

Watchdogs Yelp When Made to Heel

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Journalists, the folks who love to dig into other people's lives, are learning what it feels like to be investigated.

Not surprisingly, they don't much like it.

The adversarial media culture has grown so voracious that it now routinely bites other members of the media culture. Everyone is suspect. Everyone is fair game. Everyone's motives are questioned.

Inevitably, many of the journalists who find themselves on the other end of the media microscope feel they have been misquoted or misrepresented or railroaded by someone with an agenda -- precisely the kind of complaints often voiced by their subjects.

Sometimes, of course, the scrutiny is warranted. Still, it's uncomfortable for reporters to find themselves suddenly being investigated by their own news organizations. Take correspondent Peter Arnett, who narrated the now-retracted CNN story charging that U.S. troops used nerve gas during the Vietnam War. Arnett, saying he was "never informed that my face on the air gave me responsibility for a major story," was summoned to a three-hour inquisition. He got off with a reprimand after convincing his bosses that he did almost no reporting for the story -- a novel defense, to be sure.

Yet conservative critics, fuming about a network run by the husband of the woman they call "Hanoi Jane" Fonda, see an ideological crusade. Commentator Pat Buchanan called the story "an attack . . . on the American military from the left." The Manchester (N.H.) Union Leader blamed the "disgraceful smear" on "senior producers and reporters at CNN and Time, steeped in a prevailing leftist culture."

Other reporters find their sources and methods under examination by barking press watchdogs. When Steven Brill assailed much of the early Monica Lewinsky coverage in his new media magazine, his accuracy was challenged by journalists for Newsweek, Time, ABC, NBC, The Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal -- and Brill had to admit that he erred by not disclosing his contributions to the Clinton campaign. Those who criticize Ken Starr's investigation are routinely assailed as White House suck-ups; those who defend the Starr probe are often dismissed as Clinton-bashers.

It's worth examining how news outlets have dealt with the multiple media meltdowns of recent weeks:

The Cincinnati Enquirer has refused to say what, if anything, was wrong in its 18 pages of allegations involving Chiquita Brands. The Gannett paper has apologized to Chiquita -- which is run by Carl Lindner, who owned the Enquirer in the 1970s -- and agreed to pay the company more than \$10 million.

The massive May 3 report, based on reporting from around the world, said that Chiquita secretly controls banana companies in Latin America, that it engaged in pesticide practices that threaten workers' health, that employees were involved in a bribery scheme in Colombia and that Chiquita ships have been used to smuggle cocaine.

The Enquirer fired lead reporter Mike Gallagher, saying he stole voice mail messages from Chiquita (which is suing Gallagher) and that this offense taints the entire series. But is the paper disavowing even the details that the Enquirer says has led to a Securities and Exchange Commission probe? It won't say.

In an internal memo, one staffer said the normal editing process, including the copy desk, was bypassed: "Many of us who toil in this newsroom knew this series stunk from Day 1. . . . But in his zeal to win a coveted Pulitzer Prize, {Editor} Larry Beaupre bypassed all of those checks and rushed the Chiquita series to print."

The bypassing issue also surfaced after CNN's nerve gas retraction. CNN Chairman Tom Johnson says he should have made sure that the network's Pentagon reporter and military analyst -- both of whom raised last-minute objections -- were involved with the story earlier.

CNN's apology is plenty embarrassing, but no one can accuse the network of quietly burying its blunder. CNN allowed the two producers fired over the story, April Oliver and Jack Smith, to appear on its "Crossfire" and "NewsStand" programs and accuse the network of a corporate whitewash and a cave-in to military pressure.

The Boston Globe also ignored clear warning signs that columnist Patricia Smith was indulging in fabrication before firing her over faked quotes in four pieces (Editor Matt Storrin says another 48 columns are now under suspicion). But the controversy has taken on racial overtones, with 20 prominent black women saying in an open letter that the paper mistreated Smith.

"Her fall had nothing to do with race; her rise had everything to do with it. . . . It was the worst sort of racism that kept us from confronting the fraud we long suspected," wrote Globe columnist Eileen McNamara, who is white.

News organizations can gradually rebuild their reputations; "Dateline NBC" has fully recovered from the 1992 fiasco of rigging a truck so it would catch fire when it crashed. "At some point you step back up to the plate again and swing away," says "Dateline" producer Neal Shapiro.

The growing scrutiny of media practitioners is, however unnerving, a healthy thing. And journalists -- even media reporters -- had better get used to it.

Beer Blast

"An American History of Beer" was all set to air on the Learning Channel this weekend -- a pleasantly sudsy piece ordered up by Anheuser-Busch and produced by its ad agency, DDB Needham.

But Johnathan Rodgers, president of the parent Discovery Networks, spoiled the party, saying it was unacceptable for the sponsor to have a financial interest in the subject matter. As first reported by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, he relegated the program to early-morning infomercial status and charged Anheuser-Busch for the air time.

"It fell between the cracks," says Discovery spokeswoman Lynn McReynolds. "It was a mistake on the part of our programming people."

This Space for Rent

It sure doesn't sound like a USA Today lead: "Preliminary results from a small phase II study suggest that the combination of amprenavir (formerly known as 1592) may effectively suppress HIV replication while being generally well tolerated."

In fact, the June 30 front page is all about drugs made by Glaxo Wellcome -- because the company bought the page, 8,000 of which were wrapped around the paper and distributed at the World AIDS Conference in Geneva. "We make it obvious to the reader exactly what it is, that it's a promotional piece," says USA Today spokesman Steve Anderson. "It hasn't been a problem among readers."

Bad Taste Alert

Wall Street Journal editorial writers offered this less than elegant advice to Ken Starr on Monica Lewinsky: "Indict the little tart and get the show on the road."