narrative that war often doesn't have—a kind of coherency. You made it mythic. The best book on this is Philip Knightley's "The First Casualty," where he goes from the Crimean War all the way up through Vietnam, and I think [makes] a pretty damning case to show that the press considers itself part of the war effort. You certainly see this now with the flag lapel pins of the news announcers and this gushing kind of excitement that you see on CNN.

It's important to remember that one of the first things that's taken from us in wartime is language. The state hijacks language. We speak in the clichés and aphorisms and the jingoism that's handed to us by the state. We're doing that now: "The War on Terror." "Show-down With Iraq." "Countdown." Once they take from you the ability to speak, they make it very difficult for you to think and express whatever disquiet it is that you feel.

Often in Bosnia, in Mostar, the trench lines between the Muslims and the Croats were [only] a few yards [apart]. They would talk to each other at night. They'd grown up together. They'd gone to school together. They played together. They'd gone to each other's weddings. Yet they were killing each other all day long. It had a kind of absurdity to it. When you asked soldiers there to try and express it, you could sense the disquiet. But they didn't have the vocabulary by which to speak.

The fact is, mythic war [reporting] sells newspapers—that's how William Randolph Hearst built his empire—and it boosts ratings. Real-world reporting doesn't. In the end, it's about a business, especially when we see the complete, almost total corruption, in my mind, of commercial broadcast media. Although I was not part of the pool system and was out on my own—which perhaps allowed me to write articles that were somewhat more critical—I still tended to write stories that fit that kind of narrative.

Firefights are very confusing. Most of the time you don't know what's going on. You try, once it's over, to make it a story in your head—How am I going to explain it?—because it doesn't really have any coherency. That is the very moment of the creation of myth. ... When you go back and read what Martha Gellhorn did in the Spanish Civil War, what many reporters did in most conflicts is they ignored what was convenient to ignore. In almost every war, the press is part of the problem.

Another question was asked about the embedding of reporters into military units.

Hedges: News organizations should embed. I just don't have the constitution for it. I don't like press buses. I don't like being driven around. I couldn't do it, personally. But I think that it should be done. The problem is that, from everything I can tell from the coverage in Afghanistan, if you're a good little boy and girl, and you go out and do what you're told, you're okay. But the moment you get out and do independent reporting, you pay a heavy price. My colleague, Doug Struck of The Washington Post, was investigating a bombing raid outside of Kandahar that had killed apparently a large number of civilians. He was stopped by U.S. soldiers, had a gun pointed to his head, was made to lie down on the ground, and was told that if he went any further, he would be shot. This administration has made it clear they cannot guarantee the safety of reporters and tell us the El Rashid Hotel in Baghdad where reporters stay is a legitimate target. A friend of mine works for the BBC. I spoke with her on Sunday. She's leaving very soon. She said that the BBC was told by the Pentagon that, if they uplinked to their satellite from Baghdad, they would be considered by the U.S. military a target

You have to remember that, in the Persian Gulf War, there were only 80 journalists in the pool system. When the military went back and did a study of how they handled the press, one of the main critiques they made of themselves was that they failed to get out the

message they wanted. Now, you have supposedly 500 reporters embedded. They're going through these Boy Scout Jamboree sessions, you know, where they get to play soldier for a week and sort of bond with the unit. Of course, everybody has to do a story about it, which is great press for the military. They're so dependent on the military. When you read the rules, it's pretty clear that if they don't like you, you're out. If things go horribly wrong—I know from the Persian Gulf War—they're not going to be driving you in a Humvee to see it. It's just not going to happen.

So we're going to get a completely sanitized version of the war. It's going to be packaged and presented. When things go wrong, we're not going to see it. Independent reporters, who always constitute about 10 percent of the reporting group, are going to have a really tough time. ...

Louise Nissen, Nieman Fellow: Having experienced all the atrocities you describe in your book and having analyzed how many of your colleague journalists and photographers were addicted to war, what kept you going back? What were you trying to accomplish or prove?

Hedges: I don't [keep going back]. I went to Gaza, and I stopped. I mean that was it. I realized I had to stop. It's not easy to stop because that was my identity: I was a war correspondent. I was a good war correspondent. It gave me my cachet. It was an adrenaline rush. I know people in Kosovo I covered the war with in El Salvador. I don't see them anymore. It was a very difficult transition, not made any easier by the institution I work for. It was painful and hard and humbling. In the end, it made me a better person and a healthier person. But it was a conscious decision. We live in war, and it's all about speed. I was on a platform the other day and watched the Acela [train] go by. I felt that sort of catch inside. I almost had to stop myself from wanting to live at that kind of pace again. I think it's always there. But in the end it's a very unhealthy way to live. ... ■

WATCHDOG

Embedding Reporters on the Frontline

With regained public trust, watchdog reporting might be more welcomed for its role in protecting democracy.

By Nancy Bernhard

Several weeks into the Iraq War, the Pentagon's embedding policy was judged a resounding success. While questions will always remain about the degree to which reporting from within a war effort must inevitably compromise journalistic independence, embedding allowed far greater access to the battlefield than the press has enjoyed in more than two decades and has dampened the long hostility between the Pentagon and the press. In a popular and relatively easy war, reporters' access to the battle zones was a win-win policy. With a bit of a stretch, we might even speculate that the embedded reporters' contributions in the war will contribute to a wider public embrace of the press's watchdog functions.

Mutual dependence under fire entwines people, as the Pentagon obviously understood. Skeptics likened this empathy to the "Stockholm Syndrome," but if embedding yielded some gee-whiz admiration for soldiers and their hardware, mutuality also yielded a great deal of public education about military life and procedures. Support for the troops became the overriding frame for war news in the United States media, and television reporters, in particular, partook of the vast public support that poured forth for capable and honorable soldiers.

The degree to which embeds participated in the war effort became a central element of their reporting. Following the Fox News Channel's lead and precedents set after September 11th, broadcasters used the triumphal first person "we" to chart U.S. progress toward Baghdad. Through the frame of red-white-and-blue graphics, the celebration of embedding took on a redemptive tone, as if, after decades of obstinate standoffishness, reporters

had finally reconciled with their Pentagon elders and shown up for the family reunion.

The few flaps that raised ethical conundrums for journalists' indepen-

dence were resolved with the happy discovery that reporters are actually Americans and human beings. Boston Globe reporter Scott Bernard Nelson, embedded with the First Marine Divi-

Embedded Reporting

Is objectivity an acceptable casualty of this kind of reporting?

What follows is an excerpt from Dan Kennedy's April 14, 2003 Media Log (www.dankennedy.net).

"Life, death and objectivity. Here are a few of Roget's synonyms for objectivity: 'detachment,' 'disinterest,' 'dispassion,' 'fairness' and 'impartiality.' In journalism, fairness and impartiality are good; but detachment and dispassion are more suitable for a certified public accountant than for someone who's trying to bring a story home in all of its vivid truth.

"The Boston Herald's embedded reporter, Jules Crittenden, described the limits of objectivity in an astounding account for the Sunday paper, recounting how he called out Iraqi positions as his unit rolled through Baghdad, thus helping to kill three Iraqi soldiers. He writes: 'Some in our profession might think as a reporter and noncombatant, I was there only to observe. Now that I have assisted in the deaths of three human beings in the war I was sent to cover, I'm sure there are some people who will question my ethics, my objectivity, etc. I'll keep the argument short. Screw them, they weren't there. But they are welcome to join me next time if they care to test their professionalism.'

"Crittenden's account comes closer than anything I've read in this three-week war to making me feel as though

I were there and experiencing for myself the abject fear and its close cousin, exhilaration, that define combat. But, of course, this isn't objectivity—a bogus concept in any case—or, for that matter, a fair, comprehensive view of what's going on in Iraq. The reality is that Crittenden's account illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the embed program.

"The strength, of course, is that it gives us a close-up look and otherwise unattainable insight into what it's like for American soldiers to fight this war. The weakness is that the embeds' accounts necessarily become the story of the war as seen through the eyes of American soldiers. No reporter is going to be 'objective' about those who are protecting his or her life. And Crittenden's assistance in killing Iraqi troops who were trying to kill him is perfectly understandable. Who among us wouldn't do exactly the same thing? But it also—as Crittenden acknowledges—calls into serious question the role of journalists as noncombatants, thus turning reporters into legitimate targets for those against whom we are fighting.

"Overall, the embed program has been a real plus. But as Crittenden shows, there are hazards to it as well. He deserves credit for describing those hazards so honestly." ■

sion, was the only one in his convoy who spotted an Iraqi sniper's position. Nelson informed a gunner, who fired 100 rounds and killed the fedayeen sniper. Nelson said he had come to "identify with the Marines," but would like to believe his reporting was untainted since it appeared alongside unembedded Globe coverage from Qatar and the Pentagon.

CNN's Sanjay Gupta, a neurosurgeon, helped doctors in a U.S. Army medical unit operate on both Americans and Iraqis. After interviewing a Marine wounded in Nasiriyah's "Ambush Alley," MSNBC's Kerry Sanders—still broadcasting—offered his satellite phone to the young soldier so he could

call his family. MSNBC's self-congratulation grew a bit thick as the New York-based anchor, on the phone with the Marine's mother in Tennessee, concluded the umpteenth repetition of this video of the soldier being propped up to catch the satellite signal with the verdict that embedding was a triumph. "Somewhere a journalism professor is telling a student never to get involved with the subject of a story. Here we have proof that this is wrong."

Whither Journalistic Independence

What could be wrong with reporters doing such useful and compassionate

duty? Nothing. The ethic of journalistic independence suddenly appeared obsolete, as if it had stemmed from life-threatening stupidity or inhuman selfishness. Journalists' service to democracy is now defined as providing support for the troops rather than independently gathered information on their activities.

Oddly enough, for those of us concerned with the health of our democracy and its diminishing respect for a watchdog press, embedding might prove to have been a positive step. For decades, journalists have labored under the public perception that an aggressive watchdog press is inherently unpatriotic and disloyal. That percep-

The View From Inside the Military

Embedding of journalists was an experiment. How did it work?

"Not unlike covering a statehouse or Congress, you get cozy with the people you cover. They take you into their confidence. You end up self-censoring for obvious reasons. You're at ground zero—no one with an ounce of sense is going to betray sensitive information. And you don't want to get innocent people killed." —*Walter Rodgers, veteran CNN correspondent traveling with the Army's 7th Cavalry, quoted in the March 22, 2003 Washington Post story, "Reports With a Troop's-Eye-View: For Embedded Correspondents, the Small Picture Is Big News," by Howard Kurtz.*

"I acknowledge the right of an army to exploit the media to confuse the enemy. But it is our job not to fall for it. I do, therefore, share a concern that, with so many reporters deployed in Iraq, some of them novices in the art of reporting warfare, our profession may be at greater hazard than usual of being a channel for disinformation. That's where the news executive comes in. He must counteract that downside. He has to brief his team. And he has to ensure that he deploys some roaming reporters—Reuters has 20 very brave journalists in Baghdad working inde-

pendently and 23 more in southern and northern Iraq—to try to balance, if not verify, what the 'embeds' are saying. ... Finally, the news executive needs a vigilant—and skeptical—editing desk supported by specialist writers. I go back to Doon Campbell on D-Day, 'How to convey even a tiny detail of this mighty mosaic.' No one battlefield reporter can ever make sense of a war. The challenge for a news organization is to gather and meld the fragments into a coherent and, you hope, accurate and impartial whole." —*Geert Linnebank, editor in chief of Reuters, in an op-ed, "Counteract Drawbacks of 'Embedded' Reporters," published in USA Today on March 31, 2003.*

"Embedding is for the journalist who wants access and is prepared to pay a price to get it. But for those who worry about the blurring of the line between government and journalism, even in the post-9/11 war against terrorism, there is the larger problem of patriotic reporting. Will journalists covering the front or the White House criticize the mission, the troops, the President, or the strategy in the face of strong popular support for the war? Or will the

public have to wait months, even years, after the war to learn about the blunders?

"September 11, 2001, is the dividing line in journalism between purists and realists. Purists may still worry about the problems of embedding and patriotism; realists say the rules have now changed, and it's time we all recognize we are in a war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq and one against terrorism at home. And journalists may have to bend with the winds of change." —*Marvin Kalb, excerpted from an article he wrote, "Journalists Torn Between Purism and Patriotism: Marvin Kalb Explores New Realities of War Reporting," published in Editor & Publisher on March 24, 2003.*

"The challenge of knowing so much and being able to say only in general terms what you do know in a live or nearly live broadcast is extraordinarily difficult. I'm holding in my head all the information at the same time as I'm censoring myself, ad-libbing to the host in Washington who is asking questions that I could easily answer and give away information that would break the ground rules. For the TV people doing

tion has dissipated in some measure because embedded reporters reestablished the humanity and patriotism of those in the profession. Even if it emerges out of the bandwagon aspects of embedding, the possibility might have opened for increased public respect for the press's more demanding functions, the ones that are not as obviously patriotic as saving lives.

My experience teaching a course in the history of war reporting suggests this possibility. Harvard undergraduates generally arrive with some version of the belief that the news media are overly aggressive, disrespectfully demanding, and utterly unpatriotic. When they look at documents such as the

Society of Professional Journalists' December 2002 "Statement of Principles" on access to military operations, many find the tone whiny. Reporters' exasperation with decades of military secrecy seems unreasonable.

These students do not easily differentiate tabloid excesses from mainstream news practices; instead, they tend to roll it together in a ratings-frenzied and unbecoming free-for-all. Nor do they recognize the difference between a journalist's personal criticism of, say, prospective war in Iraq, and reporting of such sentiment on the part of a prominent individual whose opinion is itself newsworthy, such as Brent Scowcroft. While intrigued by

the mystique of war correspondence, these brightest of 18-year-olds find the concerns of actual military journalists tiresome and annoying.

What gives more of a luster to journalists' defense of freedom of information, in their minds, is a bit surprising. It is not learning the difference between criticizing the government and bringing important criticism to public attention, although that makes them far better readers of news. Nor is it the study of press performance in past wars, from Ernie Pyle's rhapsodies of the Normandy infantry, to Michael Herr's hallucinogenic evocations of Khe Sanh, although first-rate war journalism from any era holds their rapt atten-

it from the frontlines, it must be even more challenging." —*Jack Laurence, with the Army's 101st Airborne Division, reporting for Esquire and filing reports for NPR, quoted in an April 7, 2003 article, "Veteran reporters go to war. Ted Koppel and Jack Laurence, both 63, are in Iraq. Koppel tells what enticed him. Laurence compares this war's challenges with Vietnam's," by Elizabeth Jensen, Los Angeles Times.*

"Just look at the story William Branigin of The Washington Post filed last week while being embedded with the Army's 3rd Infantry Division. Soldiers in that division killed seven women and children in a car the troops said failed to stop, despite commands and warning shots. Branigin's story quoted Capt. Ronny Johnson, who ordered the warning shots, as subsequently telling his platoon leader, 'You just ... killed a family because you didn't fire a warning shot soon enough!' The Pentagon has ordered an investigation, but I suspect that military brass wasn't happy with Branigin's account—and we should be grateful for it, an account we would not have had if he had not been embedded. For now, embedding is giving us a rare window on war. The critics should stop carping." —*Los Angeles Times media critic David Shaw,*

from his April 6, 2003 article, "Media Matters: Embedded Reporters Make for Good Journalism."

"It now appears that unilateral reporters cannot operate in Iraq with the current security situation without being sort of unofficially embedded with troops, or at least being able to camp at night near them. Unilaterals have had mortars and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] fired at them by Iraqi troops. Lack of supply is also an enormous problem. Unilaterals who are up closer to Baghdad are having to abandon their vehicles as they cannot source gasoline to keep them running, even with military help (the military runs on diesel, and there are no diesel vehicles to rent in Kuwait where people started, hence the problem). I hear a small group of unilaterals up there are actually siphoning the last of their gas into one vehicle, getting in together, and trying to make it to Baghdad in that vehicle." —*Laurie Goering, a unilateral reporter with the Chicago Tribune, who was in southern Iraq and serving as local bureau chief for embedded and unembedded journalists. From a March 26, 2003 article, "Unembedded Reporters Face Grave Dangers: Chicago Trib Reporter Offers Chilling Account" by Greg Mitchell, in Editor & Publisher.*

"I'm not sure this is a workable arrangement—the whole embed process. I think it's an unnatural way to practice journalism. But one of the good things to come out of this is that the whole experience has helped I think bridge the gap of distrust between the military and the media that is going to yield better defense reporting in the future. Because they're going to be more open with the media, and I think we'll understand them better. It's been a fascinating experiment." —*John Burnett, one of NPR's embedded correspondents during the war in Iraq, from an April 11, 2003 interview with Brooke Gladstone on NPR's "On the Media."*

"Who knows how much the embedded reporters saw? Did we see eight percent of what happened? Did we see four percent of what happened? It's arguable they didn't see a double-digit percentage of what happened." —*Eric Sorenson, president of MSNBC, quoted in the April 20, 2003 New York Times article, "Spectacular Success or Incomplete Picture?" by Jim Rutenberg and Bill Carter.* ■

tion. Instead, a simple exercise in defining democracy dispels the notion of an overreaching press. Is democracy best served by Americans' uncritical support of wars or by free-ranging debate that might end by earning support the hard way? There is an easy defense of democracy and a hard one, and when challenged no student ever prefers the easy one.

The students and I might end with respectful disagreements over the justice of particular wars, but we always agree that security should be defined strictly, to limit disclosure of information directly injurious to the troops, and hardly ever should be defined broadly, to include those broad strokes

that fall under the heading of "protecting morale." This generation of students has no romance with dissent. As a style and mode of discourse, they find it embarrassing. Yet they believe strongly in the institutions of democracy. They just need a bit of help to locate this belief among the many fashionable dismissals of the media.

Has embedding made it easier to understand the difficult demands of democracy? After the war in Iraq, do we have a better view of the crucial role the press plays in a robust democracy? Certainly not. The war remained popular and only fuelled intolerance of dissent. But to the extent that it dispels the perception of journalists as spoil-

ers, it opens a small window to more tolerance for genuine democratic debate. Reporters begin again to look a bit like heroes. The question remaining is whether the former war correspondents will use that capital to meet the challenges of democracy, or to make TV movie deals. ■

Nancy Bernhard teaches "Reporting From the Front" in the Expository Writing Program at Harvard University. She is the author of "U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-60" (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

✉ bernhard@fas.harvard.edu

Blogging the War Away

A media critic wages his own media war against the coverage of the war.

By Danny Schechter

We have all been reading and seeing reports from Iraq, from journalists embedded and not, reports from what have been described as the frontlines of the fight for "Iraqi freedom." Throughout the American media world and beyond, there has been a hearty sense of a job well done and regrets for colleagues who never made it home.

The Iraq war coverage inundated us as if there were no other news in the world. It was blow-by-blow and wall-to-wall, with the focus on the United States military campaign as it rolled across the desert and fought its way into Baghdad, stronghold of Saddam, capital of the regime, whose overthrow was demanded and accomplished. We've also seen the images and heard first-person accounts of journalists about their adventures, difficulties, scoops and disappointments.

Reporters who worked under limits imposed by the deposed Ministry of Information in Iraq were not shy about explaining what they'd had to put up with. Embedded reporters were less

forthcoming about their restrictions, although nearly all claimed they were not really restrained but rather assisted in their work by Pentagon press flacks. Many of them talked about how they came to identify with and sometimes befriended soldiers in units they tagged along with, usually with the caveat that it was no different from covering any other beat. The cumulative impact of their work prompted former Pentagon press chief Kenneth Bacon to tell *The Wall Street Journal*, "They couldn't hire actors to do as good a job as they have done for the military."

Covering the War Coverage

I have been covering the war, too, but from another vantage point. I was embedded in my small office in New York's Times Square where I work as editor of the nonprofit *Mediachannel.org*, a global media monitoring Web site with more than 1,060 affiliates worldwide. I focused on covering the war coverage on a global basis and disseminating my findings, ruminations and dissections

(I'm known as "the news dissector") on a daily Weblog. Many of these Weblog entries run 3,000-4,000 words each day; during the war, they sometimes appeared seven days each week, which speaks to my obsession with the issue.

Someone had to keep track of the media war. I say this because I've become ashamed by how much of what I've read, heard and seen has been used not to inform, illuminate and explain—what journalists once considered important—but to rationalize (a political agenda), mesmerize (the public), and create a consensus (for more preemptive unilateral action). This forces me to conclude that much of what passes for journalism here is seen as nothing but propaganda by people in other countries and by an increasing number of Americans, who are turning to international Web sites to find the kind of news they can no longer get here.

There is a mission to my madness, as well as a method. From years of covering conflicts on radio in Boston and on

television at CNN, ABC News, and Globalvision (the company I co-founded), I have come to see the inadequacies in journalism's "first draft of history." There are the ways it excludes so much more than it includes; how it narrows issues in "framing" them; how it tends to mirror and reflect the view of decision-makers while pandering to the patriotism of the audience. And, most interestingly, now that the Web provides instantaneous access to comparable news stories from different countries, we can see how ideology and cultural outlook shapes what gets reported and what doesn't.

Comparing Reports From Different Countries

Web technology made it possible for me to monitor and review, with the help of readers and other editors in our shop, war coverage from around the world. Clearly some of the reporting from other countries brought biases as strong as our own. But being able to read these reports also offered information, context and background missing in U.S. media accounts. Most of our news outlets, for example, covered a war *in* Iraq; others wrote of this conflict as a war *on* Iraq. Often, no line was visible between jingoism and journalism.

Many of the U.S. cable news networks portrayed Iraq as if it was the property of, and indistinguishable from, one mad man. Accordingly, attention was focused endlessly on where Saddam was. Was he alive or dead? Injured or in hiding? Few references were made to U.S. dealings with his government in the 1980's or the covert role the CIA played in his rise to power. He was as demonized in 2003 as Osama bin Laden had been in 2001, with news being structured as a patriotically correct morality soap opera with disinterested good guys (us) battling the forces of evil (them/him) in a political conflict constructed by the White House with its "you are either with us or against us" approach.

At times, it seemed as if there were only two sides to the story. The U.S. side was represented by endless

Centcom briefings, Pentagon press conferences, Ari Fleischer and the White House press corps, administration domination of the Sunday TV talk shows, and occasional presidential utterances riddled with religious references. On the other side were crude press conferences of Iraq's hapless minister of misinformation, a cartoon figure whom no one took seriously. The two armies were spoken of as if some military parity existed. And there was continual focus on anticipated chemical or biological weapon attacks that never happened and weapons of mass destruction that have yet to be found.

Omitted from the picture—and from the reporting—were views offering any persuasive counternarrative. There were few interviews with ordinary Iraqis—no reporters were embedded with them, experts not affiliated with pro-administration think tanks, military people other than retired officers who quarreled over tactics not policy, peace activists, European journalists and, until late in the day, Arab journalists. We saw images from Al Jazeera but rarely heard their analysis. This list of what was left out is endless. Footage was sanitized. "Breaking news" was often an inaccurate headline, and critical voices were omitted as Fox News

Using a Weblog to Track War Coverage

'If some of the embedded U.S. journalists are showboating, the anchors home are cheering them on.'

Danny Schechter, a 1978 Nieman Fellow, chronicles media coverage daily on Mediachannel.org, a Web site he edits. What follows is an excerpt from his Weblog of March 26, 2003.

"GulfNews recently echoed the view of American media often found in the Arab world: 'Western channels, notably CNN, have come under fire for not only following but also promoting American policy, serving as "apologists" for a unilateral war on Iraq waged without a U.N. mandate and censoring graphic images of the civilian carnage.'

"And then there is the matter of journalists stealing the show. Writes Gulf News: 'First person accounts of journalists' own experiences in war zones have long been the bane of sober political analysts, who regret that sensationalized tales of adventure should eclipse the reality on the ground. As such, critics would argue foreign correspondents reporting on the war in Iraq have broken a cardinal rule of journalism by becoming a part of the story they are sent to cover.'

"If some of the embedded U.S. jour-

nalists are showboating, the anchors back home are cheering them on. This prompted a comment from Pulitzer Prize-winner Sidney Schanberg whose coverage of the Cambodian genocide was turned into Hollywood's 'The Killing Fields.' He writes in The Village Voice: 'A lot of the people reporting on the war have no firsthand experience with it, especially those working from air-conditioned television studios an ocean and a continent away from the fighting. Probably they should begin their reports with some kind of ignorance acknowledgment, but no matter, they are harmless if you hit the mute button. Reporters in the war zones are, for the most part, quite different. Some are new at it, as we all were, but they won't be innocent for long. War vastly speeds up the initiation process. Clears the mind of flotsam, too. Journalists are already among the allied casualties.'

"And if that is not bad enough: Health experts are warning that too much war watching can be dangerous to your health." ■

played up martial music and MSNBC ran promos urging "God Bless America."

While much of my focus was on the TV packaging and presentation, I did keep an eye on the more diverse but not necessarily more skeptical print coverage. Print reporters can spend more time and be more thoughtful. They are not performers, although many print journalists were called upon as interview subjects by the cable networks. I was blown away most of all by the photographers, whose work for the first time ended up on TV as well as in print because it was, in many ways, more striking and made more of an impact than the hyperkinetic TV pictures. (All too often, however, the networks ran archival shots over and over again without always disclosing when they were taken.) In this war, the picture could be worth more than a thousand words if only because they seemed to capture better the agony of the war and its impact on civilians.

At the same time, if you compared the reporting in *The New York Times*, for example, with the far punchier reportage in the *Guardian*, it was clear which was steering a safe middle course, except when *Times*'s news analysts like R.W. Apple antagonized war boosters by daring to report suggestions by military men that there was a quagmire. In contrast, much of the print journalism in Europe and the Middle East was so different that many thought they were covering a different war.

From the U.S. press, we never heard voices like England's John Pilger, who wrote: "There is something deeply corrupt consuming this craft of mine. It is not a recent phenomenon; look back on the 'coverage' of the First World War by journalists who were subsequently knighted for their services to the concealment of the truth of that great slaughter. What makes the difference today is the technology that produces an avalanche of repetitive information, which in the United States has been the source of arguably the most vociferous brainwashing in that country's history." Journalists such as Israel's Uri Avnery condemned what he termed "prostitution."

In the United States, many newspapers played the story big, then downplayed it along with their TV counterparts. Explained Ned Warwick, foreign editor of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*: "While the *Inquirer* ran 20 stories a day during the war—about a third more than usual for foreign news—when that statue [of Hussein] came down, the space began to contract pretty rapidly. Given the brutal nature of the combat, people are wanting to hunker down and get as far away from it as they can. I was hearing readers say, 'Enough! Enough!'"

Quotes and information like this appeared in my daily media analyses, cobbled together from articles from the world press, independent sources, international agencies, and my own observations of the U.S. cable coverage, network shows, BBC and CBC News. I relied on the 350 worldwide news partners of the Globalvision News Network to offer far more diverse accounts of the facts on the ground, as well as their interpretation.

Weblogs: The Work and the Benefits

I began at six each morning, watching television at home with a remote in one hand and a notebook at my side. I read *The New York Times* and the *New York Post*, *New York's* weeklies as well as news magazines and opinion journals, clipping away with a fury. I was in the office by seven and was soon hopscotching among Web sites and e-mail that was bulging with stories I'd missed. I'd cut and paste and then start writing, squeezing in as much as I thought relevant. By nine o'clock, my writing was posted, and an editor was looking over the copy and correcting its many typos. Within an hour, we tried to send the Weblog out to the many Mediachannel readers who subscribed. After the workday ended, I'd be locked back on the TV, go to sleep, and do it again the next day.

Writing on a Weblog gave me the space and the freedom to have a rather extended say and, when I could, to link readers directly to the sources of what I wrote about. (At times, I was moving

too fast to do it all.) Could my logs have been shorter? Probably. Would it have been as comprehensive? No.

I deluge. You decide.

It may sound crazy, and admittedly idiosyncratic, but at least I know I am not alone in my responses to much of the U.S. coverage. On April 25th, I led my Weblog with comments by the head of the BBC, Greg Dyke, as reported in the *Guardian*: "BBC Director General Greg Dyke has delivered a stinging rebuke to the U.S. [broadcast] media over its 'unquestioning' coverage of the war in Iraq and warned the government against allowing the U.K. media to become 'Americanized.'"

While I agree with his general point, what bothers me about his remarks is the all-too-common view that "unquestioning coverage" is what all of American journalism has become. It has not. My hope is that U.S. journalists will find ways to demonstrate that this one-note war coverage is not their finest hour and that they, along with many in the public who are already relying on alternate and more diverse online news sources, will become more self-critical and willing to embrace other approaches. ■

Danny Schechter, a 1978 Nieman Fellow, is editor of Mediachannel.org and writes the daily "news dissector's" Weblog. He writes regularly on media issues for Globalvision News Network (www.gvnews.net) and for other news outlets in Berlin, Brazil, Frankfurt and Teberan. His book, "Media Wars: News at a Time of Terror" (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), contains some of his writings, and an original "soundtrack CD" (with the same name) features a collage of criticism of TV coverage with comments from him and other critics. To download "Media Wars" soundtrack visit: www.polarity1.com/jcfree.html

✉ Danny@mediachannel.org

Getting a More Complete War Story

Arab + U.S. television = more accurate war coverage.

This article appeared in The Daily Star on March 25, 2003, written by Rami G. Khouri, executive editor of The Daily Star, an English-language newspaper in Beirut, Lebanon. Khouri is a 2002 Nieman Fellow.

By Rami G. Khouri

The first thing I learned from the early days of the war in Iraq is not to rely solely on either American or Arab satellite/cable television channels as primary sources of news and analysis—but one should also watch both sides to get a complete view of events on the ground and in people's minds. For different reasons, Arab and American television—with a few notable exceptions that confirm the rule—both broadly provide a distorted, incomplete picture of events while accurately reflecting emotional and political sentiments on both sides.

Every day I scan through 20 different Arab and American TV services. This is a painful exercise, because the business of reporting and interpreting the serious news of war has been transformed into a mishmash of emotional cheerleading, expressions of primordial tribal and national identities, overt ideological manipulation by governments, and crass commercial pandering to the masses in pursuit of the audience share needed to sell advertising.

American television tends to go heavy on the symbols of patriotism, with American flags fluttering as integral elements of on-screen logos or backdrops, while emotional collages of war photos are used liberally as transitions between live reports and advertising breaks. Other signs of how American TV tends to reflect the pro-war sentiments of the government and many in society include the tone of most anchors and hosts, the heavy empha-

sis on showcasing America's weapons technology, the preponderance of ex-military men and women guests, not showing the worst civilian casualties in Iraq, highlighting U.S. troops' humanitarian assistance to Iraqis, and reporters' and hosts' use of value-laden and simplistic expressions like "the good guys" to refer to American troops.

The most unfortunate and professionally disgraceful aspect of U.S. television coverage, in my view, has been the widespread double assumption that Iraqis would offer no resistance and would welcome the U.S. Army with open arms. Some Iraqis will surely do so, but most people in this region now see the Americans as an invading force that will become an occupying force. The American media probably reflect widespread American ignorance about what it means to have your country invaded, occupied, administered and retooled in someone else's image.

Americans are correct to assume that their impressive military might will prevail on the battlefield; yet they also appear totally and bafflingly oblivious to the visceral workings of nationalism and national identity. I have seen no appreciation whatsoever in America for the fact that while Iraqis generally may dislike their vicious and violent Iraqi regime, the average Iraqi and Arab has a much older, stronger and more recurring fear of armies that come into their lands from the West carrying political promises and bags of rice.

Arab television channels display virtually identical biases and omissions, including heavy relaying of film of the worst Iraqi civilian casualties, interviews with guests who tend to be critical of the United States, hosts and anchors who often seem to see their role as debating rather than merely interviewing American guests, accepting Iraqi and other Arab government statements at face value without sufficiently probing their total accuracy, and highlighting the setbacks to the attacking Anglo-American forces, by means including showing film of captured or dead troops.

We in the Arab world are slightly better off than most Americans because we can see and hear both sides, given the easy availability of American satellite channels throughout this region; most Americans do not have easy access to Arab television reports and, even if they did, they would need to know Arabic to grasp the full picture.

Two days ago, I better understood the need to see images from both sides. Arab television stations showed pictures of dead and captured American troops, many of which were eventually shown on American television. But Arab channels the same day also showed a horrifying picture that did not get into American TV: a small Iraqi child who had died during an American



Cartoon by Hassan Bleibel, Beirut, Lebanon.
Reprinted by permission of Cartoonists & Writers
Syndicate/cartoonweb.com.

attack, with the back of the child's skull and head missing. The picture was as gut-wrenching and disgusting to Arabs as the pictures of the dead Americans were to Americans.

You had to see both images simultaneously that day to fully grasp the three most important dimensions of this conflict, in my view: a) the terrible tragedy of human loss and suffering on both sides; b) that this was a deliberately chosen American war that could and should have been avoided, and c) we have only started to witness the human, economic and political costs that will be paid by many people and countries before this adventure plays itself out.

If you're getting your news and views from either Arab or American television, it is now very clear: You're getting only half the story. ■

✉ rsgskhoury@hotmail.com

The Arab Press

'Like their audience, the Arab world's newspapers are angry, nuanced, multifaceted, passionate and argumentative.'

On April 4, 2003, Rami Khouri's op-ed, "The War Americans Don't See," was published in The New York Times. Excerpts from his article follow.

"Like their audience, the Arab world's newspapers are angry, nuanced, multifaceted, passionate and argumentative. The complexity of imagery reflects several trends. Arab and Western satellite television, FM radio and the Internet, have vastly expanded the range of news and views available to the average Arab. Any credible newspaper that hopes to compete with these comprehensive sources of information must provide more complete and bal-

anced fare, or it will quickly be discredited as biased and unreliable. Arabs are increasingly tired of being lied to and presented with only half of reality, and their press is starting to reflect this.

"The press also is starting to reflect fast-changing Arab attitudes, as more and more people in this region criticize both American military attacks and the tradition of autocratic Arab regimes that have caused so much waste and destruction in modern times. One antidote to the cumulative catastrophes that have plagued the modern Arab world is truth and intellectual balance, and the press is also beginning to reflect this important demand as well." ■

Televised War Coverage in Namibia

'It is evident that objective journalism has been lost in the "us" and "them" scenario'

This column appeared in The Namibian on March 28, 2003, written by its editor, Gwen Lister. Lister, a 1996 Nieman Fellow, founded the Namibian in 1985. In 2001, she was named one of the 50 World Press Freedom Heroes by the International Press Institute.

By Gwen Lister

It is undoubtedly fascinating and even mesmerizing to watch war, live on television. But I am conscious, as I'm sure are many other viewers the world over, that we're largely seeing, on these channels, only what "they" want us to see. It is the sanitized version. Nothing too ugly, so the undiscerning viewer may think, and even believe, that it is a worthy war that is all but won.

The reality is something totally dif-

ferent and, if you're lucky, and equally perceptive, you might catch a glimpse of it coming through now and then on your television screen: the traumatized and bleeding face of a child visible in a bombed building; a petrified dog fleeing as a missile is fired from a U.S. gun emplacement. Generally speaking, though, we're simply seeing the relentless war machine hammer away at Iraq, from the air and the land and the sea. And we are seeing the talking heads sitting in the comfort of Camp David or 10 Downing Street, spouting off their moralistic propaganda about securing world safety and winning the fight on weapons of mass destruction.

But the United States networks in particular, and to a lesser degree the British, prove that they're not going to show their viewers the images that will repel and revulse even the most hardened hawks. So the some 500 "embed-

ded" journalists largely put out the image that the respective military forces and their political masters want the world to see.

George W. Bush, according to White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer, "doesn't really watch TV." As if we believe that! This U.S. President, who himself ducked service in Vietnam, now finds it all too easy to wage war and probably revels in the images.

The media are manipulable, particularly the vast TV networks. CNN, to our surprise, went against a Pentagon recommendation that they not screen the faces of POW's or bodies of U.S. soldiers, for that matter. It is clear that while the public there is generally amenable and supportive of the war effort, the tide can turn if and when enough U.S. casualties are reported. And they don't want to lose public support in this war of all wars.

The BBC's Mark Damazer has already admitted that reporting of allied military claims in Iraq that later proved false—such as the heralding of the fall of Um Quasr at least nine times—had “left the public feeling less well-informed than it should be.” He agreed, too, that language used was misleading, such as claims of an area in Iraq being “liberated.” “That’s a mistake,” he said. “The secret is attribution, qualification and skepticism,” he added, a sentiment expressed by a U.S. media-

monitoring group, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting openly criticizes the networks, in particular, for a lack of skepticism towards official U.S. sources who had already led journalists into embarrassing errors in their Iraq coverage. Among others, they've claimed the Iraqis have fired Scuds (subsequently denied by military sources). (It is also worth recording that despite being touted as the prime *raison d'être* for the war, no

weapons of mass destruction have either been found in Iraq or used by the Iraqis in the conflict.) TV journalists even discovered a chemical plant that in fact did not exist!

Reference even to “coalition forces” is stretching the truth. It is simply the United States, the British allies, the Australians, and a few Polish noncombatants. For the rest, there is no real “coalition.” The language of the networks in this regard speaks volumes. It is evident that objective journalism has

Deciding What Images to Show

‘If a fact is ugly, should it be kept at a distance from readers and viewers?’

“We don’t show the faces of the dead. We don’t show the faces of the wounded, especially in this time of satellite television. We don’t want to be in a position where we on television are notifying the next of kin. But I think you do show bodies, shooting them in as responsible a fashion as possible. In time of war we don’t want to soft-pedal what is going on here. That would be contrary to the whole purpose of our being here. One thing you cannot do is leave people with the impression that war is not a terrible thing.”—*Ted Koppel, ABC News “Nightline” anchor and an embedded correspondent during the war, quoted in the March 28, 2003 Washington Post story, “The News Veteran ‘Nightline’ Anchor Ted Koppel Had to See for Himself the Shape of a Conflict Drawn in Sand,” by Howard Kurtz.*

“Television viewers love to see war, they love the bang-bang. But show them what it really is about, and the switchboard lights up. (That’s what happened when Rodgers showed an Iraqi soldier’s body next to a burnt-out armored personnel carrier during live coverage on the road to Baghdad.) ... It’s dishonest not to show that. You ought to show even more than taste allows so no one has any illusions how terrible carnage and war are.”—*Walter Rodgers, CNN correspondent traveling with the*

Army’s 7th Cavalry, quoted in an April 17, 2003 Newsday story, “CNN’s Rodgers Faults Queasy Networks,” by Harry Berkowitz.

“The American TV carries us live when there is bombing in the skies of Baghdad, the shock and awe. But when it comes to the casualties from the Iraqi or the American side, they don’t want to see it. If we didn’t show them [these graphic images], that would not be realistic journalism.”—*Hafez al-Mirazi, Washington bureau chief for AlJazeera, quoted in a March 26, 2003 Boston Globe article, “Differing TV Images Feed Arab, U.S. Views,” by John Donnelly and Anne Bernard.*

“For Arab News, the decision to post the photographs, which show the interrogation of American military men and women and the bodies of what appear to be dead soldiers, was a basic question of journalistic objectivity. The American media were hiding a truth of the war, and Arab News felt obliged to fill in a glaring gap. For American news organizations, which have refrained from showing all but glimpses of the footage, it was far from simple. It was a matter of taste, ethics, professional standards, and responsibility to a complex web of constituents: viewers, families of the soldiers, the government, and news organizations’ often vaguely de-

finied sense of journalistic mission and responsibility.

“At issue, however, are several questions central to reporting and consuming news in this era of 24-hour television coverage and the burgeoning independent news media on the World Wide Web: Are images facts or illustrations? If a fact is ugly, should it be kept at a distance from readers and viewers? And what do news organizations do with the simple fact that there is both an eager appetite for, and a sincere disgust with, graphic images?”—*Philip Kennicott, in his March 25, 2003 Washington Post story, “The Illustrated Horror of Conflict: Images Convey Facts That Are Hard to Face.”*

“Certainly the reach of The Hartford Courant is far less than that of The New York Times and The Washington Post. So The Courant weighs the considerations of publishing such images a little differently. But I fear that with the news media so snug with the troops in Iraq and Kuwait, recoiling from newsworthy images only gives skeptics here and abroad the opportunity to ask what else the U.S. media are willing to withhold.”—*Karen Hunter, The Hartford Courant’s reader representative, quoted on ABCnews.com on April 1, 2003.* ■

been lost in the “us” and “them” scenario, in which Iraq is openly referred to as “the enemy.”

George W. Bush is getting muddled, too, but the networks won't point this out. First he promised a short war, then he said it would be longer than anticipated, and so it goes. But no one points out these discrepancies. The TV networks generally show the sanitized version of the war. Iraqi civilians smiling as they're treated for war wounds in a hospital; military medical corps

operating to save lives of “enemy” soldiers; distribution of food and water—and so it goes. And much of the unsuspecting public is probably totally taken in by these images, and most of the U.S. public still appear to fervently believe that their troops are “liberators” rather than the occupiers they really are! (The raising of the U.S. flag at Um Quasr was a revealing “mistake.”)

There's no truth in the propaganda that the United States wants to give Iraq back to the Iraqis. Simply put, they

want it themselves. Already a U.S.-based company has been given the multi-million dollar task of managing the Um Quasr port. This is reality TV with a huge slice of Hollywood. So watch with this in mind and, where possible, turn to alternative sources of information, because fortunately those who haven't been jammed or taken off the Internet or bombed off the face of the earth by the United States are still out there. ■

✉ gwen@namibian.com.na

Keeping an Eye on Thailand's Press

A media column tracks coverage and commentary about the war in Iraq.

Songpol Kaopatuntip, a 1987 Nieman Fellow, is editor of the Sunday Perspective section of the Bangkok Post and writes a column called “Eye on the Thai Press” for the Post's Web site. In his column, he tracks commentaries from Thai publications. He notes that “most of the commentaries were anti-American, and I got angry letters for presenting their views.” The Thai media relied primarily on CNN and the BBC to follow news of the war, though many in the media complained about the domination of these Western news outlets; they accused CNN of being pro-American, while regarding BBC as more balanced. Some newspapers used AlJazeera's English-language Web site and other Arab Web pages to offer differing perspectives of the war. All of the leading Thai-language newspapers took editorial positions against the war, as did the most influential columnists. Two of Kaopatuntip's media columns are reprinted below.

By Songpol Kaopatuntip

This column appeared on April 3, 2003.

“The Operation Iraqi Freedom has now turned into the Holocaust of the 21st Century,” says the mass-circulation Thai Rath in its main front-page article this morning.

With fresh reports from Baghdad of the deaths of Iraqi civilians at the hands of U.S. troops, anti-war—and to some degree anti-American—feeling is growing among leading vernacular dailies. The opinion is reflected in front-page headlines, photos and commentaries by sharp-tongued columnists, many of whom believe the war is waged to allow the United States and United Kingdom to take over vast oil and gas reserves in Iraq.

Both Thai Rath and Matichon carry big photos of a weeping Iraqi man who lost 15 members of his family when his truck was bombed by U.S. helicopters while fleeing a town south of Baghdad on Monday. Matichon describes the scene as “heartbreaking,” while Thai Rath proclaims, “This is ethnic cleansing.”

In an equally strong editorial, Thai Rath says the United States and United Kingdom are likely to be trapped in a long and violent war, which was launched without the consent of the United Nations and is now condemned by people around the world. Expressing a similar view in Matichon, columnist Chalotorn says the photos of Iraqi children killed in the war have “seared the minds” of all peace-loving people. “Muslim people are now asking: Should we continue to pray while our brothers and sisters are killed?” writes the columnist.

Muslim people in southern Thailand are already boycotting U.S.-made goods, Chalotorn says, adding that Thais in other parts of the country should take action as well. In his opinion, the war will only benefit big U.S. companies with ties to the Bush administration. Lucrative contracts for the reconstruction of post-war Iraq have already been doled out to these firms, says Chalotorn. He specifically mentions an oil well firefighting contract granted to a subsidiary of Halliburton Company, once run by Vice President Dick Cheney. “This only proves that there is no morality in the minds of these profit-seeking people,” concludes the columnist.

This column appeared on April 10, 2003.

Some foreign readers wonder why all the columnists, editorial writers, academics and ordinary people featured in this column are all against the U.S.-led attack on Iraq. These readers, particularly American, believe the Bush administration is doing Iraqi people a favor by freeing them from the tyranny of President Saddam Hussein. “How can the peacemakers condone what this SOB has done to his people?” a reader wrote me on Tuesday. “He even executed his two sons-in-law.” A few others believe Saddam is a threat to

world peace. The Iraqi leader has weapons of mass destruction and supports anti-American terrorists, they say.

I respect their opinions. We may live in a globalized world, but there will always be a diversity of opinion. Do we have to hate each other because we do not share the same ideology, beliefs and ways of life?

These thoughts came to my mind as I read another hard-hitting article by popular columnist Plaew Si-ngern, who believes the attack on Iraq is in violation of international law, morally wrong, and serves the expansionist policy of U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. In a column entitled "Twenty Days of

Baghdad," published in Thai Post yesterday, Plaew suggested the attack on Iraq was part of a grand scheme by powerful cliques in America and Europe to create a new world order under a "world government." "Under this government, America will rule the world by its military might, leaving Europe to exert its economic and financial power," he wrote. In his opinion, the United Nations has lost its credibility by failing to prevent Bush's aggression against Iraq. And it is a shame that Bush and Blair are now asking the U.N. to be in charge of the post-war reconstruction of Iraq. "The U.N. will only be a rubber stamp for Bush and Blair," he said.

Having gone through good and bad times, Plaew said he had learned not to get too emotionally involved in certain things in life. But what happened in Baghdad during the past 20 days was beyond description. "Every time I watch the TV news," Plaew said, "my heart is filled with grief and anger." His point is that why so many innocent people will have to die for the sake of some power-hungry politicians. ■

Kaopatumpit's media columns can be found at www.bangkokpost.com, by scrolling down the left side of the page to "Eye on the Thai Press."

✉ songpolk@bangkokpost.co.th

Receiving Very Different News

'It's like you are talking about two different worlds.'

"In the 25 years that I've been covering world affairs, I've never seen such a divide between what American people are reading and watching on TV and what almost everybody else in the rest of the world is reading and watching on TV. It's like you are talking about two different worlds." —*Andres Oppenheimer, columnist with The Miami Herald, who is syndicated throughout Latin America, quoted on ABCnews.com on April 1, 2003.*

"The difference in coverage between the United States and the rest of the world helped contribute to the situation that we're in now. Americans have been unable to see how they're perceived." —*Kim Spencer, president of WorldLink TV, a U.S. satellite channel devoted to airing foreign news, quoted in a March 25, 2003 Christian Science Monitor story, "World and America Watching Different Wars: CNN vs. Al Jazeera: Seeing is often believing," by Danna Harman.*

"There are really two stories unfolding here, one is the war and its progress and the second one is the progress of world opinion. That second dimension is there in the American press, but it's clearly way underreported." —*Tom*

Patterson, a media expert at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, quoted in a March 25, 2003 Christian Science Monitor story, "World and America Watching Different Wars: CNN vs. Al Jazeera: Seeing is often believing," by Danna Harman.

"Personally I was shocked while in the United States by how unquestioning the broadcast news media was during this war. If Iraq proved anything, it was that the BBC cannot afford to mix patriotism and journalism. This is happening in the United States and, if it continues, will undermine the credibility of the U.S. electronic news media." —*Greg Dyke, BBC director general, in a speech at the University of London, reported by Reuters on April 24, 2003 in "BBC Chief Attacks U.S. Media War Coverage," by Merissa Marr.*

"I have a new favorite news anchor: Her name is Michelle Hussein. She is the Washington, D.C.-based anchor of the BBC news on cable TV.... Hussein is evenhanded, and her voice is not filled with that funereal pseudo-emotion that so many of the U.S. anchors have.... The U.S. anchors often make war coverage sound like a natural disaster. ... Often you see the exact same

footage on the BBC that you see on CNN and elsewhere, but slightly changed. In one case, I noticed almost the exact same war footage, but in the case of the BBC, I saw the dead body of an Iraqi soldier on the ground [on the BBC] that was not shown on CNN. In another case, a civilian dead body by the side of the road, shown on the Beeb, but not on U.S. television." —*From a message sent to Nieman Reports on March 27, 2003 by NPR correspondent Margot Alder.*

"The U.S. press is relying too much on U.S. and British correspondents. I would like to see more reports from Spanish, Italian, French, Arab and other foreign news outlets, especially those that don't have reporters embedded with the military. When an Arab report is included in American newscasts, it is usually from Iraqi television and is reported in a dismissive fashion. I think the networks could go out of their way to feature more credible journalistic sources from Arab countries in order to give us a different perspective. Al Jazeera is not the only news outlet in the Arab world." —*From a message sent to Nieman Reports on March 31, 2003 by Nuri Vallbona, photojournalist for The Miami Herald.*

War Coverage in the Chinese Media

The Chinese people saw changes in the way news of this war was brought to them.

By Yuan Feng

It does not look like Chinese media. People in China were astonished at how quickly and intensively CCTV and China National Radio—the state-run television and radio stations—and some newspapers provided news about the Iraq war. Since March 20th, when coverage of the war began, audiences in China have also been exposed to another war—the media war.

On the war's first day, special news programs about the war began being broadcast on CCTV-1 immediately when it started, and the coverage continued for about five hours. After that, news about the war was broadcast several regular times each day, as well as on National Radio, which also began its live broadcasts when the war began. CCTV-4 (the overseas Channel in Chinese) and CCTV-9 (overseas Channel in English) concentrated on the war for as many as 20 hours a day, seven days per week. At least seven provincial TV stations also had news about the war immediately.

In print, the International Herald Times (affiliated with Xinhua News Agency) released its 16-page "War Special" in the early afternoon of March 20th, just two hours after the first American bombs were dropped. The Reference News (also affiliated with Xinhua News agency) published a supplement at three o'clock that afternoon, and seven other newspapers in Beijing, Shandong, Guangdong and Hunan published supplements the same day. A newspaper in Hunan even published five issues in 25 hours.

Finally, it seems, the war has unleashed the Chinese media and let them release their long-constrained impulse to act as real news media. Reporters here have not been able to report in this way on stories about mine explosions or food poisonings (which happen quite often) or, until mid-April, about the SARS epidemic. [See story

about reportig on SARS by Chinese media on page 50.] Nor are they able to report on the nation's change in leadership or political topics. [In March, the chief editor of the South Weekend was replaced and the 21st Century Globe Report stopped publication because of trying to do such reporting.] Yet the Iraq War seems to have given the media in China opportunities to show their professionalism. It is a chance many of them have been longing and preparing for, for a long time.

During the 1991 Gulf War, the Chinese people could only get information about the war through limited means and from a few established media such as CCTV, the People's Daily, and the Reference News. By 1999, when the Kosovo War took place, the Internet had become one of the most important resources, both for information and as a place where people could have their voices be heard. Notably, the Forum section of the People's Daily Web site was set up during that time and remains popular today.

This time, with live broadcasts using experts in studios to analyze and illustrate what was happening in Iraq, television news became a prime news source. Usually, those who live in Guangdong and Shanghai don't watch CCTV. In Guangdong, in southern China, many people watch Hong Kong TV and, in Shanghai, people normally watch local TV news. People make this choice because these news organizations often provide news that in ways are more relevant and attractive to these viewers. But with its coverage of this war, the audience rating of CCTV increased by 28 times nationally and even more in Guangdong and Shanghai. In 1999, two newspapers dominated coverage of the war in Kosovo—the Reference News and Globe Times (affiliated with the People's Daily), whose owner then made a lot of money by selling

papers at newsstands and selling advertisements. With the Iraq war coverage, the competition for audience among TV, radio, Internet and newspapers was very strong. Just the number of channels and publications for sale at newsstands is enough to make the news audience dizzy.

How about the content? If we use April 10th as an example (the day the American troops arrived in Baghdad), if Chinese people relied on conventional media like People's Daily, CCTV-1, they would have had a more difficult time figuring out that the turning point of the war was coming. Their news reports only mentioned that U.S. forces claimed they controlled part of the capital city and showed President Bush stressing that the war is not finished and Iraq's resistance will go on for a while. However, on the news pages of commercial Web sites (such as <http://news.sina.com.cn>) pictures were being shown of the huge statue of Saddam being torn down.

Usually, the Chinese media "borrow" a lot of information from U.S. media. But this time, footage from Arab TV stations was shown frequently, too. Audiences could also listen to local experts in international affairs and the military. Among these experts can be found various styles, stories and commentaries, but Chinese viewers know that what is being said is within guidelines issued by the propaganda department of the Communist Party. What the Chinese public still can't hear is what the authorities dislike or don't want them to know. So what they do read or watch or hear is still limited and filtered.

The situation on the Internet is somewhat different. There, the Chinese can find more diversity in terms of news and opinions. Those who don't use the Internet can receive or send unconventional opinions by mobile phones.

But how much information can be sent in these short messages? No real alternative media exist, and major foreign radio and Web sites are jammed or blocked. Phoenix TV is based in Hong Kong (ironically, it is called CCTV Channel N to refer to its cringing attitude toward the state), but ordinary people in China have no access to this station.

What made this war coverage so special was the tension that came to the fore between media control that the Communist Party and the state exerted and the visible impulse of journalists to meet the needs of the audi-

ence and also make money. Also present during the war coverage was the evident tension between journalists in China who wanted to compete with the international media in telling this story, the changing attitude of China's new leadership in permitting such a large amount of news coverage, and the reliance on newsgathering by sources other than Chinese reporters to report the news. All of the Chinese correspondents had withdrawn from Iraq by the time the war began. What this meant is that the media had an extraordinary amount of time to report

on the war, but they were able to convey comparatively little information.

Nevertheless, in trying to find their way on this story, the media in China struck an energetic pose for those in their country and the rest of the world, even though they still appeared somewhat awkward in their practice of journalism. ■

Yuan Feng, a 2002 Nieman Fellow, is an editor with China Women's News, a daily newspaper based in Beijing.

✉ fengyuan@public.bta.net.cn

German Skepticism About America's Intent and Goals in Iraq

One headline called it 'The worst invasion of Baghdad since the Mongols.'

By Martin Gehlen

The cover page of *Der Spiegel* displayed the globe as a broken egg. "Pax Americana—The new world order," read this influential magazine's headline days after the fighting in Iraq ended. On the inside pages of this German publication, editors made the point that the majority of the German public and most German media share: "The allies have won the war against Saddam, but the fight over the post-war future of the country is far from over."

Skepticism and criticism about the military campaign in Iraq and its goals are widespread in the German media, although most publications did not hold an uncritical attitude towards the Arab world, in general, or sympathy towards Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in particular. In many newspaper stories the crimes and oppression of Saddam and his inner circle were described in vivid ways—the human rights violations, the torture and assassination of political opponents, the wars against Iran and Kuwait, and the gas attacks against Iraqi Kurds and Iranian soldiers. Other news reports focused on

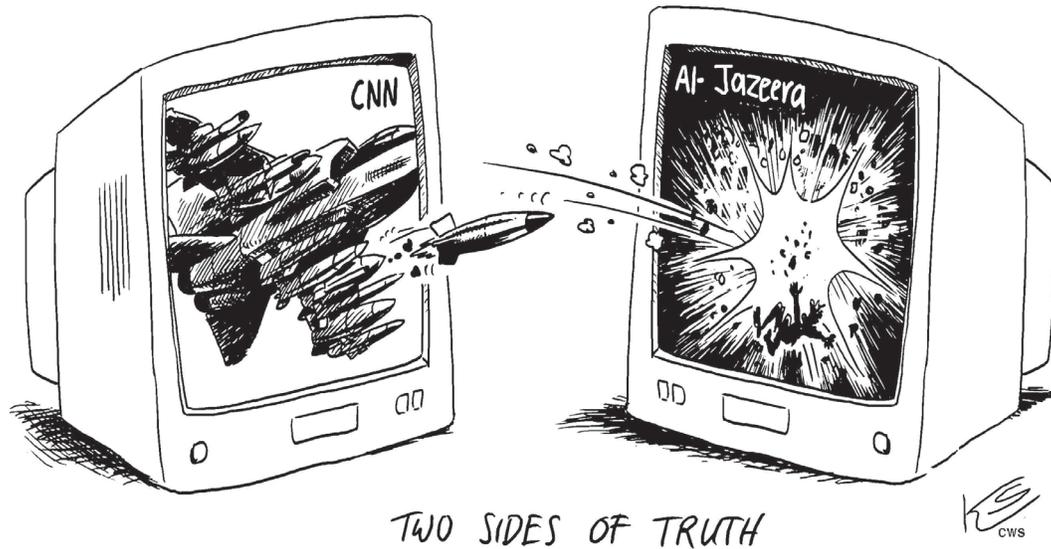
the backwardness of Arab societies, the growing anti-western sentiments, and the influence of fundamentalist Islamic movements.

In the German media, most editorial writers and news reporters have not been convinced that a connection between September 11th and Baghdad exists or that Iraq, after 12 years of United Nations sanctions, still posed a threat to its neighbors, to the United States, or even to the world. The performance of the United States in the U.N. Security Council was viewed by most in the media as reckless propaganda of the superpower using false or even fake information to push its war agenda. Widely covered by German news organizations, too, were also the failed American attempts to blackmail weaker U.N. Security Council members to secure their votes for a second resolution. Even the U.S. goal of democratizing Iraq (and potentially the entire Middle East) is regarded as pure rhetoric or seen as hopelessly idealistic and naive.

In its daily coverage, the German media's focus was very much on the

horrors of war and of the potential casualties of the air bombardments, the propaganda being put forth by both sides, and on the worldwide protests of the peace movement. Reporting also dealt with the criticism made by various church leaders against President Bush's use of religious language to justify the military engagement and the fierce diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and British allies on one side and Russia, China, France and Germany on the other.

Several papers printed a notice each day for their readers to inform them about the specific problems and limits of war coverage when the military controls the news and when, as was written in Berlin's *Tagesspiegel*, "the number of official lies increases drastically—on all sides." There is no "clean" war; there are no "surgical" air strikes. "Shock and awe" means death and horror, and that was the message the media tried to forward to their readers. Many thousands of people were killed. The nation's infrastructure was in ruins, with Iraq bombed back to the oil lamp economy of the



Cartoon by Klaus Stuttman, Berlin, Germany. Reprinted by permission of Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate/
cartoonweb.com.

19th century, as one paper wrote.

War is always a defeat for mankind, Pope John Paul II said, and this message was the hidden red thread of considerable parts of the German media coverage. Stern Magazine used the line, "God's Warriors and their Victims," as the title for a series of three photos, each of which was at least a full page in size. In the first one was a blood-covered dead young mother together with her dead child, with the pacifier still in the child's mouth. On its opposite page, an American soldier had his combat pack on which he had written the Biblical words, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The following double page then showed a young Iraqi mother seeking shelter in a ditch together with her two kids. She had pure horror in her eyes; this extraordinary photograph was used as a front-page image by other German print media as well.

The Iraq war was the first live war in history. It was probably also the most widely reported and taped military fighting ever. The whole world was watching as dozens of "embedded journalists" talked through their videophones. But what did most of these "info-combatants" really produce?

"News fog," judged the national daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung when it printed a detailed documentary of war propaganda of both sides includ-

ing, among others, a list of the numerous alleged discoveries of chemical weapons by the American army on their way to Baghdad.

However, in the eyes of German media, no other event did more damage to the American case than its failure to guard hospitals, ministries and the national museum and library in Baghdad. This failure to protect civil order and save the collective memory and cultural roots of the Iraqi people led to critical stories and headlines. "The worst invasion of Baghdad since the Mongols" read the headline in the national paper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, published in Munich, after the vandalism, looting and arson finally ceased. Several other papers called the damage done within those 48 hours a "Cultural Super-GAU." (In German, GAU is used to categorize severe nuclear power accidents; in English, it means "worst imaginable accident.")

These events were widely viewed as a devastating omen for the future of Iraq and as inexcusable proof of American ignorance and incompetence, especially when it was reported that the American military command only protected the oil ministry. When the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, later compared the looting of the unparalleled treasures of Mesopotamia with the behavior of football rowdies, one

newspaper even speculated that a country with some 300 years of history might be unable to grasp the meaning of 5,000 years of history. Another paper relied on irony to make its point by inserting in its coverage of the cultural losses a quote from President Bush's speech to the Iraqi people, which aired the same day the looting started: "The nightmare that Saddam Hussein has brought to your nation will soon be over. You are a good and gifted people—the heirs of a great civilization that contributes to all humanity. You deserve to live as free people."

Such heavenly rhetoric leaves many German journalists with doubts and mistrust. To destroy the dictatorship in a relatively small country by military force is an easy thing compared with the complex task of developing improved and stable civil order. The military battle took three weeks; the battle for Iraq's future will need many years. And it might well end in another nightmare for the people of that country. ■

Martin Gehlen, a 1992 Nieman Fellow, is a political writer at Der Tagesspiegel in Berlin.

✉ martin.gehlen@tagesspiegel.de

Watchdog Reporting

As part of the Nieman Foundation's Watchdog Journalism Project, Nieman Reports is featuring two articles about watchdog reporting. In the first, **Deborah Henley**, executive editor of The (Delaware) News Journal, writes about her newspaper's many years of legal struggles in trying to obtain state computer records so reporters at the paper "can assess broad trends in the state's criminal justice." The legal case is unresolved—on appeal after a January 2003 ruling by the Superior Court—but along the way lessons have been learned that can assist other news organizations in similar quests. Henley passes on those lessons.

Jack Kresnak, who has reported on juvenile justice for 15 years for the Detroit Free Press, describes how he went about uncovering and telling the stories of missing foster children in Michigan and, in turn, held accountable Michigan's Family Independence Agency whose job it is to oversee these children's lives. His reporting followed news reports from Florida about a five-year-old foster child whom that state's Department of Children and Families couldn't find. Using his long-established sources in the child welfare system, and adroitly playing off related news stories in Michigan, Kresnak, at times working with another Free Press reporter, wrote more than 30 stories about efforts to find missing foster kids. His watchdog reporting on this story—and others—led to changes in how state agencies handle child-related issues. ■

WATCHDOG

A Lengthy Legal Battle to Gain Access to Public Documents

A Delaware newspaper tries to obtain data about the state's criminal justice system.

By Deborah Henley

By now, there have been years of repeated Freedom of Information Act requests and lawsuits, appeals, filings, pleadings, responses, hearings, conferences, negotiations, affidavits, experts and many thousands of dollars paid to attorneys. A Delaware judge, in his most recent finding, used the words "difficult and protracted" to describe the lengthy fight between The News Journal and state agencies of the Delaware Criminal Justice Information System (DELJIS) over our reporters gaining access to the state's criminal justice database.

For those of us in the newsroom,

five years after our first Freedom of Information Act request (FOIA) in this case, it feels more like the movie "Groundhog Day." Every day is a repeat. Each new document labeled *The News Journal v. DELJIS* or vice versa seems to bring a split decision by raising as many new questions as providing answers. This fight has become a never-ending free-for-all, with the state and its largest newspaper seeming to argue the same basic issues again and again.

We are seeking computer records about those who have been arrested or charged with a crime in Delaware. Re-

porters at The News Journal want to analyze a 10-year "snapshot" of data from state agencies including police, prosecutors, courts and corrections. The reason we want to do this is so the newspaper can assess broad trends in the state's criminal justice. Are there trends in sentencing? If so, what do they show? Does gender or race make a difference in how cases are handled? Are cases being handled promptly? How do past convictions affect sentencing? How often are charges dropped or pleaded down to lesser crimes? How does sentencing affect the recidivism rate?

The Legal Issues

We believe that with information from the state's database, The News Journal will be able to better tell newspaper readers how criminal justice is administered in Delaware. Yet, five years after the newspaper's most recent request for DELJIS information, the fight continues. The legal issue: What is the proper balance between protecting the personal privacy of individuals whose criminal justice record is compiled by the state and providing for public accountability by sharing information necessary to assess the overall performance of public officials and government?

The state's FOIA prevents the release of "criminal files and criminal records, the disclosure of which would constitute an invasion of personal privacy." But The News Journal has not requested the names of defendants or any means of identifying individuals. The newspaper has consistently signed or offered to sign a "user's agreement" for information from the database, pledging to ensure confidentiality. Ironically, most of the information we requested is already public, at police stations and courthouses across the state. The database is a long-term compilation of information that would be nearly impossible to collect every day.

In January, a Superior Court judge told the state to pay The News Journal \$74,000 in attorney fees and costs incurred since the newspaper was forced back to court by the attorney general last fall. After initially approving an amended FOIA request, DELJIS sought judgment on whether the unnamed individuals in the database information requested by The News Journal could be identified from the information provided and whether the identification numbers of police officers should be released. This judge affirmed the newspaper's right to have fields of related information linked so that repeat offenders could be recognized and an unnamed individual could be followed as he or she moved through the criminal justice system.

But, from our perspective, there were also troubling notes in the judge's

decision. The judge denied the newspaper access to information about cases that did not result in conviction as well as geographic information such as the location of the crime and county of residence. DELJIS had previously agreed to release this information, so these were not considered issues that the court was being asked to decide. The judge also decided that the newspaper could be treated differently from individuals. Because it is routine for newspapers to file lawsuits to gain information for investigative reporting, he wrote, the "incentive structure" for awarding court costs—intended so the public is not dissuaded from litigating for information—should be different for a newspaper than it is for an individual. Using that reasoning, he awarded about half what The News Journal had sought to recover for its legal costs.

This differing treatment of journalists can be found in other state agencies. Last year, another state agency raised its fees for providing copies of documents released to the newspaper under FOIA requests. Whereas it had charged the same fee for us as it did for members of the public, now a newspaper request is given the same fee rate as a business or commercial request.

What was gratifying, however, was that the court finally showed support for FOIA and the newspaper's role as a watchdog for Delaware citizens. In agreeing that important parts of the database should be released so that the newspaper can begin meaningful analysis of trends in the justice system, the court affirmed that the newspaper serves an important role as watchdog for the public.

Our fight is not over. We're appealing the Superior Court's rulings that denied reargument of issues including information on cases that did not result in a conviction. It is crucial to be able to analyze why cases were dropped and at what point in the judicial system that happened, whether at the point of a police investigation, a prosecutor's case, or events inside the courtroom. Additionally, we will appeal the rulings on geographic data, identification of police officers, and the amount of the

award. The opening brief was filed March 31, 2003, and DELJIS representatives immediately filed a notice to cross-appeal.

Lessons About Obtaining Access to Government Data

We've examined our experience in the DELJIS case and found some practical advice to share with other journalists confronting similar challenges in trying to obtain access to government data. Here are some observations and suggestions:

Financial and management support are critical: Newspapers of all sizes—community, metropolitan or national—must be willing to spend the money necessary in the fight to keep public records open and provide reporters with the tools to examine them. They cannot be deterred in the face of challenges such as the current recession and increasing public concerns over privacy. This fight must be waged for the larger public good.

Support and involvement from the newspaper's leadership is crucial. The News Journal, under our publisher and his executive editors, has steadfastly encouraged watchdog journalism. But it is essential that reporters, editors and management at the newspaper constantly communicate among colleagues in the newspaper and beyond that watchdog journalism is a sound investment.

Given technological advances—for example, in computer-assisted reporting (CAR)—important work can and should be done in watchdog journalism. CAR increases significantly the depth and breadth of reporting. In some respects, CAR is an equalizer, allowing us to explore the numbers and check the accountability of public institutions. It enables us to advance our stories from the anecdotal to a broad, substantiated analysis. Computer hardware and software are affordable, as is the training offered throughout the year at regional workshops, where journalists learn from one another.

Having this capability puts metro

and community newspapers on a more equal footing with the government agencies they cover. As computers assumed more tasks in government offices, the accessibility of large amounts of information on government operations increased dramatically. When such information is available (as it should be to the public that pays for it to exist), a newspaper can analyze data just as any government agency can and determine public accountability. All of this can help to bring reporting to new and important levels.

The News Journal began in the early 1990's to request electronic copies of 10 years of records including felony, misdemeanor and traffic cases from the DELJIS database. In 1993 and 1995, nearly 100 fields of information were released to the newspaper, but turnover in newsroom staff who had the expertise to work with databases and our discovery of limitations of the data we'd requested prevented us from reporting from the original records provided. In 1997, the newspaper expanded its request for information to obtain a more accurate picture of state criminal justice operations.

Be prepared to react to change: Even though laws are unlikely to change, everything else can, including judges, attorneys and public officials.

Since 1997, DELJIS has attacked our requests for release of data on several fronts. This started to happen when the newspaper broadened its request for the number of fields of data from nearly 100 to about 300, again in non-identifiable form and with the signing of a user's agreement. In meeting our first two requests, DELJIS and the newspaper agreed that recurring surrogate or fictional identifying numbers should replace any numbers used by the state to identify individuals. This, both sides agreed, would adequately respond to privacy concerns while giving our reporters means to track the cases of repeat offenders. Our ability to analyze the data would be gutted if reporters could not follow an individual throughout the court system for all the crimes for which that person was charged.

In 1993 and 1995, the then-attorney

general accepted the terms of these FOIA requests. But in 1997, a new attorney general denied our FOIA request, citing other parts of the state code relating to the release of criminal history record information. Then, in the fall of 2000, the newspaper negotiated a revised request of about 200 fields of information including only the identifying characteristics of age, gender, race and county of residence. The DELJIS board initially approved the amended request, but a month later the board reversed itself after being urged by the attorney general to go back to court to challenge the linking of data.

Journalists need to become actively involved in the legal case:

Journalists need to join with lawyers in preparing and arguing the legal case. Reporters and editors who do database work have the experience and the research skills needed to strengthen the case. Respected outside journalists can help, too. During a recent hearing, we had staffers in the courtroom checking the state's assertions and researching questions that arose during testimony. Reporters and editors also described to the court the process we use when we obtain legal information about a particular defendant or prisoner, and reporters helped to research work done by other organizations that had been granted access to DELJIS data. [See accompanying box on page 104 for description of arguments made in this case by both sides.]

There was constant communication between our lawyer and our staffers. We also brought in an expert witness, a veteran database editor from another statewide newspaper, to answer the state's expert, a data privacy expert from Carnegie Mellon University. Our staffers and expert witness also helped with the biggest challenge in such cases—the need to clearly explain the finer points of database journalism. Enhancing the understanding of lawyers and judges was crucial. It is important to tout your newspaper's record of strong watchdog work serving the public interest and to highlight reporting that has similarities to the case at hand.

It can also help to tell the story of such reporting by other newspapers and in other states.

News Journal reporters also testified about the newspaper's responsible handling of database information from public agencies and the important stories that resulted. Our reporters shared examples of database work in which they reviewed property records to assess whether tax assessments are fair and examined state spending to determine whether government makes the most efficient use of tax dollars. The newspaper also annually analyzes and reports on state test score data provided by the Department of Education. Those records include demographic and descriptive information about individual students, but each name is redacted and replaced with a surrogate, scrambled identification number. The News Journal voluntarily withholds economic demographic data related to a group of fewer than 15 students to prevent the public from being able to identify those individuals.

And, as we pointed out in testimony, the Department of Education does not charge the newspaper for the data because it considers this reporting to be a public service. Members of the public receive information about how schools perform, how demographic groups are faring, and how the same groups of students are progressing over time. These are valuable measurements that people can use in assessing new statewide testing that determines grade level advancement and graduation. We also found that Georgia has used the same technique of surrogate identifiers to provide criminal records of minors to a state newspaper for database analysis. And this we told the court.

One fact we learned from testimony was that there are 1.34 million individuals in the 10-year "snapshot" being requested. The newspaper is hindered in its ability to analyze and counter the state's assertion because it has no way of knowing how many crimes the 1.34 million individuals in the database have been charged with, nor whether they were arrested within the 10 years included in this "snapshot." And we don't

yet know how many traffic offenses, misdemeanors or felony arrests there are, nor how many are linked to any one individual.

Keep records of database work updated: Our FOIA requests and challenges unfolded over almost 10 years, so we sometimes found ourselves repeating research and review of documents because of staff turnover and the passage of time. Be sure to keep records easily accessible and leave memos to your successors about what you've found and done.

Take the fight to your readers: Assign a reporter not involved in the case to cover this story. Give thought to how to play the story in the newspaper. Involve editors who are not involved with the case and empower them to edit these stories with fairness, context and balance. Give interviews when

appropriate to help explain the newspaper's position. Be sure your own reporters press those on the other side to fully represent their concerns.

At The News Journal, one of our court reporters has covered developments in the case. Our attorney and I and previous executive editors have presented the newspaper's views in interviews for these stories. Stories are played on the front page or the local section, depending on their news value. Editors not directly involved in the case help make this decision and edit the story.

This debate is a crucial one for the public to understand. As we have argued in court, "It would seem that what little privacy issue could be argued to exist, it is so remote as to be far outweighed by the public's interest in analyzing the performance of the criminal justice system."

Readers expect newspapers to help

watch over the elected leaders who govern them and the officials who run government acting on their behalf. And those newspapers doing so responsibly and regularly have established a credibility that enhances the value of their publication. ■

Deborah Henley is executive editor of The (Delaware) News Journal. Henley also has worked at New York Newsday, The New York Times, and The Courier-Journal in Louisville. News Journal colleagues Merritt Wallick, Jean Buchanan and Robert Long, and the newspaper's attorney, Richard Elliott, Jr. of Richards, Layton & Finger, contributed to this report.

✉ dhenley@delawareonline.com

The Arguments: The News Journal v. DELJIS

To try to prevent newspaper access to computer databases, the Delaware Criminal Justice Information System (DELJIS) has argued that:

1. By using fields to link cases related to a defendant, a criminal history record will be created. That record, along with age, race, gender and geographic details, make it possible to cross-reference data fields with information appearing in newspapers such as The News Journal and other public databases to identify, by name, individuals in the DELJIS database.
2. Releasing a police officer's name and/or identifying number would be an invasion of personal privacy and safety.
3. The newspaper is not considered a research entity and for that reason is

not permitted by state code to access this data through a user's agreement.

To try to get access to the information, The News Journal has argued that:

1. The News Journal is studying the criminal justice system and has no interest in attempting to put names to criminal history records. Further, less than two percent of all felonies are reported in The News Journal, and there are no other databases available that could be used to cross reference the DELJIS database in order to re-identify individuals, given the limited information of age, race, gender and county of residence. Further, The News Journal has a statutory right to obtain specific conviction information on an individual

and does so regularly when reporting daily news stories. Thus, The News Journal has no reason to use the database to identify individuals, assuming that were possible.

2. The names of police officers regularly appear in a number of public records.
3. DELJIS has provided access to this information to groups outside of the media, some with a user's agreement and some without. These requests have not been litigated. Therefore, the newspaper is not receiving equal treatment under the law.
4. The state is trying, through repeated litigation, to interfere with citizens' right to "easy access to public records" accorded in the Delaware Freedom of Information Act. ■

WATCHDOG

Reporting Holds Michigan's Child Welfare System Accountable

At the Detroit Free Press, a watchdog reporter sees the impact of his stories.

By Jack Kresnak

Like other children's beat reporters, I closely followed the case of Florida's missing five-year-old foster child, Rilya Wilson, whose disappearance last year added to the already abysmal reputation of Florida's Department of Children and Families. I wondered how many foster kids were missing in my state of Michigan.

After 15 years on the juvenile justice beat, I already knew that runaway foster children were a chronic problem in the child welfare system, but it was a problem that no one seemed too concerned about. The typical response from juvenile court judges and child welfare officials has been to file a missing person report with the police and hope for the best.

Whatever the number of missing Michigan foster kids was, however, I knew I'd need a compelling human element for my reporting to capture the attention of readers and to have any impact on how state agencies handle these cases. In August 2002, the right story appeared. A juvenile court referee in Detroit was livid that the state agency responsible for placing foster children into protective care had decided to send a 12-year-old boy named Prentiss to live with his mother—even though the referee had terminated the mother's parental rights to Prentiss because of drug abuse and homelessness. The mother had moved to Atlanta, gotten a decent job with MCI and, reportedly, kicked her drug habit. She was caring for two younger kids who were doing just fine, at least that's what child protective services officials in Georgia told their counterparts at the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA).

Two months after the FIA sent Prentiss to be with his mother in Atlanta she, Prentiss and one other child disappeared. Three weeks later, Prentiss and his sister were found in Dallas panhandling to feed his mother's crack cocaine addiction.

Tracking Missing Foster Children

My article in the Detroit Free Press about Prentiss (August 30, 2002) said that the state had lost track of 302 foster children. FIA spokesperson Karen Smith had provided the number that, she said, is sent quarterly to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. I quoted Smith as saying the vast majority of the kids were teenaged runaways; many of them were girls neglected or abused at home who latched onto a boyfriend.

When the story appeared, the FIA's initial response was anger at me for "blowing out of proportion" a routine problem with teenaged children under state supervision running away from foster homes and shelters. All state child welfare systems experience a certain number of children who are kidnapped out of foster care by their parents or relatives, the officials in Michigan said. FIA Director Doug Howard strenuously denied that the state had lost kids; they were merely "absent without legal permission" (AWOLP) from their foster care placement, he told me. "This is Michigan and in Michigan we don't lose kids," Howard said. "They walk away or are taken by others without the court's permission, but we don't just lose them.... I take great offense that the

article made it look like in Michigan we don't care."

By happenstance, the Wayne County Sheriff's Department's child rescue task force—which works with the FIA and juvenile court to locate at-risk children—found a missing six-year-old foster boy the day the first story broke. He had been kidnapped by his mother, a former FIA employee who had sworn to a judge that the child was with his father in California. My admittedly snarky lead in the next morning's Free Press was, "There are now only 301 missing foster children in Michigan."

Based on the e-mail and voice mail I got during that Labor Day weekend, those two stories prompted strong reactions of outrage at the overseeing agencies from Free Press readers. The day after Labor Day, Governor John Engler called the FIA director in for a meeting. Suddenly, the agency's attitude of denial about missing foster kids changed, and the state began to take some practical and innovative steps toward finding solutions. Three weeks later, Michigan became the first state to publish the names and photographs of missing foster children on its Web site, www.michigan.gov/fia. (I'd broken the story about the Web site a week before it was announced.)

Realizing that the FIA did not have photographs of dozens of missing foster kids, the agency ordered its social service workers and private foster care agencies under state contract to conduct face-to-face visits of all 18,000 foster children immediately and to take pictures of them. Foster care workers also scrambled to make sure that the court orders to take into custody missing children were current. Within a

month, Maura Corrigan, the state Supreme Court's chief justice, stepped in and ordered all of the state's family courts to establish a special docket for abused or neglected children missing from foster care placements. In special "investigative hearings," judges began to question the social workers responsible for locating missing kids, and they scheduled weekly or monthly updates to hold the agency's feet to the fire. People who might have information—such as school guidance counselors, relatives, even peers—were subpoenaed to court to be questioned by the judge about what they knew. Leads on the whereabouts of the children were turned over to the child rescue task force, and the police unit found dozens of them, many in dangerous places such as drug houses or abandoned buildings. Several of the runaway foster girls, aged 13-16, were working as prostitutes and/or strippers in Detroit's many illegal after-hours clubs.

Gaining Access to Confidential Files

At our request, the chief judge of Wayne County Family Court authorized the Free Press to examine the confidential court files of the foster children known to be missing from Wayne County. It was not an easy task, because the FIA refused to identify which counties missing foster kids had come from. We had to cross-reference all 199 missing foster kids on the state Web site (the FIA did not list all missing foster kids) with the dockets at local juvenile courts. We finally found that 107 of the 199 were from Wayne County.

Chief Judge Mary Beth Kelly said she gave us access to these sensitive records because she respected my record of covering juvenile justice in a fair and accurate manner, and because she wanted the newspaper's help to keep the pressure on everyone in the child welfare system to find those kids. Since each file takes about an hour to review, editors assigned a colleague, Nancy Youssef, to read them, sketch out each case, and find common themes. Meanwhile, I continued to report daily de-

velopments on the search for missing foster kids, including 15-year-old runaway Heather Kish, who was found murdered on October 5th. Including the three-part series Nancy and I wrote in December, I wrote another 27 stories on efforts to find missing foster kids.

The children of Michigan are fortunate that the editors of the Free Press are committed to covering children's issues. Since 1993, in more than 4,000 articles, the paper's "Children First" campaign has focused attention on the health and safety of all kids. In January, publisher Heath Meriweather marked the campaign's 10th anniversary by recommitting the Free Press to "Children First." My role is to cover the juvenile justice system in a way that exposes problems and celebrates successes.

To date, more than 200 of the missing foster children have been located, sometimes in dangerous homes with drugs and guns within easy reach. In several cases, the kids had managed to find someone responsible to move in with. I remember, in particular, one missing foster girl, 15 years old, who was found by the police at Mackenzie High School in Detroit. She was in her ROTC uniform, and she was getting mostly A's in school while living with an unrelated adult female. The judge in charge of the AWOLP docket, Mike Hathaway, allowed her to remain in that home.

Although foster kids still run away from placement, there are now established protocols and procedures that the police, juvenile court judges, the FIA and others in the system use to find and house them. Each foster child over age 12 is given a copy of the court order placing him or her in foster care, and they are told that if they run away again they will be violating the order. That could get them locked into juvenile detention. Although the juvenile detention facility in Detroit is rated among the best in the country, kids still don't like being there, and many of them are obeying the judge's order to stay in a shelter or foster home because they don't want to get locked up again. One

16-year-old girl who had been missing for two years called Judge Hathaway, who promised not to lock her up if she came to court. The girl drove herself and said she'd been working cleaning houses and living with a 44-year-old woman. But she hadn't been going to school because she didn't have a legal address to register. Hathaway allowed her to stay with the woman in an arrangement that will now allow that child to return to school.

The Impact of Press Coverage

As this situation has developed, observers have commented that without the Free Press coverage of these AWOLP children, none of these changes would have happened. Two people even joked that court officials should call the special docket "the Kresnak docket."

Juvenile justice is a complex system running on two tracks: In dependency court, also called child protective proceedings, judges deal with cases involving children who are the victims of maltreatment; on the delinquency track, the court handles kids who commit crimes or status offenses, including acts like smoking cigarettes or skipping school, which are against the law only because of the juvenile's status as a minor.

Journalists covering this beat for a long time realize that there is really no one inside the system—either at the court, or the agencies and programs dealing with kids—who sees the entire spectrum of a case. Fortunately, a journalist with reasonable access to juvenile court matters—and the amount of access reporters have varies among states and cities—can find the context or back-story of a particular child or family situation. Overcoming confidentiality restrictions is a challenge, yes, but because of the openness of Michigan's juvenile courts, I can get information from many sources, including foster parents, group home workers, court files, lawyers, social workers, agency documents, trial transcripts, and police reports.

Because we take this broader per-

spective, judges, agency officials, legislators and line social service workers often say that they learn more about what's going on in the child protection and juvenile justice systems from the stories we publish than from any of the official memos or training sessions or court hearings they attend.

The Juvenile Justice Beat

Shortly before Michigan's juvenile courts first were opened to the public and the press in 1988, I asked my editors to create a new beat, juvenile justice. I figured I would try it for two or three years until something else came along. Fifteen years later, after covering too many stories of child maltreatment, my reporting has become something child welfare systems in every state desperately need—it's a watchdog approach that works to hold public official accountable to those they are supposed to serve. I investigate the deaths of abused or neglected children and uncover weaknesses in the systems designed to protect kids.

Public officials in Michigan have responded amazingly well to the problems described in my stories. In September 2000, a story I did on the smothering death of a seven-month-old girl named Miracle Jackson prompted better and more systematic cooperation between two state agencies, the FIA and the Department of Community Health. I recognized the name of Miracle's mother from previous stories on her children being abused by a boyfriend. One of her sons was beaten so badly he remains in a persistent vegetative state; his care costs thousands of taxpayer dollars every month. When Miracle's body was found inside a plastic grocery bag left in a field, I was able to write an authoritative story with historical context. Another of the mother's bad boyfriends had killed her child.

Within a week, the two state agencies announced that they would begin crosschecking computerized records of live births with the FIA's central registry of known abusers. When a child is born to a parent with a history of

abuse or neglect, the FIA now knows about it and is required to investigate and assess the risk to that child. The story of Miracle Jackson is used during the training sessions for FIA and private agency social service workers. Workers are told that they must be cautious and thorough, otherwise they might end up on the front page of the Free Press. At the same time, I was wrapping up a six-part series on the system's failure to protect a two-year-old girl named Ariana Swinson that ran in December 2000. The series is now cited as a cautionary tale for judges, referees, lawyers and social service workers.

Stories Make a Difference

Other stories and their impact include:

- Documenting the sorry conditions at the local youth home in 1996. After this story appeared, Wayne County built a \$48 million juvenile detention facility that opened two years later. It is considered among the best juvenile detention facilities in the world.
- A five-part series on a man's efforts to have access to his two daughters while repeatedly being falsely accused of sexually molesting them might have led the judge to award custody to the father.
- In March 1999, I wrote a front-page story on a juvenile court referee ordering life support systems to be removed from a child born with severe birth defects. The parents were not present for the hearing, the baby's court-assigned attorney was not present, and only hearsay testimony was taken on whether the parents had agreed to their baby being allowed to die. An initial appeal of the referee's ruling was dismissed as moot. But the state Court of Appeals, which had seen my article, took the matter up, severely chastised the juvenile court actions, and established legal protocols to be used when a request to remove life support from a child is being made.

I have never really considered myself a child advocate—although that is what people who work in the child welfare system call me. I cover the children's beat in the same way a Pentagon reporter covers the Department of Defense or a health reporter covers the health care system—by being diligent, open to new ideas, and honest with sources and readers. What the child welfare system needs are more journalists who are committed to covering it as a beat and doing the kind of watchdog reporting that can make a difference. ■

Jack Kresnak is the juvenile justice reporter at the Detroit Free Press. His stories about various children's cases can be found at www.freep.com/news/childrenfirst. His reporting on two-year-old Ariana Swinson won the Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism, presented by the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families. He also is the only journalist among 30 fellows with the Urban Health Initiative, a project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to improve the lives of children in five U.S. cities.

✉ kresnak@freepress.com

Words & Reflections

Is it possible for truth to exist in journalism? This question resides at the core of “The Press Effect: Politicians and the Stories That Shape the Political World,” a book written by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman. **Seth Efron**, who for 18 years reported on politics in and around North Carolina, reflects on how the analysis and conclusions contained in this book apply to current political coverage. In doing so, he relives President Bush’s telegenic landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln and wonders why aspects of “truth” didn’t surface in the political coverage of that event. He also comes up with a few good questions that most in the press never asked.

Mike Riley, editor of The Roanoke (Va.) Times, provides a close-up view of Eric Alterman’s book, “What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News,” but he also looks behind the words—liberal and conservative—that are tossed around in media food fights. Riley writes about how all of this affects journalists: “Journalists are held hostage by the power of labels. We, the labelers, have become the labeled, and we’re trapped by the ways in which people perceive the words ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal.’ That’s a terrible predicament for people who fancy themselves as independent observers.”

Media companies believed in the Internet as a profit-making enterprise. And then they lost billions of dollars before abandoning this belief. In “Bamboozled at the Revolution: How Big Media Lost Billions in the Battle for the Internet,” John Motavalli chronicles the many difficulties big media companies have had trying to develop new media strategies. In reflecting on Motavalli’s book, **David DeJean**, a former newspaper reporter who works with computers and communication technologies, wishes the author had focused less on intricacies of corporate deal-making and more on whether what media companies produce really have a profitable place on the Internet. For readers who want to understand the disconnect between media content and the Internet as its vehicle, DeJean recommends “Small Pieces Loosely Joined,” a book by David Weinberger.

Bill Wheatley, vice president of news at NBC, walks us through the 40-year reporting career of CBS News’s Bob Schieffer, who is now moderator and commentator of “Face the Nation.” He bases his account on Schieffer’s memoir, “This Just In: What I Couldn’t Tell You on TV,” in which he quotes Schieffer as saying he has “always wanted to see things for myself and make my own judgments about them.” During his career, Schieffer reported on the forced integration of the University of Mississippi, President Kennedy’s assassination, the Vietnam War, and from the White House, Pentagon, Congress and the State Department. As Wheatley writes, “One doesn’t get to hold the jobs Schieffer has . . . without being journalistically aggressive, to say nothing of being good at what you do.” ■

What Stands Between the Press and the Truth?

When it comes to coverage involving politics, the answer seems to be a lot.

The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists and the Stories That Shape the Political World

Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman

Oxford University Press. 240 Pages. \$26.

By Seth Effron

Is it possible, ask Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, for truth to exist in journalism?

President Bush's telegenic landing in a four-seat S-3B Viking fighter jet on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln for his May 1st nationally televised speech provided ample opportunity for the news media to be tested. And just like the many examples used in Jamieson and Waldman's book, "The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists and the Stories That Shape the Political World," most news organizations fell short.

Prior to the event, Bush's press secretary, Ari Fleischer, told reporters the carrier would be hundreds of miles off shore. When Bush landed, the carrier was waiting for the President about 30 to 40 miles away from San Diego—a short helicopter's flight distance to land. Initially, Fleischer said use of a helicopter—a much safer way to get to the carrier—was impossible because of the distance. After the event, Fleischer acknowledged that Bush "could have hehelicoptered, but the plan was already in place."

The news media reports made much of how Bush's dress—in a fighter pilot flight suit—gave him the appearance of a "Top Gun" character. And the live TV visuals of the flyover, landing and the President's walk across the carrier's deck remind us of the power of images to trump whatever words might follow. It has become a maxim among political image-makers that voters remember pictures, not words.

Immediately following Bush's flight and speech, there was little independent reporting on the appropriateness of the event and the way the nation's

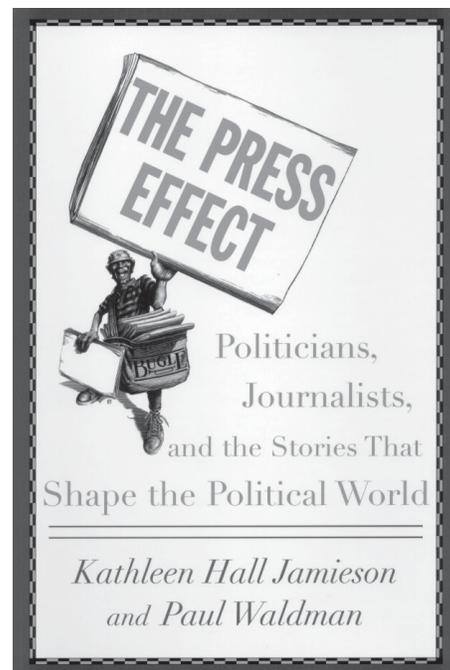
military service was used in a publicity spot. The few stories about this were premised mostly on partisan Democrat questioning of the cost of the trip and whether it was political in nature.

Unasked Questions

Ten days after the USS Abraham Lincoln event, Richard H. Kohn, a nationally recognized expert in presidential war leadership and civil-military relations, said no reporters called to ask him about the event. No reporters called to ask about any implications the event might have on military-civilian relations or the traditional separation between the uniformed military service and the civilian commander in chief.

Kohn heads the University of North Carolina Department of History's curriculum in Peace, War and Defense. He was chief of U.S. Air Force History for the Air Force from 1981 to 1991. He's said that there are some questions worth raising—and having answered—about the event:

- Was Bush's trip an appropriate use of a military facility—both in the context of public policy and the historic role of the President and use of the office?
- Just how dangerous was the made-for-TV fighter-jet arrival?
- What did the Secret Service think of it?
- Was it necessary for Bush to wear a flight suit?
- What is the history and custom of Presidents, while in office, dressing in military gear?
- To what extent did the President's



event delay the arrival home of the war-weary crew of the USS Abraham Lincoln (that had set a record of 10 months at sea)?

Then there are the questions of the news media's reaction to the aircraft carrier event and how it contrasts with coverage of Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis's 1988 ride in a tank or with reports (later found to be inaccurate) that President Clinton delayed air traffic at the busy Los Angeles International Airport while getting a haircut aboard Air Force One.

A review of the coverage of Bush on the USS Abraham Lincoln would have, no doubt, left Jamieson and Waldman wondering if their book had even been noticed. With the exception of a brief Associated Press report two days after the speech, nearly all of the coverage

that raised questions about the event's staging came from clearly partisan pundits and columnists.

Informed, Aggressive Skeptics

University of Pennsylvania communications and journalism professors Jamieson and Waldman say the press need to take a stronger and more affirmative role. "The proposal we offer is a simple one," write Jamieson and Waldman. "Reporters should help the public make sense of competing political arguments by defining terms, filling in needed information, assessing the accuracy of the evidence being offered." They call on reporters to be, as New Yorker editor, David Remnick, says, "informed aggressive skeptics."

The authors rehash a series of case studies of press missteps and failings:

- The reporting in 1988 on Dukakis's law-and-order record, as it was portrayed by the "Willie Horton" TV advertisement, and George H.W. Bush's inflation of Horton's crimes went largely unchallenged by the news media.
- Coverage of the claims of technological success in the first Gulf War far outweighed later revelations about the actual facts.

- Examinations of presidential candidates character (they call it "the press as amateur psychologist") fall short or they stray from assessing potential governing behavior.
- A look at how the press has covered Bush during and since the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York City and Washington. They challenge the oft-repeated notion that the President had been "transformed" and say the press were simply put "at bay" and even took what had previously been considered his lack of eloquence and transformed it into emerging grace.

These case studies demonstrate how reporters often seem mesmerized by politicians' and consultants' tactics and spin. One wonders, though, in examining press coverage in this way, whether they are unwittingly giving too much attention to tactics over substance.

The two authors conclude with their list of recommendations to the press when politics is part of the story:

- Use a "reasonable person" standard to define accuracy of claims and define in easy-to-understand language the shorthand of political rhetoric for readers.
- Press candidates and campaigners

to acknowledge easy to understand ways of discussing their differences and clearly understandable standards of accessing the truth and accuracy of a campaign's claims and charges.

- Explain, don't assume.
- Assess whether examples cited by candidates are typical or exceptional.
- Fit the story to the facts, not the facts to the story.
- Tie facts to the larger context and be skeptical about the frames of references being offered by candidates and campaigners.

Neither the examples examined nor the advice being offered by Jamieson and Waldman are all that original. Still, the authors can be credited with taking the time to thoughtfully remind the news media, again, of what they know they should do and recommend reasonable steps they can take to become more responsible and helpful to citizens who seek to be more engaged in American civic life. ■

Seth Efron, a 1992 Nieman Fellow, is special projects director at the Nieman Foundation and covered state and regional politics in North Carolina for 18 years.

✉ effron@fas.harvard.edu

Challenging the Charge of Liberal Bias in the Media

An editor's response: Understand our biases, act as journalists, be a watchdog of the powerful.

What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News

Eric Alterman

Basic Books. 322 Pages. \$25.

By Mike Riley

What's the nastiest name you've ever been called as a journalist? Liar? Miscreant? Bloodsucker? Liberal?

For many of us, it's probably that last word: liberal. That modern-day epithet has been fired at me—and the newspaper I edit, The Roanoke Times—

with increased frequency during the last few years. Maybe it's the war in Iraq or the post-September 11th world or the still-stumbling economy, but the name-calling has lately taken on a more vicious tone. In my mind's eye, I see readers sneering over the phone lines

or through e-mails, their fangs bared, dripping with venom, certain that editors are at the hub of a vast left-wing conspiracy that is bent on undermining our nation's values and destroying the fundamental freedoms of America as we know it.

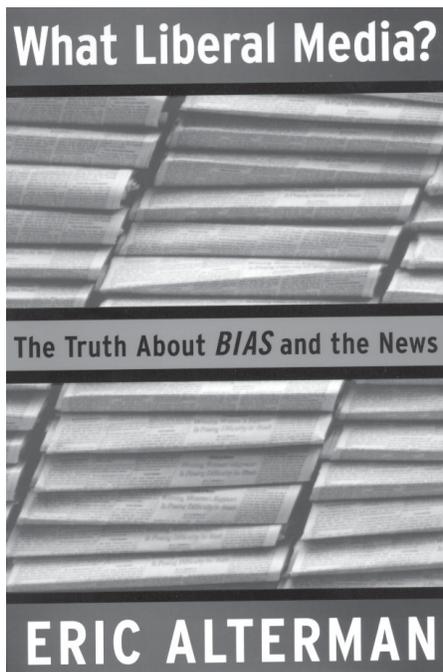
Perhaps that's going a bit far. But while the hyperbole is way over the edge, my point is made. The press or, more broadly, the media (how I hate that piece of jargon), are under fire as a bastion of liberal bias, and those of us in the craft are not quite sure what to make of it, or how to answer the charge.

Media: A Liberal Bias?

That's exactly what Eric Alterman tries to do in his book, "What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News." In this exhaustive—and sometimes exhausting—book, Alterman argues that the media are not guilty of exercising a liberal bias; in fact, the reality, he says, is quite the reverse. "The idea that the media might," Alterman writes, "for reasons of ownership, economics, class, or outside pressure, actually be more sympathetic to conservative causes than to liberal ones is widely considered to be beyond the pale." But it's true, he says. The notion of the media's liberal bias, he contends, is a widespread and useful myth, one that's easy to buy into and especially hard to dismiss.

Alterman works hard to shatter this enduring belief. For five decades, he says, the Republicans have kvetched about a conspiracy of liberal media bias, so much so that almost everyone, particularly those in media, now believes it, though it's not true. Some smart conservatives have even confessed it's a lie, Alterman writes, as he quotes influential neoconservative William Kristol. "I admit it," says Kristol. "The liberal media were never that powerful, and the whole thing was often used as an excuse by conservatives for conservative failures."

Alterman then goes on to cite, at excruciatingly great length, evidence of conservative domination of the media: Rush Limbaugh's influence on talk radio; the rise of Fox News as a burgeoning TV powerhouse; a bevy of conservative commentators in print and on TV; the media's harsh treatment of President Bill Clinton, along with its clear distaste for White House aspirant Al Gore; the media's fumbling of Election Night 2000 and the Florida recount; its kid-glove treatment of George



W. Bush, and on and on.

Alterman makes some excellent points, particularly when he traces the influence of Richard Mellon Scaife, whose wealth fueled an anti-Clinton feeding frenzy, and James Cramer, whose stock market shenanigans helped inflate the 1990's financial bubble. But his bristling polemic pushes him into the same absolutist trap of conservatives who bemoan a vast left-wing conspiracy. The media universe is neither that simplistic nor that Manichaean. Although it's easy to view this world in pure black-and-white terms, the reality is far more complex. A vast swath of grays predominates, which means the media's biases—and there are many—cannot be easily reduced to bumper sticker slogans.

To his credit, Alterman tips his hat to the notion that the media is not monolithic. "The media make up a vast and unruly herd of independent beasts," he notes in one of the more profound lines of his book. But his shrill, defensive argument that the media actually suffer from a conservative and not a liberal bias undercuts the truth-telling evident in that single sentence.

Looking Behind the Words

So perhaps it makes sense to start at a more fundamental point: What do we

really mean when we utter the words "conservative" and "liberal?" Are these words really as bad as everyone seems to think they are? The word "liberal" finds its root in the Latin *liberalis*, or *liber*, which means free. Webster's New World College Dictionary offers this definition, among others: "Favoring political reforms tending toward democracy and personal freedom for the individual; progressive." Given that cast, liberal sounds more like a concept the Founding Fathers would embrace rather than a description of some clan of pointy-headed evildoers who are regularly excoriated on talk radio.

Maybe being called "liberal" isn't as bad as it seems.

Examine the roots of the word "conservative." It comes from the Latin *conservativus* and is defined as "tending to preserve established traditions or institutions and to resist or oppose any changes in these." It's about protecting and preserving the fundamental values of what is right with the world. That doesn't seem so bad, either.

It requires a little deeper digging to figure out what the fuss is all about. If conservative means protecting the established order and liberal means challenging that order, then the conflict is between preservation vs. change or tradition vs. reform. So it's a power struggle about who controls the future. The forces of change or the forces of tradition? No wonder people get their underwear so tight in the liberal vs. conservative tug of war.

By getting sucked into this maelstrom, the media find themselves caught in the middle of a battle for control of the future. Both camps jockey hard for position, trying to win us over to their side. The harder we work to extricate ourselves from this battle, the more entangled it seems we become. There's plenty of irony here: Journalists are held hostage by the power of labels. We, the labelers, have become the labeled, and we're trapped by the ways in which people perceive the words "conservative" and "liberal." That's a terrible predicament for people who fancy themselves as independent observers.

Understanding Our Biases

So how do we avoid this trap? For starters, we need to think and act more like journalists. Remain independent. Verify the facts. Question assumptions. Challenge authority. Dig, dig, dig. Strive for context in our reporting. Avoid easy answers. Be curious. Question those in power. Be a watchdog. When we do these things well, it's harder for someone to stick a meaningless label on us, no matter how hard they try.

But sidestepping these labels requires more. It involves understanding our biases and blind spots, as a group and as individuals.

Our institutional biases seem clear. As journalists, we like engaging stories. We seek out conflict and controversy. We're skeptical, if not cynical. We're intensely interested in what's new and different. (That's why we call it "the news," after all.) We work hard to be accurate and fair. We try to pursue the truth, though we don't always find it. We are drawn to what is entertaining and exciting. We prefer to tell stories in blacks and whites, since working in shades of gray makes us uncomfortable.

In addition, we're well-educated and, therefore, in many cases, elitist. We've lost touch with ordinary, blue-collar folk. We're drawn to people who look and act and think like us. We run like a pack, particularly when we smell blood. We seek out scandal. We love underdogs. We sometimes have a problem thinking independently.

We also bring personal prejudices to the job. For example, I'm a middle-aged, well-educated, white male from the South. I view the world through a lens of cultural privilege. I'm comfortable with authority, and I suffer from blind spots that I once thought never existed. For example, despite intentions and words that I think are quite clear, my race and age often silently undercut my efforts to recruit a more diverse newsroom. Every journalist must come to terms with these personal biases because, when you don't, the biases have a way of owning you. The last thing any good journalist wants is for anyone or anything to own him.

So back to where we started. What should you do the next time someone blasts you as being a liberal?

Here's my plan. First, I'll turn the question back around: "What do you

mean by liberal?" Then I'll listen to the answer, challenge its assumptions, discuss the definition, and then patiently explain that, while I may have a set of journalistic biases, they aren't liberal or conservative. My job as a journalist, I'll explain, is to keep a close eye on the powerful—be they liberal, conservative, or in-between—and to work to hold them accountable.

It's that notion that brings us to Alterman's eloquent final chapter, the highlight of his book and another place where he gets it right. "People are not angels," he writes. "Power requires watchdogs. Powerful people will often abuse their authority if they believe no one is watching. That, in a nutshell, is why we need journalism."

And that's why we need journalists, and the good ones are getting harder and harder to find. ■

Mike Riley, a 1995 Nieman Fellow, is editor of The Roanoke (Va.) Times. Before that, he was a correspondent and bureau chief for Time and executive producer of allpolitics.com.

✉ mike.riley@roanoke.com

Media Companies and the Internet

We know there's a problem, what's the solution?

Bamboozled at the Revolution: How Big Media Lost Billions in the Battle for the Internet

John Motavalli

Viking Press. 320 Pages. \$26.95.

By David DeJean

Steve Case's resignation as chairman of AOL Time Warner in January came almost three years to the day after the announcement of the merger of the biggest online service and the biggest media company. It wasn't exactly unexpected. In fact, it felt like the final shoe had dropped. Gerald Levin, Time Warner's chief executive officer (CEO) who led his company into the merger, had quit almost a year earlier. Bob

Pittman, once AOL's very successful CEO, had been forced out as chief operating officer of the merged companies the previous summer. Last fall, Ted Turner tried to lead a boardroom revolt against Case. Case survived, but not for long.

So what went wrong? How could these two powerhouses fail to find the synergy they talked about so loudly three years before? How did the media

merger of the century become just another family feud? How did things get this way? Second-day analysis stories and TV pundits found all kinds of reasons for the downfall of the new-media wunderkind: the slowdown of AOL's core online-services business; disappointment among stockholders, and anger of former Time Warner people who had seen their 401K accounts washed away. The deeper reason may

John Motavalli

BAMBOOZLED *at* the REVOLUTION

How Big Media Lost Billions

in the Battle for the Internet

have been a profoundly dysfunctional corporate culture at Time Warner, if you follow the logic of John Motavalli's book, "Bamboozled at the Revolution: How Big Media Lost Billions in the Battle for the Internet." Published last fall, "Bamboozled" focuses on the last decade in the lives of Case and Levin, et al.—the years of the Internet bubble.

The book opens with Jerry Levin's announcement in 1993 that Time Warner intended to spend five billion dollars on a new-media project called the Full Service Network that went nowhere. It closes with an epilogue apparently written in mid-2002, as AOL Time Warner took a \$54 billion charge to reflect the plummeting value of the combined businesses. In between it provides play-by-play coverage of the company's attempts to develop online products and presence—Time Inc. Interactive, Time Inc. New Media, Pathfinder, Time Warner Digital Media, Time Warner Online, GoTo, Entertaimdom.

Documenting Media Company Crashes

Motavalli witnessed most of this close-up as a computer and Internet columnist for the New York Post and a reporter for Adweek and Inside Media. Nor is Time Inc. the only media giant in his sights. "Bamboozled" is a detailed

survey of the flailings of the biggest media companies over the past decade—Hearst and Disney and NBC and News Corp. among them—as they tried to come to grips with online services and the Internet.

It's a book filled with big egos in big offices; big plans rolled out with big fanfare, then sunk by big flaws that resulted in big losses. When Motavalli writes about Time Warner, he waxes positively cinematic. "Bamboozled" describes with relish and great detail a self-satisfied corporate culture that perpetuated personal fiefdoms and spread decision-making power too thin. He elevates personal clashes between executives to the level of myth and marshals a cast of characters that is Homeric or, even better, Tom Wolfian.

As his title implies, Motavalli is fascinated by how much these media companies spent on new-media ventures and how little they got for it. He reports, for example, that in 1994 and 1995 Time Warner had opportunities to buy significant pieces of Netscape and Yahoo! and form a joint venture with AOL that would make it a major investor. It turned down all of them and instead made an investment in a company called Open Market. Who? His point exactly.

If Motavalli respects any of the personalities he covers it would be the AOL people—Case, Pittman and particularly Ted Leonsis, a utility infielder who has held several positions with AOL, most recently vice chairman.

"Bamboozled" also distinguishes between the giant media companies like Time Warner and Disney and more focused companies. Newspaper companies, in particular, "... recognized the promise and threat of the online world earlier than magazines and TV because it clearly impacted them more directly," Motavalli quotes Tribune Company executive Gene Quinn.

But companies like Disney and Time Warner and their ilk learned little. Motavalli's notebooks yield up example after example of hubris and ignorance. The very volume of his evidence makes his book a dizzying whirl of names and years and numbers, but this central fact of the book is also its central failing:

There's no learning going on here. It's bad enough that the Time Warner executives from Levin on down weren't developing any understanding of the Internet, but what's worse is that Motavalli doesn't, either.

Missing the Larger Questions

His stories of drive-by character assassination in the executive suites create more heat than light. Nowhere does he ask the basic question: Does the output of the media companies really have a place on the Internet? Just because Time Warner (and News Corp. and NBC and Microsoft and a few hundred other companies) have spent the last decade convinced that the Internet is their next playpen doesn't mean that it is actually "media" in any way that's meaningful to (that is, that will ever make a profit for) these companies.

He comes close when he writes about Leonsis in June 1995, at a meeting with AOL's content partners, companies who had done high-dollar deals to provide content to the service. The relationship was increasingly tense because AOL had gone from a million members at the end of the previous year to three million by the time of the meeting, from 250 employees to 2,000. It had become a medium unto itself in the process and was developing in-house content like the "Motley Fool." And it was telling the partners that henceforth it would be competing with them to sell advertising.

Leonsis, writes Motavalli, laid out for the assembled media company representatives his view of what would succeed online, which he called "The Five C's":

1. Content that is programmed, not aggregated.
2. Community that is endemic to the programming.
3. Commerce that is part and parcel of the channel.
4. Companion Web sites and CD-ROM's that are connected properties.
5. Context and point of view.

While Point Four was more relevant when the Internet was still in its in-

fancy, Leonsis's blueprint has not been disproved in the years since he laid it out. Portals and search engines and eBay and Matt Drudge and instant messaging and bloggers all fall within this vision.

Now skip forward 180 pages and seven years to almost the present. Levin is gone, and the technology that would support his Full Service Network never has arrived: Its latest incarnation, "broadband" (high-speed Internet connections that run on cable TV or telephone lines), is being treated by consumers as an expensive luxury, not a necessity. AOL Time Warner's magazines still aggregate their print content for the Web, pretty much as they did for Pathfinder in 1994. There is little indication of any communication, let alone synergy, between Time Inc. and AOL and, even if there were, there's no money to be made in online content.

"There is little doubt by this point that, indeed, the deal had been a disaster. Moreover, Levin's dream of a hyper-connected, Jetsons-style AOL Time Warner, full of synergies and explosive growth, had failed as well," writes Motavalli. And that's where he leaves his cautionary tale. Readers who are themselves inside the media might appreciate more thoughtful consideration of the "what ifs" of the stories told here, but readers on the outside will find Motavalli's ability to successfully infuse corporate deal-making with a car-chase sensibility very entertaining, if not particularly enlightening. And when you think about it, perhaps that's appropriate. We might not have learned much about the Internet yet, but it has certainly been a hell of a ride. ■

David DeJean, a 1978 Nieman Fellow, went from newspapers to new technologies and has watched videotex become online services and then morph into the Internet while writing about and working with computers and communication technologies in a variety of languages, including English and FORTAN.

✉ ddejean@dejean.com

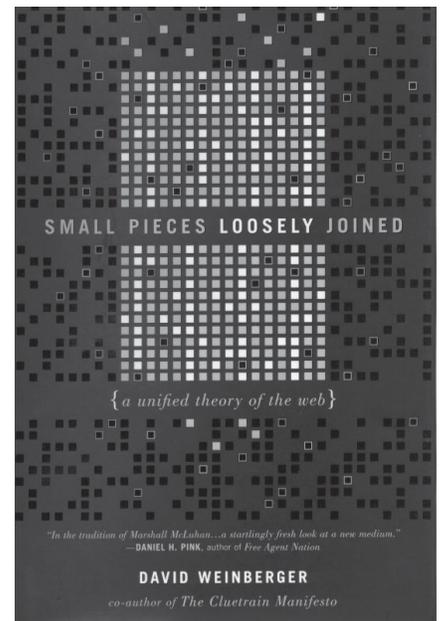
'Small Pieces Loosely Joined'

Part of the problem with AOL Time Warner's failure to capitalize on the Internet might be a basic misperception of what kind of medium the Internet is. Like all the other big media and telecommunication players, AOL Time Warner wanted the Internet to be the next television—a pervasive mass medium with a huge potential for advertising revenue. They wanted it so much, in fact, that they simply assumed consumers would want it, too. What these companies have failed to consider is that to its users, the Internet is not television. It is much more like the telephone or the postal service, a media outlet where advertising is regarded as intrusive junk and the emphasis is on active participation in communities, not passive consumerism.

That is one of the lessons taught by "Small Pieces Loosely Joined," a thoughtful book by David Weinberger subtitled "A Unified Theory of the Web" (Perseus Publishing, 2002, \$25).

Weinberger, who expounds his theories as the publisher of the Journal of the Hyperlinked Organization (www.hyperorg.com), an NPR commentator, writer and lecturer, discusses the fundamentals of the new world of the Internet in chapters titled "Space," "Time," "Perfection," "Togetherness," "Knowledge," "Matter" and "Hope." In "Space," for example, he concludes that the fuss over the merger of AOL and Time Warner was driven largely by fear that new, giant entities like this one would crowd out smaller sites the same way a Wal-Mart drives local businesses out of a small town.

The fallacy, he says, is that this assumes the Web has a finite amount of space and that location counts. But that's not the way the Internet works, he says: "It's no harder to get to www.mom-and-pop.com than to www.megasite.com. Distance on the Web is measured by links, so the way to make your site 'close' to where your customers are is to get lots of places to point to it. How? By being interesting or worthwhile.... While big companies



have an advantage [in the real world] when it comes to location because their fatter wallets can buy better positioning, big sites don't have a leg up on being interesting. In fact, often it's the contrary."

The Web, he argues, has succeeded precisely because it was created without centralized management and control—it is a structure based not on "Thou shalt not," but on "Thou canst."

Weinberger is a philosopher, and his last chapter, "Hope," uses terms we don't often find connected to the Internet, at least on the business pages—"individualism," "utilitarianism" and especially "morality." The Web, he says, has created a place where we can shed the alienation induced by big media and rediscover our authentic selves as members of a community who engage in person-to-person communication and caring. That's pretty heavy, but it sounds vaguely familiar—like the claims made by newspapers, back when they were small media, owned by real people who talked seriously about their responsibility to create an informed citizenry. It's nice to know that Weinberger thinks there's an institution around that can pick up that fallen torch. ■ D.D.

Forty Years of Reporting the Nation's News

Bob Schieffer reflects on stories he's covered and the way journalism has changed.

This Just In: What I Couldn't Tell You on TV

Bob Schieffer

Putnam Publishing Group. 448 Pages. \$26.95.

By Bill Wheatley

How many journalists can say that they covered the integration of Ole Miss, the John F. Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, Watergate, the Clinton impeachment, the election of 2000, and the events of September 11, 2001? Very few, no doubt. It's even possible that there might be only one: Bob Schieffer.

Without fuss or frill, and with a reputation for getting the story, the versatile Schieffer has been at it for more than 40 years, in Texas as a radio reporter, newspaperman and television anchor and then at CBS as a correspondent, anchor, host of the "CBS Morning News" and, at present, moderator and commentator of the Sunday-morning institution "Face the Nation."

It has been an impressive and enviable career, even if it has sometimes played out in the shadow of others, notably Dan Rather, Schieffer's fellow Texan and stylistic opposite. Where Rather is intense, Schieffer is relaxed, but don't mistake the calm demeanor for a lack of drive. One doesn't get to hold the jobs Schieffer has, including the Washington correspondent's grand slam (White House, Congressional, State Department, and Pentagon assignments) without being journalistically aggressive, to say nothing of being good at what you do. And one doesn't come away from the jobs Schieffer has had without some keen insights into how the world works (or doesn't) and without a cache of interesting and revealing tales. In this book, it is those tales and those insights that Schieffer blends into an engaging biographical narrative.

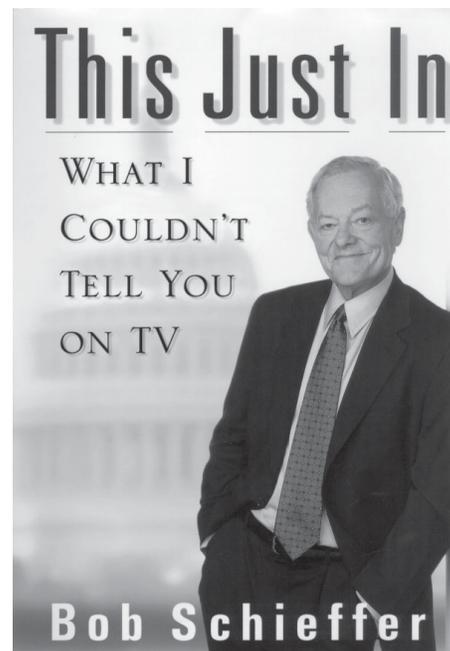
Schieffer writes that he has "always wanted to see things for myself and make my own judgments about them."

He recalls vividly one of the first big "things" he saw as a child in Forth Worth: Lyndon Baines Johnson, in the Senate campaign of 1948, swooping into town in a helicopter, making a stump speech and tossing his Stetson to the crowd. (Only years later did Schieffer learn that LBJ was aiming the hat at a campaign aide whose job it was to catch it and get it back to him before the next speech.) Johnson would go on to win—some say steal—the Senate seat by 87 disputed votes, earning him forever the moniker "Landslide Lyndon." Schieffer would take something away from the campaign, too: the beginning of a life-long fascination with politics, on which he would eventually report at the highest levels.

Like many journalists before and since, Schieffer drifted through his college years—"I put little into it and got little in return."—preferring covering wrecks and robberies for a local radio station to spending time in the pursuit of book knowledge. Journalism had a strong attraction for him. "I just liked being where the news was," he writes, "knowing about it before other people did and telling them about it before other people could." It would, of course, be hard to find a better description of why most journalists show up for work each day.

His First Big Story

If Schieffer ever thought journalism was something of a lark, that changed quickly when, as a 26 year old, he was dispatched by his radio station to cover his first national story: the integration, by federal court order, of the University of Mississippi. Schieffer, who con-



cedes that he had never spent much time thinking about why whites and blacks lived apart, was surprised when he and other members of the media were not welcomed warmly by the good citizens of Oxford; indeed, the press, federal marshals, and anyone else who got in the way were attacked, even shot at, by mobs opposed to the admission to the university of a black man, James Meredith.

With the arrival on campus of thousands of federal troops, all-out war erupted, and Schieffer experienced for the first time the sheer terror that can go hand-in-hand with an assignment that has turned dangerous. When the shooting ended and the smoke cleared, two people were dead (one of them a reporter), hundreds were wounded or injured, and the Ole Miss campus resembled a burned-out battlefield. But Meredith was attending class. And a shaken Schieffer had learned some enduring lessons, not only about what it means to be a reporter, but also about race and hatred and the power of the federal government.

A Reporter's Lucky Break

He learned another lesson—being lucky can sometimes be as important to a journalist as being skilled—on that dark day, November 22, 1963. Working the police beat for the Fort Worth (Texas) Star-Telegram, Schieffer was not among the paper's reporters who were rushed to neighboring Dallas when President Kennedy was shot. In the bedlam of the city room, he picked up a ringing phone. It was a woman asking for a ride to Dallas. Doesn't she understand that this is a newspaper, not a taxi service, and that the President has been shot? "I know," she told Schieffer. "They think my son is the one who shot him."

The woman on the phone was Lee Harvey Oswald's mother, and she wanted to visit her son at the Dallas police station. Schieffer and a colleague picked her up and Schieffer spent the drive to Dallas interviewing her in the back seat. But he knew hundreds of reporters would be gathered at the police station. How could he hold onto the exclusive, even expand on it?

What happened next is one of the best-told stories of the book. Rather than spoil the reader's enjoyment, let's just say it involves a snap-brim hat and behavior by the author that an ethics class might debate for days.

President Kennedy's murder took an emotional toll on Schieffer, much as it did on the nation at large. "We had come to believe our Presidents were somehow invincible," he writes. "America lost its innocence that day in Dallas, and we would never look at government and politicians in the same way." In the days following the assassination, Schieffer would become mentally exhausted, his feelings deadened. He writes that it would be a long time before he would get it behind him.

Something else, Schieffer believes, changed when Kennedy died: Television journalism replaced print as the country's choice for news. In ways no one could have predicted, the nation had for the first time been brought together to share a national tragedy, and it was television that had done it. As Americans watched the remarkable

events unfold on their screens, the country virtually stopped. "The scenes of that week," writes Schieffer, "had been burned into the national psyche. No more would Americans have to see something written down in the newspaper to believe it."

Reporting on the Vietnam War

It was a watershed moment, and he would not be immune to its consequences. In a few years he would trade in his pencil for a microphone, but first, he would go to Vietnam. There, the war was building and, with it, the American presence. Schieffer, always wanting to be in on the big story, somehow persuaded the Star-Telegram's dubious editor to send him. The deal was this: Schieffer would let the wire services cover the big picture; he would stay behind the lines, report on Texas boys and not take any chances. Arriving in Saigon, Schieffer, his editor many thousands of miles away, did what all good reporters would do: He headed right for the action. "I wanted to know if I was a man," he writes.

It wasn't long before he would find out that he was indeed a man, even if, he admits, a "foolhardy" one. He dove into combat from land, sea and air, risking his life repeatedly to get stories and making sure that enough of them were about Texans to assuage his editor back home. Looking back, he reflects on why he did it: "I came to understand that war could be unparalleled adventure and, for lack of a better word, fun."

He certainly understood that war is also deadly serious, and it has consequences. One of the most poignant moments in the book occurs when he tours a military hospital, and it hits him hard that the men there "would be going home, not as God made them, but as war has left them." After four months, Schieffer, summoned by his editor, headed home himself, leaving Vietnam disillusioned with a war "where there are no front lines and the enemy always disappeared to fight another day," and believing (wrongly, he regrets) that in a short time the Viet-

namese government would fall and the Americans would be asked to leave.

When he got back to Fort Worth, Schieffer, whose stories from Vietnam had been heavily promoted by the Star-Telegram, was greeted as something of a celebrity. Before long, a local television station had snapped him up as an anchor. Not long after that and newly married, he set off to Washington with dreams of being a network correspondent. How he got to be one is a delightful tale, one of the finest in the book. So as not to give it away, all that will be said here is that Schieffer was as surprised as anyone to find himself suddenly intoning the words "Bob Schieffer, CBS News, Washington."

The Washington, D.C. Beats

The CBS News that Schieffer joined was near the height of its excellence. Walter Cronkite was in the anchor chair in New York, and his program had just passed NBC's "Huntley-Brinkley Report" in the evening news ratings. Schieffer was signing up with the best bureau in the television news business, the CBS bureau in Washington. Presided over by the demanding and autocratic Bill Small ("Mr. Small," even to his correspondents), the bureau was the broadcast equivalent of the vaunted 1927 New York Yankees. Its Murderers' Row included Roger Mudd, Marvin Kalb, Dan Rather and Daniel Schorr, backed up by a group of other seasoned correspondents. If this weren't enough, the oracular Eric Severeid was in residence to put into perspective the news that the correspondents reported. The correspondents were highly competitive, not only with reporters from the other networks but also among themselves. In short, the atmosphere was proud and intense. When, on his first day, Schieffer asked where he would sit, he was told by Small, "You won't, if you want to stay."

But stay he did, working hard and well, moving from general assignment to a series of beats, getting some anchor work, staying out of controversy, letting his skills carry him up the ladder gradually. Almost 35 years later, he's on a top rung, having had most of the

Nieman Notes

Compiled by Lois Fiore

television news jobs worth having. It's been quite a run, and Schieffer provides some interesting observations on the jobs he's held.

He very much enjoyed working at the Pentagon and calls it "the best of all beats to learn how Washington works," a good place to develop sources. Reporting from the State Department was far less satisfying: "I could never seem to get a straight answer from anyone." The White House, despite the reputed glamour of working there, also proved in some ways to be a disappointment. Schieffer recalls it as a "place where real reporting was all but impossible and where you had contact with the President and his staff only when they chose to see you." It is covering Congress, where he still spends time each week, which he considers truly interesting, even fun. Schieffer likes the access provided by what he calls "the greatest concentration of characters ever assembled under one roof." He says that Congress is the last place in Washington where reporters can be in daily direct contact with newsmakers.

Schieffer decries the growing partisanship in politics and the trend in presidential campaigns for images to be emphasized over issues. But he seems to be an optimist by nature. True to this, he takes heart in the way Washington and the nation dealt with the tragedy of September 11th. "We had been through one of the worst days in American history," he writes, "but it brought out our best." At the end of that long and difficult day, he recalls, several hundred members of Congress gathered on the Capitol steps, and it wasn't long before the strains of "God Bless America" were heard. Democrats and Republicans had come together. Hope and resolve were replacing fear. And Bob Schieffer was just where he wanted to be: right there to report on it. ■

Bill Wheatley, a 1977 Nieman Fellow, is vice president of news at NBC. He was the executive in charge of that network's coverage of the Iraq War.

✉ William.Wheatley@nbc.com

Photographer Gordon Parks Turns 90

'Gordon is our lamplighter, and I love him for that.'

By Lester Sloan

In the early afternoon of November 30th of last year, 90 African-American photographers and editors gathered on the steps of a brownstone apartment near Adam Clayton Powell and 125th Street in Harlem. It was the 90th birthday of Gordon Parks, and they had come from across the country to be photographed with the man who had influenced their lives. Parks arrived in a limo with his daughter Toni and Adger Cowans, a man who was like a son to Parks. After several exposures, the session ended. Later that evening, several hundred people gathered at a Manhattan hotel for the birthday celebration. Throughout the evening, Parks greeted and received the strangers and the familiar. There were speeches, toasts and the birthday cake. Throughout it all, Parks sat with a bemused expression on his face.

Gordon Parks was a prophecy long before he was a person. Prior to his conception, it is said that a gypsy woman told his mother that her 15th and last child would be known throughout the world, bringing honor and acclaim to the family. All this from a boy born in Fort Scott, Kansas, where most people, black or white, felt dwarfed by the prairies. Such a prediction was surely not a safe bet for a black man born shortly after Reconstruction, in a country where lynchings were as common as thunderstorms. That he was declared legally dead at birth tended to make the prediction all the more amazing.

The trauma of birth brought to the world a child that neither moved nor

cried. Failing to respond, he was wrapped in a blanket and placed in a basket at the side of the bed while the midwife attended to the mother. A doctor asked that some ice be placed in a pan of water. The child's lifeless form was immersed in the pan. "I started yelling, and I haven't stopped," Parks likes to say when retelling the story.

Gordon Parks's mother died when he was 15, and he was sent to live with an older sister in St. Paul, Minnesota. Shortly after his arrival, a family dispute set him adrift, homeless in a world where hunger, poverty and racism stalked him. Armed with the weapons given to him by his parents, who placed "love, hard work, and dignity over hatred," he set out to live out the gypsy's prophecy.

In Minnesota he worked at an assortment of jobs: janitor, musician, semi-professional basketball player, and railway porter. Working on the railroad, Parks came in contact with newspapers and magazines left behind by passengers. Thumbing through the magazines, he discovered the pictures of Depression-era photographers working for the Farm Security Administration, documenting the dust-bowl caravans traveling from Oklahoma to California. "These stark images of these men, women and children, caught in their confusion and poverty, saddened me," says Parks. "I took them home and kept looking at these photographs for months."

It was on a trip to Seattle that he brought a Voightlander Brilliant cam-

era from Abe Cohen's pawnshop for \$7.50. "I liked the name," he remembers. "I hurriedly pulled the money from my pocket—without bothering to inspect the camera." It would be a serendipitous introduction to what he would later call his "choice of weapons."

The first roll of film Parks had developed earned praise from the proprietor of a Kodak camera store in Minnesota, who offered to give him an exhibition if the promise he saw in his first roll of film continued. It would be his first of many.

"I'm often asked why I didn't allow anger and bigotry to maim me," says Parks. "The answer lies in the goodness of people who, regardless of their color, have reached out to me when I needed help. Without them, the most inconsequential hills would have been impossible to climb."

Gordon Parks inspired a generation of photographers, black and white, by both his work and his example. And unlike so many great European photojournalists who were adopted Americans and who saw this country through a European prism, Parks was from the soil that he tilled and, as a black man, he lived both the American dream and the nightmare.

"I would say perhaps his greatest contribution to photojournalism was his recognition, in depth, of the underdog—Harlem gang leader, Flavio, Malcolm," says former Life magazine editor, John G. Morris.

"Gordon is more than a photographer," says Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer John White of the Chicago Sun-Times. "He's more than a hero; he's a lamplighter, and everyone is illuminated by that. Gordon is our lamplighter, and I love him for that."

Parks's images mirror a truth that at times is painful, reflecting both the country's promise and its failure. But he believes in the redemptive powers of truth and beauty. Both his life and work celebrate the capacity of human beings to rise above adversity and reach for the sublime. ■

Lester Sloan, a 1976 Nieman Fellow, has been a journalist for more than 30 years, working in print, television and radio. He has worked as a cameraman/reporter for the CBS affiliate in Detroit, a staff photographer for Newsweek in Los Angeles, an at large contributing editor for Emerge magazine, and a contributor to National Public Radio's Weekend Edition. He edits a Web magazine, www.lestersloanmediagroup.com.



Frisco Railway Station, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1949. Photo by Gordon Parks.



“Drugstore Cowboys—
1955,” Blind River, Ontario,
Canada.

Bessie Fontenelle and her
son, Richard, from a 1967
Life photo essay about the
Fontenelle family and pov-
erty in Harlem.

Photos by Gordon Parks.



—1941—

Robert Vance Johnson died on December 14, 2002 in Hendersonville, North Carolina. He was 91.

His daughter, Jeanine J. Noble, writes: “My Dad was so proud to be a Nieman Fellow, owned one of the [Harvard] chairs and read Nieman Reports regularly with great interest. I was nine years old when my Dad went to Harvard, I believe at the ripe old age of 29. ...

“He was the son of the late J.O. Johnson and Hattie Robinson Johnson and husband of the late **Thelma Bagwell Johnson**, to whom he was married for 63 years.

“He served in the Marines during World War II and was a newspaper reporter, editor and White House correspondent. This included 35 years working on newspapers in Clovis, New Mexico; Amarillo, Texas, and Washington, D.C. as a correspondent for the Chicago Sun-Times and San Francisco Chronicle. He wrote many feature stories for *Colliers* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

“Vance was the author of two books: ‘Heaven’s Tableland,’ a history of the Dust Bowl, and ‘The Fabulous Toby and Me,’ with Neil Schaffner, about the repertoire tent show in the Midwest, *The Schaffner Players*.

“After his years in journalism, Vance became a development officer at the University of Chicago and later at Rush Presbyterian Hospital from which he retired in 1980 and moved to Florida with his wife.”

Johnson is survived by his daughter, Jeanine Noble; his son, William V. Johnson; six grandchildren and their spouses; three great grandchildren, and one great, great grandson.

—1963—

Paul Kidd, a former Ontario broadcaster and reporter, died on February 13, 2002 in Hamilton, Ontario after a brief battle with cancer. He was 69.

Born in Norton, England, Kidd went to Canada in 1956 to join *The Hamilton Spectator* as a reporter. Ten years later “he was kicked out of Cuba for taking

pictures of a secret labor camp—but not before he got the photos and the story,” according to an obituary in the Canadian press.

He later became a foreign correspondent for *Southam News* and visited 70 countries in all parts of the world. His reporting brought him 10 Canadian and international awards, including a Cabot Prize Gold Medal from Columbia University in 1966 for Latin American reporting while based in Buenos Aires.

Upon his return to Canada, Kidd became a nightly news commentator on CHCH TV 11 and later joined the CBC as bureau chief in the Hamilton radio bureau until its demise in 1991. He became area correspondent for *The Toronto Star* and finally *The Toronto Sun*. In 1994 Kidd was elected councilor for the Town of Flamborough and was re-elected in 1997.

He is survived by his wife, **Judy Creighton-Kidd**.

—1966—

Robert A. Caro received the Pulitzer Prize for Biography for his book, “Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson.” In this book, Caro examines Lyndon Johnson’s career in the Senate from his arrival in 1950 until his election as John F. Kennedy’s vice president in 1960. It is the third volume in a monumental work, “The Years of Lyndon Johnson,” which began with the award-winning “The Path to Power” (1982) and “Means of Ascent” (1990).

A former investigative reporter for *Newsday* and winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, Caro also won the 2002 National Book Award for Nonfiction for “Master of the Senate.”

—1972—

Lee Winfrey, a former television critic for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, died on April 2, 2003 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from arteriosclerosis and diabetes. He was 70.

Winfrey was a “veteran reporter who covered Castro in Cuba, Washington politics, and West Virginia coal-mine disasters during his 44-year career in

journalism,” an *Inquirer* reporter wrote in Winfrey’s obituary.

In 1957, Winfrey began his career as a reporter at *The (Nashville) Tennessean* and then joined *The Miami Herald* in 1962, where he eventually became the paper’s Washington correspondent. After serving as the Washington bureau correspondent for *Knight Newspapers* from 1963 to 1966, Winfrey took a break from journalism to work on a master’s degree in fine arts from the University of Iowa. After graduating in 1968, he joined the *Detroit Free Press*.

“Everybody wanted Lee to be on their projects, he was so good,” said Tom Wark, former editor in Detroit and a retired *Inquirer* associate managing editor. Wark recalled one particular story Winfrey worked on about a mine disaster in West Virginia that had the opening line: “Once again in West Virginia there is frost on the mountain and blood on the coal.” Wark said: “The whole piece went on in that remarkable poetic rhythm. It read like he had worked on it for days [when he only had three hours to complete it].”

In 1972, Winfrey joined *The Philadelphia Inquirer* as a general-assignment reporter and wrote his first television column in 1974. For the next 24 years, Winfrey reviewed programs and provided readers with an understanding of what he considered to be the art of television.

Writing his millionth word on the subject in his “On Television” column in 1980, Winfrey remembered warnings in his childhood against mispending his youth. “As a TV critic,” he wrote, “I have often wondered if I am mispending my adulthood.” But, he continued: “More families own a TV set than own a bathtub or a shower. If Americans care more about watching TV than keeping clean, surely that is a fixation too Brobdingnagian to be ignored.”

Winfrey is survived by a son, David Dylan; a brother, and two former wives, **Mary Anne Hight** and **Kiki Olson**.

—1973—

James O. Jackson writes: “I retired

from Time magazine in 2001 but continued working in London as ‘contributing editor,’ a title that remains on the masthead, although I am doing rather little lately. I also divorced in 2001 and have since remarried—to an old friend dating from second grade in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where we now live. I’m at work on a history of the local newspaper, The Santa Fe New Mexican, which first appeared in 1849 and claims to be the oldest continuing newspaper in the West. Perhaps it is.”

—1976—

Janos Horvat brings us up to date on his work: “I am still in the TV business as president of a cable platform (so far we have launched a premium sports channel and now we are preparing a comedy channel). I still have a ‘Children in Need’-type telethon show on Hungarian TV and teach journalism at Hungarian universities. Far from the United States, I’m right in the middle of the European Union and a member of the preparatory committee trying to create a new modern media-law for Hungary.

“I have two daughters and no grandchildren—yet.”

—1978—

Alice Bonner, for a biography of 1966 Nieman Fellow **Bob Maynard**, would like to hear from any and all of his classmates, friends and acquaintances. Maynard, who died in 1993, was the leading champion of diversity in American newsrooms, who rose from teen reporter on black weeklies to Washington Post correspondent and history-making owner/publisher of The Oakland Tribune.

Bonner can be reached by e-mail: alicebonner1@aol.com or by regular mail: 1111 La Grande Road, Silver Spring, Maryland 20903.

—1979—

Nancy Day has been appointed chair of the Journalism Department at Columbia College in Chicago, the nation’s largest private arts and communica-

tion college founded with a social justice mission, with open admissions to this day. She starts her new job September 1, 2003, after a 22-year career at Boston University, where most recently she was director of Advanced Journalism Studies. Day also won a Fulbright Fellowship for summer 2003. She will teach at Moscow State University in the Russian Federation, which is inaugurating a special Summer Institute for journalism studies.

Day continues to write on a freelance basis, most recently for Women’s eNews, Nieman Reports, and People magazine. On a personal note, Nancy’s daughter Allison Waggener graduated from Yale University on May 26.

Bob Porterfield is now a project consultant for The Associated Press’s San Francisco bureau. He writes: “Since 1996 **Marcia** [Porterfield’s wife] and I have been spending a lot of time overseas training journalists in Central Europe, Africa and most recently (January) in Russia. We’ve done a lot of this through a nonprofit foundation we cofounded in 1997, the World Free Press Institute, which is concentrating primarily on East Africa. Our last visit was a seminar we conducted in Nairobi last summer. Believe me, there’s a lot of work to be done in encouraging press freedom and fact-based reporting in emerging democracies. That is particularly true in Africa and the Russian Federation. I’m hoping we’ll get some additional grant money in for expanded African training activities.”

The World Free Press Institute’s Web address is: www.pressfreedom.org.

—1990—

Mary Jordan and husband **Kevin Sullivan**, foreign correspondents for The Washington Post who jointly run the Post’s Mexico bureau, received the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting on Mexico’s criminal justice system. The Pulitzer citation praised them for their “exposure of horrific conditions in Mexico’s criminal justice system and how they affect the daily lives of people.”

Jordan writes, “Shortly after we ar-

rived in Mexico in June 2000, it became obvious to us that the broken criminal justice system was the most important issue facing this country. Almost everything in Mexico comes back to this problem: Corruption and unequal justice hinder the fight against poverty; economic growth is slowed because investors are scared off by an arbitrary legal system.

“The justice system is a daily torment for average Mexicans who see wealthy offenders walk free while poor criminals can be locked up for months or years for stealing as little as a loaf of bread.

“Kevin and I wrote a series of articles about victims of police torture, of kidnappings, and of a system that regards rape as a minor offense. We wrote about how children suffer in a juvenile justice system that gives them even less legal protection than the one for adults. And we wrote about how people in remote rural areas often take justice into their own hands—which in one small village we visited meant burying a murderer alive with his victim.

“Mexico is a great country. Its people deserve a better justice system. That is why we [have] tried to shed even the faintest light on the unfairness of the system.”

Jordan and Sullivan were also co-bureau chiefs for the Post in Tokyo from 1995-1999. They have two children, Kate, 8, and Tom, 6, who was born in Japan.

—1996—

Laura Eggertson, after three years of covering daily parliamentary politics in Ottawa, left The Toronto Star and started her own business as a freelance journalist, editor and speechwriter. Eggertson is now a frequent contributor to *Homemaker’s*, a national Canadian women’s magazine, to *Ottawa City*, to *Time Canada*, and to a variety of science and municipal publications. She writes: “I enjoy the flexibility that comes with being self-employed, as well as the freedom to pursue my own projects (while still taking on enough government work to subsidize the magazine articles!). Running my

own business also makes it easier to be a single parent to Miranda who, at 12, requires a near-constant chauffeur.”

—1998—

Joe Rodriguez writes: “After nearly five years and 500 metro columns for the San Jose Mercury News, I’ll start writing my op-ed column in late May or early June. It will run on the Knight Ridder wire service.

“I’m going to try something unusual for the opinion side of newspapers: a national column based on the streets. My turf will be the Bay Area and anywhere I can get to quickly for a column on deadline. I’ll be writing twice a week. My themes won’t change much—Latino issues, the politics of race and ethnicity, immigration, the plight of the working poor and working class, violence and criminal justice. I’ll add some new ones—war, health care reform, urban environmentalism, Latin American affairs. I hope to write with a distinct Latino voice rooted in East Los Angeles, my hometown.

“As for my metal sculpture, well, buying and fixing up a century-old neo-classic bungalow in downtown San Jose has put my art on hold for the past two years. The damn thing was soaking up every extra penny and ounce of creativity I had. However, the house is finally under control. I have a new friend who owns a bronze foundry! Like me, he’s an amateur sculptor, and we’ll be col-

laborating on a few large metal sculptures later this year.”

—1999—

Chris Marquis has written a novel: “‘A Hole in the Heart’ is coming out this August, published by St. Martin’s Press. It’s the story of a young schoolteacher in Alaska who must rebuild her life after losing her adventurer husband. I began the novel during my Nieman year; Anne Bernays’s fiction class was a great help. Book Magazine named me one of ‘10 writers to watch in 2003.’”

—2000—

David Molpus moved from his position as a correspondent for National Public Radio to become executive director of World Vision Radio in Tampa, Florida. He writes: “It’s a wild ride for sure, moving from NPR to a Christian organization that has never produced a news product before. Lots of educating and stretching going on for both sides as we figure out what it means to be journalistically independent and connected to the aims and values of an organization. One thing we are clear on is that those of us at World Vision and at World Vision Radio want to serve the poor and connect with Americans, especially the American church, so there is more awareness of world poverty and injustices. We also want to provoke thought about American obli-

gations to respond and what we, the non-poor, can learn from the poor. Finally, we want to explore faith as it relates to poverty and injustices.

“We hope to raise the bar as well for the quality of journalism in Christian broadcasting with more balance, more separation of fact from opinion. We are relying heavily on ‘The Elements of Journalism’ [by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel] as a guide in wrestling with questions of journalistic boundaries and integrity. The project is still evolving, but we have high hopes amidst the risks. We expect to hit air by the fall. In the meantime, I’m off to Peru, Uganda and other parts of Africa.

“We can use help finding stringers for radio pieces just about anywhere in the world. So we welcome inquiries, especially from Nieman’s.”

Molpus can be reached at dmolpus@worldvision.org.

—2003—

Kevin Cullen, a projects reporter at The Boston Globe, is on the Globe’s team of reporters who won the Pulitzer Prize for meritorious public service. The Pulitzer citation praised the Globe for “its courageous, comprehensive coverage of sexual abuse by priests, an effort that pierced secrecy, stirred local, national and international reaction, and produced changes in the Roman Catholic Church.” ■

The Taylor Family Award for Fairness in Newspapers Announced

At a dinner at the Harvard Faculty Club on April 17, The Boston Globe Spotlight Team received the second annual Taylor Family Award for Fairness in Newspapers for its coverage of the sexual-abuse scandal in the Catholic Church and its outstanding effort to examine charges and accusations from all sides and sources.

As one Taylor Award judge commented, “Day after day after day, the Globe met the standards of fairness in examining a sensitive subject and a much-revered institution that news organizations often tiptoe around.”

One nominator said that the Globe represented the essence of fairness in the media: “The

Globe’s Spotlight Team uncovered one of the worst scandals of modern times: the sexual abuse of children by members of the clergy. A few months later, after the scandal has spread around the world, [the Globe] launches another investigation to clear two priests who appear to have been falsely accused of that crime.”

The judges also recognized two finalists:

- The Cleveland Plain-Dealer, for a series that examined the life of Michael Green, who was released from prison after serving 13 years for a rape he did not commit.
- The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, for its cover-

age of chronic wasting disease in deer, the risk to the deer population, its impact on hunting, and its potential effect on Wisconsin’s dairy cows.

The Taylor Award, administered by the Nieman Foundation, was established through gifts for an endowment by the Taylor family, which published The Boston Globe from 1872 to 1999. The award carries a \$10,000 prize. The purpose of the award is to encourage fairness in news coverage by daily newspapers in America. ■

Nieman Foundation Announces U.S. and International Fellows for 2003-04

Thirteen U.S. and 12 international journalists were appointed to the 66th class of Nieman Fellows at Harvard University. The new U.S. fellows and their areas of interest are:

Erin Barnett, reporter, The Oregonian: How identity, socioeconomic status, and race influence peoples' options and sense of control over their lives in view of Oregon's Death With Dignity Act.

Carol Bradley, senior writer, Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune: The growing movement for the humane treatment for animals, the degree of support it has attracted, and its economic and sociological impact.

Alan Cullison, Moscow correspondent, The Wall Street Journal: The history and politics of the Muslim world, Middle Eastern civilization, and the roots of resentment against the West and United States.

Erik Eckholm, Beijing bureau chief, The New York Times: The role of human rights in the age of terrorism and questions of historical memory, accountability and catharsis in societies that have experienced deep internal trauma.

Indira Lakshmanan, Asia bureau chief, The Boston Globe: The downsides of development—the cultural and economic dislocation of people, the loss of old ways of life, the gap between the newly rich and still poor, and strains on the environment.

Santiago Lyon, photo editor for Spain and Portugal, The Associated Press: The history of Spain's relationship with the Americas, focusing on the lasting effects of Spain's colonization of Latin America as well as the impact of the growing number of Spanish-speaking people in the United States.

Laura Meckler, national staff reporter, The Associated Press: The politics of child welfare and how policy choices affect abused and neglected children.

Susan Orlean, staff writer, The New Yorker: The role animals play in human civilization—particularly the his-

tory of zoos, the philosophical and ethical issues of captivity, and the rights of animals.

Jodi Rave, Native American beat reporter, Lincoln (Neb.) Journal Star: The legal matters affecting native peoples and the relationship between local, state, tribal and federal governments, particularly as these relationships pertain to minority rights, revenue generation, and political participation. She will hold the Louis Stark Memorial Fellowship for journalists who specialize in labor, workplace or related issues.

Ju-Don Marshall Roberts, health education editor, washingtonpost.com: How the Internet has transformed the way people live, work and communicate, and the lessons from the evolution of radio and television that apply to the development of the Internet.

Donald Schanche, Jr., senior reporter, The Macon (Ga.) Telegraph: The evolution of public policy concerning mental illness in the United States and how those policies converge with policies on criminal justice and imprisonment.

David Stern, Caucasus and Central Asia correspondent, The Financial Times: The nature of religious fundamentalism and why it sometimes evolves into more militant movements.

Douglas Struck, Tokyo bureau chief, The Washington Post: America's policies on dealing with terrorism and whether they alienate the rest of the world and undermine U.S. domestic ideals.

The U.S. journalists were selected by a committee that included Fred Barnes (Nieman Fellow 1978), executive editor of The Weekly Standard; Evelyn Hammonds, professor of the history of science and Afro-American studies at Harvard University; Lindsay Miller (Nieman Fellow 1988), senior associate producer of The Connection on WBUR, Boston's National Public Radio station; Rose Moss, author and creative writing instructor, and Bob Giles (Nieman Fellow 1966), commit-

tee chair and Nieman Foundation Curator.

The new international fellows and their areas of interest are:

Endy Mouzardi Bayuni (Jakarta, Indonesia), deputy chief editor, The Jakarta Post: Terrorism, democracy and the news media and how much individuals are sacrificing individual liberties to live peacefully. His fellowship is supported by the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and The Asia Foundation.

Thierry Cruvellier (Arusha, Tanzania), assistant editor/chief correspondent, Diplomatie Judiciaire: The implication of international criminal tribunals on history and law and their use as tools for diplomacy and conflict resolution.

Roza Eftekhari (Tehran, Iran), senior editor, Zanan Magazine: Gender issues and their impact on religious scholarship and practice, and the impact of religion on women's issues in the various interpretations of Islam as well as the way other religions have faced feminism.

Masha Gessen (Moscow, Russia), editor in chief, polit.ru: The impact on Russian politics and media of the 1999 apartment block bombings in Moscow and the 2002 theater siege along with the use of terrorism in politics.

Jie Lin (Beijing, China), producer, China Central TV: The relationship between the press, politics and economy, particularly world trade, since the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. Her fellowship is supported by the Atsuko Chiba Foundation, established in memory of Atsuko Chiba, a Nieman Fellow in 1968.

Mauricio Lloreda (Bogotá, Colombia), reporter, El Tiempo: Examining policymaking and political accountability as they relate to terrorism. He will be a John S. and James L. Knight Foundation Latin American Nieman Fellow.

Lizeka Noxolo Mda (Johannesburg, South Africa), executive editor, The Star: The impact of globalization on

national economies, gender, race and class issues, and migration. Funding for her fellowship is provided by the United States-South Africa Leadership Development Program.

Kirsty Milne (Edinburgh, Scotland), columnist, *The Scotsman*: Public participation in civic life and the intersection of politics and society in the United States.

Pekka Mykkänen (Helsinki, Finland), China correspondent, *Helsingin Sanomat*: Politics, the political system and alienation of American voters, and examining the presidency of George

W. Bush since September 11, 2001.

Carina Novarese (Montevideo, Uruguay), reporter, *Dairio El Pais*: The democratic and economic characteristics of Latin American nations. She will be a John S. and James L. Knight Latin American Nieman Fellow.

Declan Okpalaeké (Lagos, Nigeria), general editor, *Insider Communications Ltd.*: Environmental and health implications of oil exploration and transmission.

Christian Rioux (Montreal, Canada), Paris correspondent, *Le Devoir*: Globalization and its effect on

national identity, culture and civic life. His fellowship is supported by the Martin Wise Goodman Trust.

Geoffrey Nyarota (Harare, Zimbabwe), founder and editor of Zimbabwe's only independent daily newspaper, was appointed a Nieman Fellow in January 2003. His appointment continues through December. He was forced to flee Zimbabwe after he was removed as editor amid an escalating campaign by President Robert Mugabe's government to quiet criticism from independent news outlets. ■

Alumni/ae Database Project Continues

The Nieman alumni/ae database project to update contact information for Nieman Fellows is proceeding very well. If you have already sent your current information, please accept a heartfelt thank you. If you did not receive a form via postal or e-mail, most likely your contact information is out of date. If you have not sent your information, you may go online to revise your information through the Web site: www.nieman.harvard.edu/update.

If all of your information is correct as it appears in the form sent to you, please send the form back to us as confirmation. You may also go online and select the first button indicating no changes.

The database can be used by Nieman to contact other fellows and is searchable by name, country of origin, class year, etc.

We are enjoying hearing from fellows and sharing your enthusiasm for your Nieman year. —Lisa Gould, Alumni Database Project Coordinator ■

✉ nmfnnews@camail.harvard.edu

Nieman Fellows Honor Late Zimbabwe Journalist, Mark Chavunduka, With 2003 Louis Lyons Award

Mark Chavunduka, the founding editor of *The (Zimbabwe) Standard*, has been selected by Harvard University's Nieman Fellows to receive the 2003 Louis Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism.

Chavunduka, a reporter and editor whose struggle for editorial independence became a rallying point for journalists in Zimbabwe and sub-Saharan Africa, died on November 11, 2002, following a long illness. He was 37 years old. At the time of his death, he was chief executive officer of Thomson Publications Zimbabwe, the publisher of *Parade Magazine*.

The 2003 class of Nieman Fellows cited Chavunduka, a fellow in 2000, for his courage, integrity and outstanding role and contribution to the development of the privately owned press in Zimbabwe in the face of repressive opposition from government authorities. The award was presented to Chavunduka's sister, Schona Chavunduka-Buranda, at ceremonies at Harvard University in May.

In 1991 Chavunduka became editor of *Parade*, Zimbabwe's largest news magazine. At 24, he was the youngest editor of a national publication in Zimbabwe. In 1997 he was the founding editor of *The Standard*, an independent Sunday newspaper that offered an alternative to the monopoly of government-owned weekly newspapers. The paper became an instant success.

In January 1999 Chavunduka and Ray Choto, the chief reporter of *The Zimbabwe Standard*, were arrested and brutally tortured by the military

after the paper published a story claiming 23 officers of the Zimbabwe National Army had been arrested following an alleged attempted coup against President Robert Mugabe.

The two were held despite court orders for their release and protests from around the world against their detention. Military authorities ignored three court orders—including one from Zimbabwe's highest court—to release the two journalists. After nearly two weeks in detention, Chavunduka and Choto were released on bail and charged with "publishing a false story capable of causing alarm and despondency."

At the time of his death, Chavunduka had returned to *Parade Magazine* as chief executive officer after he bought the majority of shares in its publishing company. He became one of the first entrepreneurs to emerge from the ranks of Zimbabwe's journalists.

The Lyons Award honors Louis M. Lyons, a beacon for journalistic integrity during his career, including 25 years as Curator of the Nieman Fellowship Program. The award carries a \$1,000 honorarium. Of this amount, \$500 will be shared by Chavunduka's children and the remaining \$500 will go to the Zimbabwe Chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa for its outstanding work in campaigning for press freedom in Zimbabwe. Twenty-three individuals, groups and organizations have received the Lyons award since it was established by the 1964 class of Nieman Fellows. ■

Jim Thomson's Courage is Lauded at Boston University Symposium

After Jim Thomson retired as Curator of the Nieman Foundation, he had yet another career as a professor of history, journalism and international relations at Boston University. At a symposium in his honor, author and columnist Anthony Lewis, a 1957 Nieman Fellow, told the crowd of Thomson relatives, friends, faculty and students, of Jim's courage during another period in U.S. history when there was dissension among policymakers and the public. Thomson made a difficult, soul-searing choice: to leave his mentors and promising career in Washington over his opposition to escalation of the Vietnam War and then write about it in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Of that 1968 article, "How Could Vietnam Happen?" (accessible on the Atlantic magazine Web site), Lewis said, "I can't escape its looming relevancy today.... There must be people in the present government who don't agree with the Iraq policy.... Very few people go. And very few go sounding the trumpet like Jim did."

Alex Jones, a 1982 Nieman Fellow, lauded Thomson's passionate idealism. He noted that Thomson's family hoped their youngest child would someday be President, or at least Secretary of State, yet his morality forced him to relinquish those dreams: "He ran smack up against what was

impossible for him to overcome—the person who he was and what he believed in."

Hugo Shong, now a successful entrepreneur in Asia, recalled coming to America as a penniless graduate student and being hired by Thomson, who also took Shong's future wife, Luo Yan, now a well-known actor and producer, under his wing. The couple remained close to Thomson and contributed the first donation, \$9,999 per year for the next nine years, to launch a scholarship fund in his memory. They explained that the number "nine" signifies best and forever in Chinese culture, as it is the highest ordinal number.

Nancy Day, a 1979 Nieman Fellow, organized and moderated the forum that, in addition to Lewis, retired New York Times columnist; Jones, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard; Shong, President of the International Data Group, Asia, included former Thomson Boston University student Andrew Cohen, a journalist and lawyer who is now legal analyst for CBS.

If Niemans would like to see the video of this seminar, you can borrow it—perhaps to show at reunion gatherings. Also, consider contributing to the scholarship fund to help students from around the world, as Jim did at the Nieman

Foundation and at Boston University. If you would like to have a copy of the video sent to you or would like to contribute to the James C. Thomson Memorial Fund, please contact: Stephanie Trodello, College of Communication, Boston University, 640 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02215, stepht@bu.edu, 617-353-5017. ■

Christopher J. Georges Fellowship Award Announced

Harvard College freshman and member of The Harvard Crimson staff Nathan Heller received The Christopher J. Georges Fellowship for his project on the investigation of the effects of post-September 11th legislation on Harvard University.

Writing in his project proposal that new pieces of legislation such as the USA Patriot Act allow federal researchers to gather information about U.S. residents' behavior to identify potentially malicious conduct, Heller asks: "How do these and other legislative measures change life at an international research university? How are the nation's institutions of higher education and creative intellectualism responding to the pressure of new laws governing the movement of people and information?"

Heller's project, to be published in *The Crimson* upon completion, will be one of the first comprehensive looks at the effect of post-September 11th legislation on a university.

As Gigi Georges, the chair of the fellowship fund's board said, "When Nathan completes his work and the stories are published, we expect his work will have a significant impact on how the university views and deals with these complicated and potentially intrusive regulations."

The Georges Fellowship Fund, administered by the Nieman Foundation, was established in honor of Christopher Georges, a Harvard graduate and Crimson staff member who worked at *The Wall Street Journal's* Washington bureau as a reporter until his death in 1998 at the age of 33. It covers a \$2,500 award and the printing costs to publish the project in *The Crimson*. The fellowship is awarded annually to "enable young journalists to engage in research and writing that exemplifies [Georges's] commitment to in-depth reporting on issues of enduring social value that document the human impact of public policy." ■

The Lukas Prize Project 2003 Awards

Samantha Power, Robert Harms, and Suzannah Lessard were given the 2003 J. Anthony Lukas Prize Project awards at a ceremony held on May 8 at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. The awards recognize examples of nonfiction writing that exemplify literary grace, a commitment to serious research, and social concerns.

Samantha Power, a lecturer in public policy and founding executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, was awarded the J. Anthony Lukas Book Prize (\$10,000) for "A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide" (Basic Books, 2003).

From 1993-1996, Power covered the wars in the former Yugoslavia as a reporter for *U.S. News and World Report* and *The Economist*. In 1996 she joined the International Crisis Group as a political analyst, helping launch the organization in Bosnia.

Robert Harms, chair of the African Studies Council at the Yale Center for International and Area Studies and professor of history at Yale, was

awarded The Mark Lynton History Prize (\$10,000) for "The Diligent: A Voyage Through the Worlds of the Slave Trade" (Basic Books, 2002).

Suzannah Lessard, one of the first editors of *The Washington Monthly*, from 1971 to 1974, and the author of "The Architect of Desire: Beauty and Danger in the Stanford White Family," was awarded The J. Anthony Lukas Work-in-Progress Award (\$45,000) for "Mapping the New World: An Inquiry into the Meaning of Sprawl," to be published by Dial Press.

Established in 1998, the Lukas Prize Project honors and perpetuates the work that distinguished the career of journalist and author J. Anthony Lukas, a 1969 Nieman Fellow, who died in 1997.

The awards are administered by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the Nieman Foundation and are sponsored by the family of the late Mark Lynton, a historian and senior executive at the firm Hunter Douglas in the Netherlands. ■