

ARE WATCHDOGS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

BY BILL KOVACH AND TOM ROSENTIEL

In 1964 the Pulitzer Prize went to *The Philadelphia Bulletin* in a new reporting category. The award honored the *Bulletin* for reporting that police officers in that city were running a numbers racket right out of their station house, and it presaged a new wave of scrutiny of police corruption in American cities. The award had one other significance as well. It marked formal recognition by the print establishment of a new era in American journalism.

The new Pulitzer category was first called Local Investigative Specialized Reporting, shortened to Investigative Reporting in 1985. The newspaper executives from around the country who ran the Pulitzer were putting new emphasis on the role of the press as activist, reformer, and exposé. In doing so, the journalism establishment was acknowledging the work of a new generation of journalists. Reporters like Wallace Turner and William Lambert in Portland and George Bliss in Chicago were reviving a tradition of pursuing and exposing corruption that had largely been absent from reporting during World War II and the years immediately following. Eight years later, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein would suddenly gain celebrity and sex appeal and further redefine the image of the profession.

All of journalism was changed with Watergate, especially Washington journalism. A.M. Rosenthal, executive editor of *The New York Times*, was so disturbed by the way *The Washington Post* dominated the story that he ordered a reorganization of his newspaper's Washington bureau to create a formal team of investigative reporters. CBS News launched 60 Minutes, which often does investigative stories and which became the most successful news program network TV ever produced. Local television news, not to be left out, was soon awash in investigative teams—or "I-Teams"—of its own.

Some old-timers began to grumble. Investigative reporting, they harrumphed, was little more than a two-dollar word for good reporting. In the end, all reporting is investigative. The critics had a point. What the Pulitzer Prize board formally recognized in 1964 had been, in fact, more than two hundred years in development.

Investigative reporting's roots were firmly established in the very first periodicals, in the earliest notions of the meaning of a free press and the First Amendment, and in the motivation of journalists throughout the profession's history in the U.S. These roots are so strong, they form a fundamental principle: Journalists must serve as an independent monitor of power.

When print periodicals first emerged from the coffeehouses in England in the seventeenth century, they saw their role as investigatory. *The Parliament Scout*, which began publication in 1643, "suggested something new in journalism—the necessity of making an effort to search out and discover the news." The next year a publication calling itself *The Spie* promised readers that it planned on "discovering the usual cheats in the great game of the Kingdome. For that we would have to go undercover."

These early efforts at investigative work became part of the reason the press was granted its constitutional freedom. It was the watchdog role that made journalism, in James Madison's phrase, "a bulwark of liberty," just as truth, in the case of John Peter Zenger, became the ultimate defense of the press. And in the years to come, as conflict between a protected press and government institutions increased, it was this watchdog role that the Supreme Court fell back on time and again to reaffirm the press's central role in American society. With support from state and federal legislatures during the 1960s and 1970s, the press gained greater access

through the Freedom of Information Act and so-called sunshine laws, which provided public access to many documents and activities of the government.

Journalists continue to see the watchdog role as central to their work. Yet its existence is not guaranteed, and in some ways its health is threatened.

At the turn of the century, the Chicago journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne translated the watchdog principle to mean "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Dunne was half kidding, but the maxim has stuck. Unfortunately, the notion that the press is there to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted misconstrues the meaning of the watchdog role and gives it a liberal cast, but the concept is deeper and more nuanced than the literal sense of afflicting or comforting would suggest. As history shows, it more properly means watching over the powerful few in society on behalf of the many to guard against tyranny.

The purpose of the watchdog role also extends beyond simply making the management and execution of power transparent, to making known and understood the effects of that power. This logically implies that the press should report on powerful institutions that are working effectively, as well as those that are not. How can the press purport to monitor the powerful if it does not illustrate successes as well as failures? Endless criticisms lose meaning, and the public has no basis for judging good from bad.

Like a theme in a Bach fugue, investigative reporting has swelled and subsided through the history of journalism in the U.S. As it has matured, three main forms can be identified:

- **Original Investigative Reporting:** reporters themselves uncovering and documenting activities that have been previously unknown to the public, usually via such tools as basic shoe-leather, public records, informants, and even, in special circumstances, undercover work or surreptitious monitoring of activities.
- **Interpretative Investigative Reporting.** This form often involves the same original enterprise skills but takes the interpretation to a different level. It usually involves more complex issues or sets of facts than a classic exposé, and reveals a new way of looking at something as well as new information about it. One early example is publication in *The New York Times* of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. Reporter Neil Sheehan went to great lengths to track down a copy of the "papers," a secret study of American involvement in Vietnam written by the government. Then a team of reporters and editors expert in foreign policy and the Vietnam war interpreted and organized the documents into a dramatic account of public deception. Without this synthesis and interpretation, the Pentagon Papers would have meant little to most of the public.
- **Reporting on Investigations.** In this case the reporting develops from the discovery or leak of information from an official investigation already under way. Increasingly common, it is a staple of journalism in Washington, a city where the government often talks to itself through the press. But reporting on investigations is often found wherever official investigators are at work. Most of the reporting on President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky was actually reporting on the investigation of Independent Prosecutor Kenneth Starr's office, augmented by counterinformation leaked by the White House or lawyers for those going before the grand jury. In contrast, most of the work on Watergate, especially in the early critical months, was original investigative work.

The New York Times coverage of the government's investigation of the Los Alamos scientist Wen Ho Lee provides a dramatic example of the damage that can be done to the credibility of a news organization when reporting on investigations. Relying on sources inside the

investigation of Lee, the *Times* had for weeks led the way in reporting on the strength of the government's espionage case against the scientist. But when the government's case dramatically collapsed, the *Times* embarked on a review of its coverage, which had showcased some of the purported evidence that was then abandoned when the case reached the courtroom. In an extraordinary notice "From the Editors" published last September 26, the *Times* admitted to lapses in its coverage of the story including this one: "Passages of some articles . . . posed a problem of tone. In place of a tone of journalistic detachment from our sources, we occasionally used language that adopted the sense of alarm that was contained in official reports and was being voiced to us by investigators

Reporting on investigations has proliferated since the 1970s. In part, this is because the number of official investigations has grown; in part, it is because after —Watergate federal and state governments passed new ethics laws and created special offices to monitor government behavior. But it also has spread because over time journalists have come to depend on unidentified sources to the point where the practice has become a concern for both journalists and a suspicious public.

And thus it is a form of reporting full of unacknowledged risks. For one thing, the value of this kind of reporting is largely dependent on the rigor and skepticism of the reporter involved. The reporter grants the interview subject a powerful forum in which to air an allegation or float a suggestion without public accountability. The reporters here are usually privy to only part of the investigation, rather than in charge of it. The chance of being used by investigatory sources is high. Rather than a watchdog of powerful institutions, the press is vulnerable to being their tool. Reporting on investigations requires enormous due diligence. Paradoxically, some news outlets often think just the opposite—that they can more freely report the suspicions or allegations because they are quoting official sources rather than carrying out the investigation themselves.

In the ebb and flow of the watchdog role over the last two centuries, we are reaching a moment of diminution by dilution. In the nearly thirty years since Watergate and the rise of 60 Minutes, the proliferation of outlets for news and information has been accompanied by a torrent of investigative reportage. With many local news stations featuring an "I-team" and prime-time newsmagazines offering the promise of nightly exposés, we have created a permanent infrastructure of news devoted to exposure.

Much of this reportage has the earmarks of watchdog reporting, but there is a difference. Most of these programs do not monitor the powerful elite and guard against the potential for tyrannical abuse. Rather, they tend to concern risks to personal safety or one's pocketbook.

A study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism in 1998, for instance, dissected a genre of investigative reporting that ignores most of the matters typically associated with the watchdog role. Fewer than one in ten stories on these programs concerned the combined topics of education, economics, foreign affairs, the military, national security, politics, or social welfare—or any of the areas where most public money is spent. More than half the stories, rather, focused on lifestyle, behavior, consumerism, health, or celebrity entertainment.

Safety can often be an important target for watchdog reporting. Yet too much of the new "investigative" reporting is tabloid treatment of everyday circumstances. Consider the Los Angeles TV station, KCBS, that rented a house for two months in 1997 and wired it with a raft of hidden cameras, all to expose the fact that you really can't get all the carpeting in your house cleaned for \$7.95. When local television news employs its I-teams in such stories as dangerous garage doors or how dirt and bacteria on the clothes consumers put in their washers spread to other clothes, it is worse than a weak story.

First, some of it is what Elizabeth Leamy, an investigative reporter for WTTG-TV in Washington, D.C., calls "just add water" investigative reports, which appear to be original but are not. These come from consultants who literally offer stations the scripts, the shots, and the experts to interview or the interviews themselves already on tape, and are specifically designed for sweeps periods to generate ratings. TV news producers call such exposés "stunting," an acknowledgment that they are playing tricks with viewers' appreciation of investigative work without actually delivering it.

The second problem is that exposing what is readily understood or simply common sense belittles investigative journalism. The press becomes the boy who cried wolf. It squanders its ability to demand the public's attention because it has done so too many times about trivial matters. It threatens to turn the watchdog's job into a form of amusement.

The watchdog is unlike any other role. It is similar to other journalism, but requires special skills, a special temperament, a special hunger. It requires a serious commitment of resources and a desire to cover serious concerns. And it requires a press independent of any interest except that of the ultimate consumer of the news. For all the lip service paid to it, the watchdog principle faces more challenge today than ever.

(Tom Rosenstiel, a former press critic for the Los Angeles Times, is director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, in Washington, D.C.; Bill Kovach, former curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, is chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists. This is adapted from their book, The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect, published in April 2001.)