

Death of the Watchdog, Death of Democracy

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Abstract: In a democracy, journalists are expected to safeguard the public interest and to provide truth and accountability to citizens. The media should not function as a megaphone for someone else's agenda. It is meant to have an active place in society. But the career span of an investigative reporter is relatively short, and maintaining the freedom from censorship, in Sean Holman's case at least, means going it alone as a freelancer. Unfortunately, the rise and fall of Public Eye demonstrates that independent investigative journalism is not a sustainable practice in Canada. *Times Colonist* reporter Lindsay Kines shares Holman's convictions regarding the media's watchdog function. To do good investigative reporting a journalist needs at least three to four months to focus on a story. But that is not good business – a lesson that Holman learned the hard way after receiving only \$500 for his 2004 Jack Webster Award-winning five-month investigation into what became known as the Doug Walls affair.

Key Terms: media, democracy, investigative reporting, journalism

Introduction

If the media is supposed to serve as the public's watchdog, then why has the investigative reporter been rendered half-starved and toothless, locked behind an invisible fence? In a democracy, journalists are expected to safeguard the public interest and to provide truth and accountability to citizens. But in the "24/7" information age, falsehoods outpace the reporters who expose the lies.

Syndicated columnist Sean Holman says that, when it comes to covering the backrooms of politics in Canada, staying informed should be a full-time job. Holman has spent the past eight years on the politics beat in British Columbia. He has written for major publications such as the *Globe and Mail*, the *Times Colonist*, the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Dow Jones News Service*. His greatest achievement, however, is the now disbanded Public Eye Online. What started as a free weekly, email-distributed pdf publication, advertised by word of mouth, grew into one of Canada's most celebrated daily journals: "the granddaddy of political blogs in B.C.," according to Holman.

In its seven years as an online publication, Public Eye published more than 6,000 stories, both big and small, focusing on public officials and institutions in British Columbia. With a voice neither conservative nor progressive, Public Eye ("the love of my life, before I met the love of my life," quips Holman) broke

headlining stories before they became headlines. Just one week after suspending its investigative coverage, the site rose to become Canada's top trending Twitter topic, giving him hope for the future of investigative journalism in this country. "A future that I will be part of," Holman told his readers in his farewell entry.

Investigative Journalism

Investigative reporting is essential in a democracy because it alerts citizens to the "failures within society's systems of regulation and to the ways in which those systems can be circumvented by the rich, the powerful, and the corrupt" (De Burgh, 2000, p. 3). Most journalists become reporters not for the cheap fame that comes with seeing their names in print, not for the money – there is none – but to make a difference. They feel compelled to seek out and cast light on the important illegal or unethical behaviour of those who hold power and supposedly act in the public interest. For Holman, "it's not about the journalistic act in and of itself, it's always been about the subject matter" and holding power to account. When you're following your passion, even 16-hour days are "damn fun" and "extraordinarily exciting."

The media should not function as a megaphone for someone else's agenda. As the fourth estate, it is meant to have an active place in society. But the career span of an investigative reporter is relatively short, and maintaining the freedom from censorship, in Holman's case at least, means going it alone as a freelancer. Unfortunately, the rise and fall of Public Eye demonstrates that independent investigative journalism is not a sustainable practice in Canada. Investigative journalism is the "reporting of concealed information" (Anderson and Benjaminson, 1976, p. 5) and it includes anything from public institutions to private enterprise. It concerns matters that are difficult to discover, prove, and reveal (Kieran, 2000, p. 156). Investigative reporters intend to "[justifiably] defame some person or an organization to expose a scandal and/or speed up institutional or legislative reform" (Franklin et al, 2005, p. 122). The objects of journalistic investigations may be obtained in several ways; attracting and encouraging tips, developing and cultivating sources, and evaluating and using that information all require forethought and preparation (Anderson and Benjaminson, 1976, p. 25).

Times Colonist reporter Lindsay Kines shares Holman's convictions regarding the media's watchdog function. Over his 30-year career, however, he has only ever worked as a staff reporter. Holman did a Bachelor of Arts in History and Political Science at the University of Victoria and a Masters in Journalism at Carleton. Kines opted for community college in Winnipeg, where students are sent out right away to write stories and are given internships in the second year. With a modest education, Kines built a name for himself over seven years at the *Brandon Sun* before moving to the *Vancouver Sun*, where he stayed for another 13 years. In

his 30 years of reporting, Kines says he has only ever broken four stories that he thought had a substantial impact on public institutions.

Barriers to In-depth Reporting

It seems that journalistic longevity is wrought from mixing investigative work with the daily reporting required to fill the ever-expanding content hole – more of a black hole in the age of Internet and social media. To do good investigative reporting, Kines says, a journalist needs at least three to four months to focus on a story. But that is not good business – a lesson that Holman learned the hard way after receiving only \$500 for his 2004 Jack Webster Award-winning five-month investigation into what became known as the Doug Walls affair. For every big scandal Kines publishes, he needs to write 100 smaller process stories.

The power of profits predominate over journalism. Kines accepts this situation, as he peels back the layers of a story each day, while filing and tweeting his findings on the fly, rather than dropping one major story. “It seems a bit more exhausting than it used to be because by the time you come back to write your story for the next day, you may feel like you’ve produced two or three stories already.”

For Holman, working 14-to 16-hour days was not enough to fill the content hole. “When I launched Public Eye, I thought it was simply going to be the first of several similar sites that would be launched in B.C. as time went on. I didn’t figure I was going to be the only person doing that work, and that, to a certain extent, is surprising to me.” Surprised at how little competition he had, Holman neglected to consider that when you are “independent and irreverent, biased only against pomposity and hypocrisy,” you are burning bridges with the same people and organizations that you are looking to for funding. Reader charity has its limits, and that is why Public Eye stopped evolving.

Independence only takes you so far. Speaking to the critical reporting Holman’s done on the media, Kines acknowledges that “Sean’s done some good media reporting, but it’s tough to do that when at the same time you’re hoping to break into the business... Media people are a pretty thin-skinned bunch.”

Before becoming a journalist, Holman served as a communications advisor under both the New Democrat and Liberal governments. He remembers the consequences a good story can have, how much it can reverberate through an administration to have consequences for specific people. Having triggered the resignations of public officials, he says the worst part about his job as a journalist “is every single time I have a high stress story... It’s stressful, man.” Every time he publishes a story, he wants to be certain that the facts are right and that he is being fair and balanced. But that is not easy when he is writing about situations and events that he did not witness. Instead, he must rely on his “spy network” of sources to get

inside information. The dread of being manipulated or misinformed adds to the stress; for him, it is “by far the toughest aspect of the job.”

Unfortunately, Canadian media operate against a disinformation industry during a “24/7” information age, which creates a reporting lag. Reporters are inundated with news releases and press conferences that make producing content easier, though the actual substance lacks the quality of a hard day’s muckraking. When big stories finally do break, the public gets the misimpression that few secrets get past reporters. In other words, readers (i.e the electorate) think they have all the information they need to make informed choices. Reporters would be doing the nation a service if they would only admit what important info they lack because access is denied. Journalists, however, do little more than grumble about the ludicrous wait times for freedom of information requests or about publication bans because complaining about secrecy looks like whining and smacks of defeatism.

Lessons Learned?

Public Eye diverged from the norm and refrained from news release regurgitation – that is why it went under. Holman exhausted all avenues that might keep it alive, falling victim to an awkward time in content production. When daily newspapers are coming up against barriers in their attempts at establishing content pay walls, it is not surprising that Holman’s project lapsed into an induced coma. His readers can only finance the online publication to a point. Even if he did create a pay wall, he is not certain people would be willing to pay for the service as much as they enjoyed reading it. “Besides,” he says, “there’s numerous ways to get around a pay wall.”

Reflecting back on his government communication days, Holman argues that the separation between media and communications is largely a false divide. What distinguishes one from the other is the public purse and the vested interests of the actors who control those resources. Kines and Holman agree that politicians and communications workers are not bad people. “But the offices are set up as a buffer between the media and what is really going on,” says Kines. “They’re trying to direct you in certain directions to present their minister or ministry in the best light.” They have a message to get out, and sometimes it is a valid message. Kines, however, warns that “you shouldn’t take it as gospel. You need to look for other avenues – what they’re not telling you.”

There are lots of talented young reporters capable of putting brakes on the spin, but sadly there are no decent paying jobs. Reporters today cover multiple beats; others have switched teams to work in communications because entry-level reporter salaries start at around \$35,000, says Holman. Unfortunately, when the media is cut back, crucial stories go uncovered and democracy suffers.

Recently married, Holman now finds himself at the beginning of a new chapter in his life. Much like Kines, starting a family has forced him to introduce

balance into his life, and now he spends much of his time teaching his trade to journalism students at the University of Victoria. The investigative stories that his second and third-year students produce regularly goes on to appear in the B.C. online news magazine *Tyee*.

“The lack of original content that we see is not necessarily the way it has to be,” says Holman. “We’re making a choice for it to be that way, and that choice is informed dramatically by the amount of resources that the media has available. But we are also making a choice; it is within our power to change the kind of content and the kind of service that we are providing to the public. The question is: Does the public want it to change? And are we able to make that change? I don’t know the answers to those questions.”

Conclusion

With investigative journalism’s shaky economic profile, I often wonder what democracy will look like in Canada in a decade. Will there even be a link between media and democracy? Or will news releases dominate and turn the media into a privatized propaganda machine? Active citizenship has been outsourced to lawyers and lobbyists, while ever fewer journalists are left to dig through the jargon-filled fine print, where injustices hide.

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