

Independent Media's Vital Role in Protecting the Public Interest, Not the Powerful

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I would like to thank the San Francisco Peninsula Press Club for the opportunity to speak today about the importance of high quality independent investigative reporting to insure the accountability and transparency necessary for a free, thriving society.

Just last month, one of the best films ever made about journalism hit the theaters. Spotlight is the “All the Presidents Men” of our time. and the most critically acclaimed movie of the year. Spotlight is a true story about the Boston Globe investigative reporting team that broke the story of the systematic cover-up of pedophile priests. What is remarkable about the story is how effective entrenched powers—in this case the Boston Archdiocese and Cardinal, can be in co-opting law enforcement, politicians, and, all too often, the media. As you can see in the film, the scandal that won a Pulitzer Prize for the Globe, and initiated a wave of similar investigations in scores of cities around the world, had been going on for decades.

What the movie conveys so well is the overwhelming power of the powerful to dictate, to the media, what a “responsible” narrative should be, and where a responsible journalist ought not go if he or she is to succeed and be respectful of their community.

In Spotlight, it took Marty Baron, an independent minded new editor, to take on a story that the Globe had paid little attention to for years. Baron was a classic outsider: a non-Catholic who had never lived in Boston before, who was far more committed to his profession than to being liked. During an interview last week about the film, Baron commented, “I do hope it sends a signal to the people getting into the field that it’s absolutely critical that we do this kind of work... **someone has to hold powerful individuals and powerful entities accountable... and if we don’t do it, quite honestly, nobody will.**”

In one scene, the leader of the investigative team is reminded of all the good things that the church did for the people of Boston. Taking the scandal public, he was warned, would be damaging, and insulting, to those of faith. But as the film shows, the role of independent media, and investigative reporting, is to question the prevailing narrative, not to parrot it.

A similar phenomenon is taking place across the country this year as a long standing blue wall of deceptive police narratives in being challenged by independent smartphone videos by civilians, allied with a newly critical media. An AP article yesterday noted that the number of cases in which police officers are being tried for murder has tripled in the past year, to 15. The increase was entirely due to videos like the one depicting the latest cover-up in Chicago, which led to the firing of that city’s Police Chief last week. David Harris, a University of Pittsburgh law Professor, observed, “What video does is it takes

the power of the narrative away from the police to some extent. And that shift in power of control over the narrative is incredibly significant.”

Those in power will always have their preferred narrative, one that makes them look good, get re-elected, or make more money. They will also use their power to market, and defend these narratives. They will use economic pressure, via advertising or the threat of lawsuits, or political pressure, or limiting access when journalists “insult them,” or social pressure, to use the media as a megaphone for the powerful. So if we, in the media, fail to provide a different, independent narrative, then we are little better than stenographers for the rich or powerful.

This year, I won the Greater Bay Journalism Award’s first prize for an investigative series that I wrote for WaccoBB.net, one of the largest community websites in Northern California. The stories created a new narrative that challenged a decision by a public entity, the Palm Drive Hospital District Board, to close the only hospital in West Sonoma County. The decision closed an emergency room that served 60,000 people in the community in which I live, a hospital that had saved hundreds of lives for more than 70 years. Park Drive Hospital had been ranked the safest hospital out of more than 350 in the state of California by Consumer Reports just a month before its closing.

After years of fiscal mismanagement by a politically connected and influential Board majority, the closing, and the false narrative that a philanthropist and doctor led alternative to reopen the hospital was impossible, was supported by every elected politician in the City of Sebastopol and the West County area. The last thing that the politically powerful Hospital District Board wanted to see was a narrative that challenged their reasons for closing the hospital, and not reopening it.

The investigative series, which appeared exclusively on the web, was read by more than 15,000 voters in Sonoma County. It challenged the District Board’s false narrative with inconvenient truths at every juncture, assisting in a successful grassroots populist uprising by thousands of people who put “Open Our Hospital” signs on their lawns. In the November, 2014 election, a new hospital board majority was voted in, with a pledge to reopen the hospital. Despite the sad fact that the winning candidates were opposed by every elected Council member and local school board President in the area.

As a result, millions of dollars and thousands of volunteer hours later, the new Sonoma County Medical Center reopened, with an emergency room, two months ago. It is the first time in modern American history that a small hospital has reopened after closing.

I recall the moments when I realized that the story being sold to the public was a false narrative. It was during the heated public hearing in which the hospital board voted to reject a doctor led plan, fully financed by a local business leader, to reopen the hospital. The financial, and legal justifications offered by the Board, I realized, were simply untrue. This was the investigative reporter’s smoke detector that led me to dig deeper, and uncover the fire of a faulty, misleading narrative.

It was this narrative—entirely absent from all other media coverage about the hospital, that the Palm Drive District Board was intent on keeping from the public. My stories revealed a number of highly inconvenient truths, including the truth about federal bankruptcy law, the truth about the advice of a bankruptcy attorney whose law firm also secretly represented Wells Fargo bank, the likely violation of the Brown Act in deciding to close the hospital before a single public hearing, and the truth about the viability of the alternative doctor led plan.

My series started at a major weekly newspaper, but it was killed by the editor of that publication, as it was being laid out as a cover story, after a member of the District Board called the editor to complain that I was not an impartial reporter.

Thank goodness for independent web media. I contacted WaccoBB.net, a widely read County forum. I discussed the story with the editor, Barry Chertov, who agreed to work with me on it. The initial story spread across the web through social media. It received 27,000 views, as well as 60 comments. When I asked Barry Chertov why he was willing to defy the political establishment and publish the series, he replied, “Because it seemed like an important story—and because I hate to get intimidated.”

Like the Spotlight series, and like most investigative reporting, my article could not have been written without the unsung heroes of our professions: courageous sources willing to defy the powerful, and the consequences, by coming forward and telling their story. Our profession can provide a voice for the voiceless, but these voices must first have the courage to come forward and be heard. For this story, it was doctors, business leaders, former patients, and even Sebastopol’s police chief, who was concerned about the secrecy of the decision to close, and its impact on emergency services. Sebastopol’s fire chief also made a public statement, but, under pressure from those who paid his salary, retracted it before press time.

Although I provided hyperlinks, footnotes and video for all the reporting in the hospital series, the area’s typically professional newspapers never picked up the troubling news that it revealed. Indeed, another leading weekly, eager to appease its advertisers and the publisher’s political friends, added new distortions to the mix, which I exposed at the end of this series in a column about that newspaper’s vendetta to oppose the hospital’s reopening.

My work on this story led not just to the series, but also to the creation, at the beginning of the year, of our new community website, the Sonoma Independent, and our parent non-profit public interest media organization, Informing to Empower. Our mission is to provide our community with high quality independent investigative reporting, and new insight into solutions that have little voice. We already receive 5,000 unique readers for our main investigative features. Our stories have moved the needle on issues like the continued Monday closing of the most underfunded library system in Northern California, our District Attorney’s secret war on marijuana, the unreported 23% rise, in just four years, of funding for prison and probation despite falling crime, and the failure

of Sonoma County cities to “walk their talk” on climate change by refusing to purchase electric cars for their city fleets.

We are part of a growing trend in investigative reporting, non-profit media organizations that exist to go deeply into issues often unreported by a resource-challenged corporate media. These include excellent new homes for investigative reporting like Pro Publica, The Texas Tribune, and the Bay Area’s California Watch, from the Center for Investigative Reporting.

We are working to sustain a media that champions the public interest by raising public awareness that can lead to public pressure for solutions that can make a difference. We even accompany our exposes with an Informing to Empower “What You Can Do” petition and email widgets.

As demonstrated in the Spotlight film reporting that brings greater transparency and accountability is often seen by those with power as confrontational. I like to think of it as being constructive, instead of compliant. I did not become a journalist, 35 years ago to be a stenographer for politicians, advertisers, or, County Sheriffs. Like many in this room, I became a journalist to uncover, and tell the truth, to raise awareness of issues, possibilities and solutions that most people are not aware of. To do my small part in bringing public pressure to bear for change that serves the public interest. We are all in this together.

Being an investigative reporter is not always easy, it’s not always comfortable, and it most certainly does not pay well. But a robust independent, questioning media serves a unique role in providing a voice to the voiceless, a check and balance to the powerful, and a vision of new possibilities, all of which are necessary ingredients for a thriving free society. It is an honorable and noble vocation, one that we can all be proud to be a part of.