

# Nieman Reports

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

DIGITAL NEWSBOOK



## 21st Century Muckrakers

Who Are They? How Do They Do Their Work?

**'to promote and elevate  
the standards of journalism'**

Agnes Wahl Nieman  
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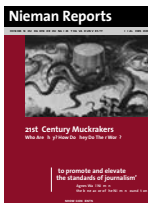
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Cartoonist Udo J. Keppler used an octopus to represent the Standard Oil Company, 1904. *Courtesy of Library of Congress*

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# Seeking New Ways to Nurture the Capacity to Report

‘Without an independent news media, there is no credibly informed citizenry.’

BY CHARLES LEWIS

*You journalists live in the reality based community. [But] that's not the way the world really works anymore.... When we act, we create our own reality ... we're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.*

—Unidentified senior advisor to President George W. Bush, as quoted by Ron Suskind in *The New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004

Controlling information and public perceptions is hardly a new phenomenon; a powerful few have been doing this literally for centuries. But the global reverberations and almost immediate human impact of decisions made by those now in power is new. And when the truth is deliberately, effectively obscured by secrecy, lies and public posturing, it distorts the government decision-making pro-

cess, mutes popular dissent, and sometimes fatally delays the inevitable, cold dawn of logic, reason and reckoning so fundamental to an open democracy.

We expect in an open, pluralistic society, in a democracy, that journalists will safeguard the broad public interest and ultimately provide truth and accountability to citizens. But unfortunately, in this 24/7 “warp speed” information age, the myriad and imaginative ways in which to propagate a palatable but false reality have substantially increased in recent decades, far outpacing the ability of reporters and other independent truth-tellers to hold those lies up to the harsh light of day.

Each successive White House occupant has been more adept at controlling the message of his administration, technologically but also in terms of additional public

relations money and personnel and “outreach.” And the intricacies of the Bush White House communications efforts, specifically the extent, substance and sophistication of its “on message” coordination and internal discipline, remain substantially murky thanks in no small part to the apparent and possibly illegal destruction of millions of White House e-mails. We do know that, as *Newsday* reported, the Bush administration in its first term hired an additional 376 public affairs officials to package information at an annual cost of \$50 million.

And, separately, \$254 million was spent on “faux news” contracts, nearly double what the Clinton administration spent during the preceding four years. Positive video news releases were sent out to hundreds of commercial TV stations, viewed by millions of Americans, often with no on-air identification or disclosure. Government Accountability Office Comptroller General David Walker criticized the practice as “illegal propaganda,” and the Federal Communications Commission recently has begun issuing fines to broadcasters who have aired it without disclosure.

Unfortunately, the problem of finding verities instead of verisi-

mitudes beneath the varnish has been exacerbated in recent years throughout America because there are, quite simply, fewer varnish removers—investigative reporters—actually devoted daily to monitoring those in power. Of course we all know too well that meticulous information-gathering and editorial quality-control essential for serious, high quality news require time and money—finite resources that many news organizations are increasingly unable or unwilling to expend.

## Doing Less—With Less

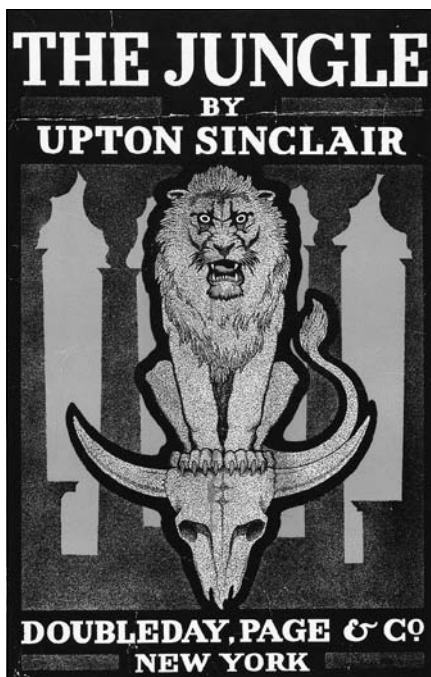
Indeed, in recent years nearly all of our media corporations have been reducing their commitment to journalism, reducing their editorial budgets, early “retiring” thousands of reporters and editors from their newsrooms in order to keep their annual profit margins high and their investors happy, harvesting their investments from a “mature” industry. The net result of this hollowing out process: There are fewer people today to report, write and edit original news stories about our infinitely more complex, dynamic world.

While more and more newspapers transform themselves into “print-

Web hybrids,” as columnist Robert Kuttner and others have written, online advertising revenue must increase considerably if newsrooms are going to be able to remain near their current editorial payroll levels. That prospect is uncertain at best, and layoffs in the immediate years ahead seem likely. And international reporting and investigative reporting, always time-consuming and expensive, increasingly have come to be regarded by management as high-risk, high-maintenance, high-priced impracticalities.

The global reach of the new technologies, the versatility, range and depth of what is possible journalistically because of multimedia convergences, computer-assisted reporting and other technical advances, the ease and relative affordability of high-speed communications in this information age, are all terrifically exciting and historically unprecedented. And the quality of some of the best reporting and writing breaks new ground with each passing year. What gnaws is the realization that there ought to be more, much more, of this unprecedented quality of journalism. Thus far, however, most of the emerging online commercial media ventures are noticeably light when it comes

## WATCHDOG GALLERY



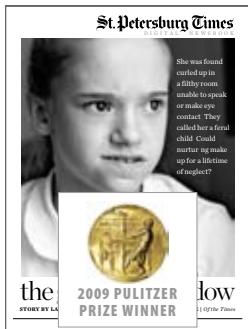
**On assignment for the journal Appeal To Reason, Upton Sinclair visited meatpacking firms in Chicago and wrote about his findings in novelistic form in his 1906 book, “The Jungle.”**

to their commitment or their capacity to publish original reporting.

The highly successful Web search engines, such as Google or Yahoo!, merely aggregate, automate and re-

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