

MOUNTAIN VIEWS: NEWS BUSINESS CUTS AND GUTS BAD FOR CONSUMERS, PRAIRIE DOGS ALIKE

By John Hanchette

OLEAN -- It's like this furtive mental rat, skittering around in your brain and gnawing at the subconscious.

We rarely acknowledge it, but most aging newsmen are somewhat ashamed of their former profession. They lose sleep over it.

Oh, not over their own roles in reporting and writing and editing all those years -- that was productive, a public good, personally fulfilling, routinely stimulating and loads of fun. One boss I had in Washington, a man of sharp wit and ethical behavior, used to comment on the news business frequently: "It's the most fun one can have standing up."

No, these former newsies are ashamed of what the discovery and delivery of news has become: a swamp of ravenous corporate greedballs uninterested in true news, or crucial information, or furthering the public good -- concerned only with squeezing their publications and TV stations for more and more profit and revenue growth.

They have two masters: Wall Street and a personal addiction to filthy lucre.

And they're not very imaginative about it, either. The only universal move they can seem to think of for guaranteeing steady profit growth is "cut and gut." The corporate executives call it "downsizing" -- and it can mean a soft landing with buyouts, extended benefits, sizable retirement incentives and such -- but the real purpose and effect is to reduce staff, put people out of jobs and leave those positions unfilled. It saves the big media chains hundreds of millions of dollars and bloats the bottom line.

It is particularly popular these days. One recent study shows full-time positions in American journalism reduced by 17,000-plus in the last three years. When this happens, it's somewhat like removing the fuel injector from your car. It doesn't run like it used to. Beats go uncovered. Story volume withers. Production cost is saved.

Easily obtained "soft news" -- celebrity trivia, contest winners, opinion masquerading as news, gossipy happenings in the entertainment sector, movie star meanderings, unwarranted space for bloviating fame-seekers and publicity hounds of every stripe, something someone not on your payroll conceives and writes and you slap into print or on your screens without a glance of editing -- grows and abounds.

Traditional "hard news" -- which includes the who's-doing-something-wrong template that business and governmental leaders so loathe -- withers on the new financial vine.

Wall Street loves this. Media companies are still money machines. The average yearly net revenue gains for big media outfits hover around a stunning 20 percent -- sometimes higher. This is an incredible growth figure, especially considering the monetary community which drives America readily accepts much smaller annual returns in most other sectors. You shop at Tops or Wegman's? A 2 percent annual gain for the owners of those fine stores is considered admirable by Wall Street. Smiles all around.

Meanwhile, the unrealistic growth demands by big mutual funds, stock brokerages, liquidity banks, capital management czars and institutional investment firms has the public thinking chain media are going broke. The media executives bow to demands to maintain this fiscal magic act because it is so personally profitable to do so -- even if they have to break up their company, as in the case of Knight Ridder, a chain of fine newspapers that is no more.

The public is only barely aware of this at best, because the very outfits who would purvey such information instead spend all their time and space moaning about reduced circulation, reduced viewership, reduced market saturation, reduced advertising, income lost to the Internet, mounting production costs and an almost total lack of interest in print media and network news by the more youthful and advertising-vulnerable

sectors of the public who spend money on retailers of goods and services as if money grows on trees.

For reporters and editors who remain employed, it means more and more work and less real production of news. Oh, boo hoo, you are thinking -- who doesn't have to work harder these days? That's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about a vast reduction of service to the American public by failing to deliver news and information that citizens need to know for their well-being -- a diminution of scope that approaches a question of national security. Here's an example.

Whereas big newspapers, news services and networks used to maintain numerous foreign bureaus in capitals of major countries or in the dominant city of a region, they no longer do, even in an age of globalization that calls for intensive coverage. A friend of mine in the London bureau of a major newspaper now covers all of Europe and much of the Middle East out of Great Britain.

Back in Washington, the larger outfits used to assign individual reporters to each Cabinet agency or important federal department. Now, typically in these days of cut-and-gut staff reduction, one reporter will cover the White House, one the Pentagon, one the Supreme Court, one Congress, and one -- impossibly -- the rest of the entire executive branch: myriad alphabet departments and agencies including CDC, FDA, HHS, NIH, DoJ, DoI, CIA, FBI, NSA, GAO and on and on and on. It can't be done properly. Some formerly functioning news outlets just shrug it off. Vital areas of the state and federal governments are going uncovered.

Somebody else -- outside the news business -- has to pick up the slack of investigating vital government functions and notifying the public when something goes wrong.

Here's a real-life example, one which in my two-plus decades in Washington I might have been assigned to cover, but which I had to read about in "Sierra," a well-written, well-edited public affairs magazine supported by charitable funding and devoted to conservation and the environment.

"Sierra" editors got their information from **the Center for Biological Diversity**, another public-advocacy group, headquartered in Arizona and supported by charitable donations, which obtained most of the documentation for this outrageous government behavior through the Freedom of Information Act, then gave it to the *Washington Post*, which also reported on it late last year. I missed that news.

The point is, the Bush administration skulduggery in question had been going on for almost four years and should have been made known to the public through now-vanished journalistic digging and reportage instead of reliance on environmental advocates, effective though they be.

The story involves endangered species -- which you may not give a flying crap about, and you don't have to. The point is, the federal behavior involved is emblematic of current government trickery and abuse, publicly damaging abuse, and of lack of oversight by the worst Congress in the last century -- one thankfully replaced by voters in November.

Whatever your feelings on endangered species, know this:

The Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973 and quickly signed into law -- surprise, surprise -- by none other than President Richard Nixon (who provided us with more liberal government initiatives than most of you realize). Despite the protests of self-serving conservative politicians with vested interests in its demise, this particular wildlife-protection law has been wildly successful.

To be protected, a plant or animal species has to be placed formally on a "threatened" or "endangered" list. Failure to make the list is the kiss of death -- 79 percent of the plants and animals gone extinct since 1973 were not listed.

In Dubya's administration, it turns out, it only takes one person -- a political appointee -- to keep a species

off the list. Her name is Julie MacDonald and she is a deputy assistant secretary of the Interior. She has the authority to edit and mold the evidence for putting rare species on the list. According to "Sierra" magazine, "she has repeatedly disregarded the recommendations of career scientists, even changing their findings to reverse their conclusions."

The Center for Biological Diversity papers show that internal findings by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists tasked with doing the research on such potentially listed species have been repeatedly and deliberately turned upside down through nefarious rewriting of conclusions. Their research on the Gunnison sage grouse, the white-tailed prairie dog, the Mexican garter snake, the Gunnison's prairie dog, the roundtail chub and a Marianas Island rare plant produced the conclusion that all should be listed.

When MacDonald -- a civil engineer with no training in biology -- got through with them, not one made the list.

Example: Of the Gunnison's prairie dog -- once prevalent in Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico but now reduced by 97 percent of its population through oil and gas drilling, poisoning by ranchers and sylvatic plague -- Fish and Wildlife scientists wrote, "We have determined that substantial information is presented in the petition and available in our files to indicate that sylvatic plague may threaten the Gunnison's prairie dog such that listing may be warranted."

After MacDonald's intervention, that read, "We have determined that information in the petition and readily available in our files does not constitute substantial scientific information that disease or predation are threats to Gunnison's prairie dog such that listing under the Act may be warranted."

When the Union of Concerned Scientists -- another public-advocacy group containing many of the country's most prominent researchers -- looked into the matter, no fewer than 84 Fish and Wildlife scientists said they were directed "to exclude or alter information in decisions," and several mentioned "abuse of discretionary authority" and referred to MacDonald by name.

One wrote, "I have never before seen the boldness of intimidation demonstrated by a single political appointee. She has modified the behavior of the entire agency."

Now if that's going on in every federal department, and it may be, it's not only a waste of taxpayer money, it could evolve into matters of life and death. Think of decisions on disease, on war, on poverty.

This, predictably, has caused a furor in Washington. Not only the groups above, but the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, the Center for Native Ecosystems, the Forest Guardians and the Sagebrush Sea Campaign have all called for MacDonald's resignation. The Department of Interior's inspector general is investigating, and the new chairman of the House Resources Committee, West Virginia Democrat Nick Rahall, has said he will investigate and hold hearings on the matter.

It is too bad that the prime response from the trickery-for-sale sector has come in an e-mail from a prominent Pennsylvania Avenue attorney -- Steven P. Quarles -- who lobbies the Dubya administration for a wide variety of industrial groups and anti-Endangered Species Act organizations. The e-mail, according to "Sierra" magazine, urged MacDonald "to just go in and erase all those back emails ... some of them are mine ... THEY are critically important."

It is also too bad that members of the once-vital news industry have come to such a dismal state that scientists, environmentalists and ecology advocates have to conduct their business for them.

John Hanchette, a professor of journalism at St. Bonaventure University, is a former editor of the *Niagara Gazette* and a Pulitzer Prize-winning national correspondent. He was a founding editor of *USA Today* and was recently named by Gannett as one of the Top 10 reporters of the past 25 years. He can be contacted via e-mail at Hanchette6@aol.com.