

Are investigative reporters an endangered species?

YOU'RE AN investigative reporter and you've just had a tip that a powerful person or corporation is up to no good. It is a complicated story — but with a strong potential impact. It involves injustices, rip-offs and betrayals of public trusts. It also exposes some well-known people whom you are likely to enrage, and who have a reputation for suing first and asking questions later.

How do you get your media outlet to go for it? Do you tell your editor or executive producer that all the details are not nailed down yet, and that this inquiry might take a few weeks or even a few months with no guarantees that you will find a smoking gun? With all the recent media scandals, will the story be considered too risky?

But the deeper, if unexpressed, question is: Can you really be spared on what sounds like an open-ended assignment with no certainty of success? It sounds dicey — and also expensive. Weeks? Months? A possible team effort? Does it make sense to go out on a limb — especially now, particularly on such volatile territory with targets that will deflect, deny, and then denigrate?

Finally you are asked — “just have to ask, you understand” — “Is this some personal crusade, do you care too much, are you too close to the story?” After your reassuring response, there is a long pause — and a promise to get back to you: “Well, I think we'll have to think carefully about this one”.

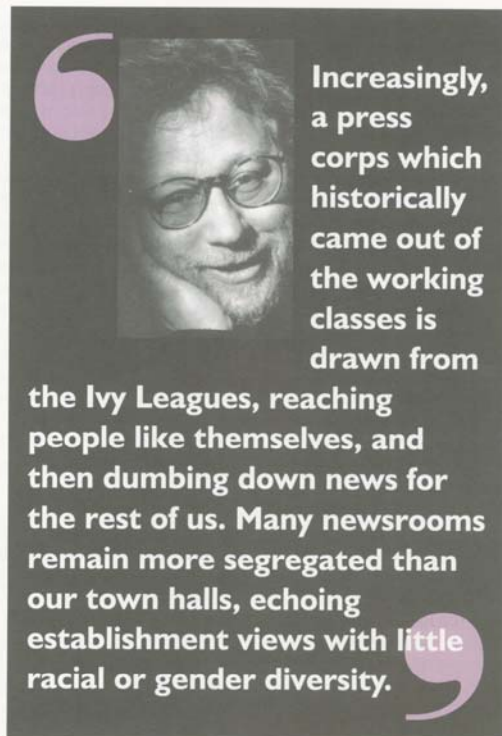
As an investigative reporter, I have frequently been party to conversations like these. Everyone taking part is sincere and professional — trying to weigh the pluses and minuses. But institutional restraints and outside pressures clearly shape today's climate of newsgathering by the dictates of the bottom line.

That is one of the little-reported lessons of the latest crop of media scandals: the CNN retraction of, and apology for, an investigation into alleged use of nerve gas on US troops in Laos; and The Cincinnati Enquirer's recent apology (and \$10-million settlement) for a flawed series on Chiquita Brands International. These setbacks for the news business mean, among other things, that it will become harder to undertake hard-hitting reporting.

Undeniably, a chill has been spreading in the newsrooms of America as new anxieties percolate down from their boardrooms. In 1995, ABC cancelled a tobacco probe for fear of holding up a merger; in 1996, 60 Minutes fudged a similar story for “legal reasons” at a network then owned by a tobacco magnate. But crude, direct economic pressure to limit investigations is rare.

Other factors are at play. Sometimes, ethical boundaries are stretched in getting the story. Attention then gets focused on the techniques more than the content. That's what happened in the ABC/Food Lion case: A lawsuit against the network was limited to the deceptive ways reporters carried out their undercover probe. In Cincinnati, the newspaper repudiated — and fired — its own reporter after discovering that part of his story was ostensibly based on purloined voice-mail messages. We still don't know what was or wasn't true about what was reported.

All news organisations are wrestling with standards for checking sources and confirming evidence. Those



Increasingly, a press corps which historically came out of the working classes is drawn from the Ivy Leagues, reaching people like themselves, and then dumbing down news for the rest of us. Many newsrooms remain more segregated than our town halls, echoing establishment views with little racial or gender diversity.

BY DANNY SCHECHTER

standards may get compromised when there is a rush to get a story out to meet corporate or competitive pressures.

As a result, investigative reporting that goes up against powerful institutions is becoming an endangered species. In a hyper-competitive climate that often encourages one media outlet to pick apart the stories of another, news has become a battleground. Where journalists once competed to advance the disclosures of colleagues, as during the Watergate era, today they smear each other with highly politicised debates over ethics and accuracy — which, in turn, often overshadow the stories themselves.

It's not all bad. Media workers can become an uncountable elite, covering stories that only they think are interesting, stories that don't touch most people's lives. Increasingly, a press corps which historically came out of the working classes is drawn from the Ivy Leagues, reaching people like themselves, and then dumbing down news for the rest of us. Many newsrooms remain more segregated than our town halls, echoing establishment views with little racial or gender diversity.

But the old debate over “media bias” misses a new reality: reporters don't set the news agenda or allocate

the amount of time or space their stories receive. Corporate news organisations do that in dogged pursuit of market share or to keep up with the pack, often by saturating a few sensational domestic stories, ignoring more complex stories and news that is more costly to cover. Inside media cartels, news divisions are now small components of much larger enterprises, fighting for resources and airtime.

And as journalism mashes around the edges, consumers turn against it. In its 20 July issue, a Newsweek poll shows that the public has become more sceptical than ever about media credibility. So as newsgathering becomes more ratings-conscious, more “instant”, more technically savvy — with fancier graphics, satellites, helicopters, etc. — it also becomes less trustworthy.

On television, programme formats limit the amount of time allocated to in-depth investigations, which are increasingly focused on storytelling rather than whistle-blowing. That was part of the problem with the CNN “Operation Tailwind” exposé: the producers had sought an hour to tell the story — but CNN said no, and compressed a complex tale into an 18-minute heavily hyped scoop to launch Newstand, their synergistic newsmag series co-produced with Time. The logic of that programme was not primarily to inform but to make a splash and build an audience.

These problems are troubling many in the business. And you can be sure that as the hole for substantive news continues to shrink, more media people will begin to speak up, despite their well-funded sinecures, challenging their colleagues and themselves to resist trends that seem to be moving us all into what some scholars already call a “post-journalism era”.

Meanwhile, back in the newsroom: “good news”. You have just been told you can do your investigative story, but unfortunately you will have to work alone because the rest of the team is on overload. Also, you will have to try to get it done in two weeks. Cut down the number of cities you want to visit. Trim your budget. And err on the side of caution. Get all your sources on the record even though some say they are afraid to go public.

Keep in touch with our lawyers, you're told. Be sure to include enough balance so there can be no perception of unfairness. You heard what Ted Turner said the other day was wrong with that CNN story — there was not enough “evidence to convict”. Oh sure, you know that journalists don't work by courtroom rules, but you know what they mean.

“And when you are finished we'll see what you have and, then, if and when to run it. You see,” you are told. “You convinced us. You won.”

Danny Schechter, the executive producer of the independent TV company, Globalvision Inc., is the author of *The More You Watch, The Less You Know*.

Copyright 1998, Newsday Inc. From *Culture Watch*, ppB06