Exposé: America’s Investigative Reports is a production of Thirteen/WNET New York in association with the Center for Investigative Reporting.

How to Use Exposé: America’s Investigative Reports

This Exposé educational package gives you an exciting way of using public television programs to enrich journalism courses. The educational package includes this guide and four uncut programs, on DVD, from Exposé’s first season.

The guide includes brief essays and discussion questions intended to help you and your students learn more about the methods of journalism presented in each program. In addition, it features notes from the producers and reporters’ tips for each story.

For more information, log on to pbs.org/expose

Strategies for Using the Programs

Video is most effective when used interactively in class or group discussion. Consider using some of the following strategies when planning lessons or discussions based on Exposé.

1. Preview the programs to determine their suitability for your students and for your objectives.

2. Select program segments that are appropriate for your class and directly relevant to your topic. The enclosed DVD gives you the option of playing the entire program or selecting individual segments.

3. Provide a focus for interaction — choose part of the segment to watch or listen for. This will help your students focus together on the information most relevant to your topic.

4. Don’t be afraid to pause the program or to replay a segment to underscore or clarify a point.

When you’ve decided on the program or segments you’d like to cover with your class, photocopy the corresponding section of this guide to distribute to your class. You might also want to photocopy the resources section on the back cover.
Dear Colleague,

Allow me the pleasure of introducing you to Exposé: America’s Investigative Reports, a unique television program that goes deeper inside the process of investigative reporting than any broadcast ever has. Exposé reveals to viewers not only the results of some of the country’s finest investigative journalism, but also some practical methods of the reporting process itself.

During our pilot season in 2006, Exposé (originally titled AIR) broadcast 12 original documentary half-hours introducing viewers to a fascinating array of reporters and their stories.

The enclosed DVD and this program guide deliver four stories which will leave you wiser, perhaps a bit sad or angry, and, I hope, inspired to share them with those who will aspire to become the next generation of America’s great journalists.

■ The Chicago Tribune’s Cam Simpson takes us on an extraordinary reporting voyage culminating in a devastating indictment of one of the Iraq war’s dirtiest little secrets. He uncovers a virtual human-trafficking network supplying impoverished foreign workers who are “deceived, exploited and put in harm’s way” in order to perform support jobs for American soldiers in the Iraq theater. And it’s all subsidized by U.S. taxpayers, whose money is used by subcontractors to underwrite the recruiting.

■ National Public Radio’s Daniel Zwerdling reveals that you don’t have to go all the way to Abu Ghraib to find abuse of non-American detainees — it’s been happening right here at home, in New Jersey and Louisiana.

■ A team from the South Florida Sun-Sentinel provides a prescient investigation proving there was remarkable fraud and waste at the Federal Emergency Management Agency long before Hurricane Katrina.

■ Award-winning reporters Scott Higham and Robert O’Harrow, Jr. of The Washington Post reveal the deeply flawed and wasteful system of Homeland Security contracting that has seen America spend billions trying to increase public safety with very little fiscal accountability or management oversight, often on plans and systems that fail to work as they should.

Good investigative reporting — and the informed public it creates — are life-blood to our democracy, and the antidote to the (sometimes justifiable) cynicism people often exhibit toward the press. I hope you’ll agree after watching these programs and sharing them with your students. We welcome your comments and feedback on this package — please send email to GuideResponse@thirteen.org.

Tom Casciato
Executive Producer
Exposé: America’s Investigative Reports
“PIPELINE TO PERIL,”
a Chicago Tribune investigation
Essay by Steve Weinberg on behalf of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE)

Journalists covet evidence. When an investigative reporter is trying to prove wrongdoing, a letter written by a corporate director can supply verification. So can a lawsuit filed at the courthouse, or reams of information stored within a government agency’s computer database.

In some investigations, however, reliable documents and government databases are unavailable. That is when journalists must rely on human sources, with all their knowledge and all their fallibilities. This investigation by Cam Simpson showed how critical it can be to find and talk to human sources.

The exposé itself took root because of a human source — Simpson’s own wife, who called him to the television set to watch a BBC news brief about twelve men from the mountain nation of Nepal dying at the hands of assassins in Iraq. The deaths received so little news coverage that they might have never entered Simpson’s universe if his wife had been away from the television.

How did those men from one of the world’s poorest, most remote lands end up in Iraq, Simpson wondered, on their way to supply American soldiers with food and other necessities? Simpson knew that documents would be hard if not impossible to find in Nepal and Jordan (their transit point). He also knew intuitively that the parents, siblings, friends and co-workers of the dead men would best be able to answer many of his questions in the absence of documents, given the nature of illegal operations in Nepal, Jordan and Iraq. So he convinced his editors to provide him and photographer José Moré with the resources and money to go to Nepal, where they would try to meet in person with the families.

“It is best to find people and question them in person,” Simpson says. That way, a journalist can study the surroundings of his subjects and sources, and then can write a more compelling, credible story by understanding their environment and culture.

The Nepalese families knew almost nothing about the ways of American journalists. They agreed to talk, however, because the reporter and photographer demonstrated sensitivity to their grief.

With their help, Simpson could try to bring the dead men to life through their own words and the recollections of others. An interview with one of the mothers of the deceased proved particularly powerful. In Nepal, Simpson also found a transcript of videotaped statements made by some of the men while in captivity in Iraq. Obtaining that transcript without cultivating difficult-to-reach human sources face to face would have been nearly impossible.

Simpson needed cooperation from the relatives for more than the emotional element of the story. He needed their help finding and contacting each person serving as a link in the illicit pipeline that plucked desperate individuals from their poverty-stricken villages with false promises of safe, lucrative work overseas. But it would not be easy, and it would not happen fast.

Learning the culture of an unknown land is vital to success along the “people trail.” In this case, for a U.S. journalist, patience was especially important within a cultural context that emphasizes politeness on the most surface of encounters.

“Do not let days without significant progress dissuade you,” Simpson has advised. “Nothing in the developing world will ever happen on your schedule. Murphy’s Law is almost always in effect. That said, people in many developing countries are often very eager to help, especially if you learn the local customs and treat everyone with honesty and respect.” The patience paid off for Simpson; he convinced Nepalese villagers, even through language differences, that he intended to treat them fairly.

Simpson also interviewed current and former government officials and diplomats in four nations, talking to at least 70 sources before obtaining the information he needed to construct an accurate, compelling story.

The distinction between sources who currently work for a government or business and the sources who have formerly worked at those organizations is crucial. “Current” sources are usually up to date with the life of the subject being written about, but might respond to questions from a stranger guardedly. “Former” sources, on the other hand, are more likely to speak candidly.

Currents and formers pointed Simpson toward documents important to the story. In the U.S., Simpson found documents explaining restrictions on human trafficking by defense contractors such as Halliburton and its subsidiaries. Such policy documents provide journalists with benchmarks, allowing them to determine eventually whether the story subjects acted illegally, or immorally.

The sources also pointed Simpson to litigation involving individuals and institutions involved in the scandal. The documents yielded insights — and a new trove of human sources.

For example, litigation existed relating to Halliburton and its subsidiary KBR. It revealed a Middle Eastern subcontractor who recruited laborers to aid the U.S. occupation of Iraq. As a result, Simpson learned details that KBR and Middle Eastern subcontractor sources never would have revealed voluntarily to a journalist.

With the skillful use of interpreters, Simpson also obtained a larger than expected amount of documentation in Nepal and Jordan.

One of the key documents came from the Jordanian authorities, who released a piece of paper to Simpson showing that a body broker — that is, a middleman subcontractor who provides workers to contractors such at KBR — had listed himself as landlord to the majority of the murdered Nepalese men. Without the cooperation of the human sources — those... (continued on next page)
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

■ Why would a reporter working for a Chicago newspaper travel to Nepal for a story, when so many other stories closer to home need telling?
■ What are your opinions about a Western journalist interviewing women and men who know nothing about American newspapers, given the sensitive nature of the topic?
■ What can be done to ensure an accurate account in the newspaper when the reporter is so dependent on translators?
■ Should journalists, when horrified at what they have learned, include their feelings in the published account? Why or why not?

TIPS FROM THE REPORTERS ON “PIPELINE TO PERIL”
(From the IRE Resource Center)

When doing stories that include other countries:

1. Do extensive preliminary research before proposing an investigation that will take a lot of resources and time.
2. Use Freedom of Information Act requests even if you get mixed results.
3. Use studies by non-governmental organizations to get background on a topic.
4. Stay relentless. If you are blocked from information in one way, find another way.
5. Avoid the phone for in-depth interviews. Find people and interview them in person.
6. If a subject won’t take phone calls, then show up at his home or office.
7. When working overseas, learn the customs and treat everyone with respect.
8. On a transnational story seek both U.S. documents and foreign documents.

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authorities — Simpson probably would never have gotten the document to help link the broker to the dead men, given the lies the broker had told previously. As for the broker, he became, at least in theory, yet another human source to cultivate.

With a combination of human sources and hard-to-get documentation — along with some crucial reporting help from his colleague, Aamer Madhani, who was in a U.S. camp in Iraq reporting about third-country laborers there — Simpson could piece together a riveting, important story that opened a window through which readers of the Chicago Tribune, and viewers of Exposé, learned of a crucial, hidden aspect of the Iraq War.

I’ve always been a believer that documentaries are collaborations between the subjects and the filmmakers. When Peter Nicks and I were in Chicago interviewing reporter Cam Simpson, photographer José Moré, and the Tribune editors, we set aside a couple of hours to take some “scenic” shots of the city. These couple of hours would have been mostly wasted had it not been for José’s help in tipping us off to the best locations and time-of-day to get the shots we needed. He had been working the streets of Chicago for decades.

The best piece of feedback I have heard about “Blame Somebody Else,” the Exposé report on Cam Simpson’s “Pipeline to Peril” series, was from my sister-in-law. She said, “I didn’t know you traveled to Nepal for this documentary.” Although I have always wanted to go to Nepal, unfortunately, the timeline and budget for this piece didn’t allow for international travel. So — though I take great pride in the work I do photographing documentaries, my sister-in-law was not responding to my own pictures, but to the beautiful photographs in the program taken by José Moré, the Chicago Tribune photographer who, daringly, opened up his archive to us, allowing this documentary to take shape.

José had taken hundred of photographs in Nepal and Jordan that he never meant to publish — any professional photographer would wince at the idea of some busybody rummaging through his or her negatives. But Jose took a deep breath and dove in. So, any sense the viewer feels of being in the room with Bishnu Hari’s mother as she describes the loss of her son or the outrage of seeing mattresses stacked outside the illegal crash pad of human traffickers in Amman, Jordan is there because of José’s great eye and passion to tell this story.

Jon Shenk is the producer of “Blame Somebody Else.”
When an investigative journalist hears about wrongdoing inside prisons, obtaining access is one of the most difficult—and often hopeless—tasks imaginable. The officials who run local jails, state prisons and federal detention centers often refuse to speak to reporters, and exert firm control over access to prisoners, staff and documents.

Even if government policy allows journalists limited access to inmates, officials often ignore the policy. This leaves the journalist with only two unattractive alternatives—dropping the investigation entirely, or settling for hearsay based on interviews with former guards and former inmates and their families.

At National Public Radio, reporter Daniel Zwerdling and his colleagues did find a way to get the inside story on abuses in prisons that housed immigrants detained by the U.S. government. At the same time, NPR journalists provided a tutorial on how to penetrate a prison system and how to be fair and accurate in the reporting.

NPR’s approach was to methodically identify networks of human sources through interviews and documents, and then tap into those networks.

The first network consisted of lawyers who specialize in one kind of practice—immigration law. A second network consisted of public interest groups trying to halt government abuse of immigrants. A third network consisted of the relatives and friends of detained immigrants. A fourth network consisted of the detainees, both those still incarcerated and those on the outside.

A lawyer who specialized in immigration issues at the New York Legal Aid Society first told Zwerdling that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security locks up hundreds of thousands of immigrants each year, without charging them with crimes. From there, Zwerdling called others across the country who work on immigration issues, including lawyers and activists from the American Civil Liberties Union, the Center for Constitutional Rights, Families for Freedom, the National Immigration Forum and the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, to name a few.

For any reporter on the prison beat, the networks of lawyers and activists can provide the leads to the victims of abuse within the prisons. The lawyers and activists can cite relevant laws and regulations that should be followed. They can tell a reporter how the prison system is supposed to operate. They can teach a reporter the protocols and the jargon.

The lawyers and the activists have professional and personal connections to the victims and have completed preliminary work on each case. They often have obtained documents needed for an investigation. With their experience, they can provide context and perspective on cases and point out the most important of those cases to examine.

Lawyers for immigrants tend to know each other, and so tend to hear about cases of prison abuse spread out across the nation.

As shown throughout this story, a positive for journalists dealing with savvy lawyers is that lawyers sometimes file revealing lawsuits. Although prison officials and their supervisors higher up in government can stonewall lawyers as well as journalists, stonewalling the immigrants’ lawyers can yield negative consequences for the detention centers if the judge hearing the case is independent and strong-willed. As a result, lawsuits might produce helpful replies, which a journalist can obtain from the inmates’ lawyers.

Lawsuits result in valuable documents that can corroborate the accounts of inmates, their family members and their issue-oriented advocates.

Zwerdling, after listening to lots of lawyers, focused mostly on a questionable death in a Louisiana federal detention center and incidents of brutality in two local New Jersey jails.

The lawyers and activists helped identify particular detainees for Zwerdling to contact. Current inmates are often apprehensive about speaking the truth for the obvious reason that they might suffer retaliation. Former inmates worry about being rounded up and imprisoned again if they speak out. As a result, journalists like Zwerdling not only must demonstrate persistence in locating those former inmates, but also find ways to speak persuasively to those with so much to lose and so little to gain personally from helping investigative reporters and editors.

One technique to reduce, if not eliminate, anxiety among former inmates is strength in numbers. When a journalist like Zwerdling can show that other former inmates have agreed to expose wrongful treatment, the individual he is trying to persuade that day might derive courage from the larger group. If each former inmate is interviewed separately and the stories of injustice mesh, the individual he is trying to persuade that day might derive courage from the larger group. If each former inmate is interviewed separately and the stories of injustice mesh, the confidence level of the journalist in each account increases.

The detainee network gave NPR specific details of abuse by guards and provided descriptive information about each guard, but not necessarily correct names. With those details, NPR could delve into another network—prison guards and administrators. Using open records requests to the state of New Jersey, NPR obtained prison staff lists used to cross-reference guard names with identifying information from the detainees.

Using that information for background searches on the Web, NPR found out where the guards lived and began attempting to contact them through phone calls and certified letters. Although most prison employees failed to cooperate, (continued on next page)
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you think prison wardens should be able to ban journalists from visiting? Why or why not?
- What do you think about the credibility of those imprisoned for crimes?
- What should happen to government officials who illegally detain immigrants?
- Does the Department of Homeland Security always know best when it comes to the war on terror? Why or why not?

TIPS FROM THE REPORTERS ON “ABUSE OF IMMIGRANT DETAINEES”
(From the IRE Resource Center)

When doing stories that include the prison system:

1. Use the Freedom of Information Act and state open records laws to obtain government documents such as staff lists and to identify potential sources.
2. Create Web pages to complement the stories so that you can generate feedback and more tips.
3. Find an editor who supports you and urges you to keep digging.
4. Keep calling and emailing and writing sources who are recalcitrant. Go overboard and beg them to call you.
5. Keep meticulous records on the date and time of each attempt to contact a source who doesn’t want to talk. That will prevent a source saying the story was unfair because the reporter did not try to contact them.
6. Keep calling helpful sources. They will remember more with each call.
7. After the story runs, call the officials who might be the angriest and ask if there are new developments. They sometimes are anxious to talk after the story runs.
8. Go to extra efforts to identify both perpetrators and victims by names in this kind of story. It adds to the credibility of the story.

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...some supplied information off the record that could be verified by other means.

When mining sources on the people trail eventually leads to documents from the paper trail, investigative journalists like Zwerdling and his colleagues at National Public Radio can finally feel confident enough to send a broadcast to millions of listeners.

By meticulously moving from one network of sources to the next, NPR built an indisputable story that was accurate, fair and devastating.

As a documentary producer, understanding the nature of “truth” is more than just an interesting philosophical pursuit. It is a professional imperative. So, given the opportunity to spend a few days with a veteran investigative journalist, I wanted to know his thoughts on the subject. Danny Zwerdling mocks the typical news report where one side of the story is presented, then another, leaving viewers to decide which they believe correct. That is not objective reporting, he told me. Reporting is about getting at the truth. Once you know the two opposing viewpoints, that is when you start digging, compiling as much evidence as you can to determine where the truth lies. And Danny Zwerdling digs. For him, every fact must be corroborated. (If a witness claims it was a hot day, he checks with the National Weather Service.) Ultimately, the truth may lie on one side of the equation or the other, somewhere in between, or somewhere else entirely. But the thing Zwerdling said which haunts me the most was: We may never actually find the truth. We may never encounter the smoking gun, the document that spells everything out, or the unimpeachable source who clears everything up. What we can do is approach the truth by compiling enough research and interviews and weather reports that we are pretty sure we know what happened.

It is unsettling to think that we may never know the truth about important issues with 100% certainty. It would be more unsettling still if there weren’t people like Danny Zwerdling out there trying.

Mike DeWitt is the producer of “An Inside Job.”
Over the past decade, data analysis has come into the forefront of investigative journalism. Known as computer-assisted reporting, the technique often provides the impetus or context for a story. Many award-winning stories now include the analysis of thousands, if not millions, of electronic records and often involve the visualization of data through software-generated charts and maps. Through these relatively new methods, reporters can see patterns and trends they would have little chance of finding by going through paper documents.

"FEMA: A Legacy of Waste," reported and written by an investigative team at the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, is an excellent example of how computer-assisted reporting has become a critical part of journalists’ investigations. Analysis of data and maps generated from data both spurred on the story at each step.

The story got its start in 2004 when Sun-Sentinel database editor John Maines was looking at online map of applications for aid to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Maines saw a cluster of applications filed by Miami-Dade residents for help with damage done by Hurricane Frances — even though the hurricane missed the county by 100 miles.

That “Eureka!” moment, as Maines called it, set him and other Sun-Sentinel reporters on an investigation which eventually identified FEMA’s payment of millions of dollars in bogus claims from residents. By looking at an electronic map which demonstrated that a vast number of claims had come from areas not touched by the hurricane, reporters Sally Kestin and Megan O’Matz were able to go to specific locations to interview residents on how they got what they called their “free money” for TVs and other appliances that had not been damaged.

During the reporting, Maines knew that with more data the team could broaden its investigation and ascertain if the pattern of false claims and bad payments extended nationwide.

Using the Freedom of Information Act, Maines sought to obtain an electronic database of applications known as NEMIS, National Emergency Management Information System. The database contained 4 million records — a number of records that a traditional journalist could never hope to analyze without the skills of computer-assisted reporting.

FEMA officials delivered the data, but they did it with paper rather than electronic records. There was no way a small team of reporters would ever be able to go through all that paper. So the Sun-Sentinel persisted in its request for electronic data — and eventually it prevailed.

When the records finally arrived in the newsroom in an electronic format, Maines was able to download them into his computer and begin to work with them with software known as a database manager. The database manager allowed Maines to group the records into ZIP codes and put them in a color-coded map.

Maines also obtained electronic information from the government on the location of 20 disasters and damage assessments. With the claims information clustered in individual ZIP codes, he could identify and map the location of the applications against the areas affected most in the disasters.

It quickly became apparent that throughout the nation, thousands of applications that FEMA quickly approved were coming from people who lived at a significant distance from the disasters.

Furthermore, the evidence uncovered by using computer-assisted reporting was irrefutable by FEMA — despite their feeble attempts to dispute the findings — because the reporters were not looking at a handful of records on claims. They were digging into all of FEMA’s very own records and seeing the pattern of waste and abuse.

Because of the high number of fraudulent claims, Maines used another computer-assisted reporting tool so that it was easier for his colleagues to check particular claims. Maines placed the data on an intranet that he constructed. The intranet is a set of Web pages for newsroom use only, and Maines created a form for reporters to search for information on certain claims.

With this tool, the reporters could work by themselves in retrieving information from the database without having to ask Maines for help each time they had a question.

By using the database, the reporters filtered information on a nationwide scale and used it to target certain areas in the U.S. to which they should make site visits and conduct interviews. That way, they went into the field with a well-focused purpose, armed with specific information on a claim.

Computer-assisted reporting also played a major role in presenting the story with maximum impact.

With databases that contained geographic information, Maines could create the newspaper’s own maps that showed where the weather was fiercest during a hurricane, including high winds and flooding, and contrast that information with where damage claims had been made. He could make the same comparison for wildfires in California using reports on destruction that included geographic information.

By putting the information into maps, it was easy to demonstrate that not just in South Florida, but around the country, bogus claims were being paid by FEMA in areas where there was little or no damage.

With the use of the maps, Maines had come full circle. He started the 17-month investigation by examining an electronic map and he finished by generating maps that showed the sensational results of the investigation. And readers of the Sun-Sentinel were much better informed for his work.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you think most or all journalists should have the database skills that John Maines has?
- Would it have been possible to do as effective a series of stories without using information from the Web and databases from government agencies?
- Why didn’t FEMA do its own analysis, and why did it refuse to answer questions?
- Why wouldn’t the government want to prevent the paying of false claims of damage after disasters?
- Why wasn’t FEMA head Michael Brown fired before Katrina? Who should have been monitoring his performance?

TIPS FROM THE REPORTERS ON “FEMA: A LEGACY OF WASTE”
(From the IRE Resource Center)

When covering the aftermath of natural disasters:

1. Get started with maps on the Web such as FEMA’s Mapping & Analysis Center www.gismaps.fema.gov and make sure to save them to your hard drive in case they are removed from the Web site.
2. Use the Federal Register for Presidential Declarations and Amendments to identify places that have been declared disasters and are eligible for assistance.
3. Get local data and breakdowns by county levels.
4. Create maps of damaged property and then compare them to damaged property reports.
5. Data won’t do it alone. You need to get supporting documentation and solid interviews.
6. Talk to local residents and business owners who will know if fraud is widespread.
7. Check the background of inspectors.
8. Use commercial databases when necessary. Try Accurint, Nexis and AutoTrackXP to obtain addresses, phone numbers and names. Keep track of it all in an Excel spreadsheet.

PRODUCER’S NOTES

By Tom M. Jennings

Having received the assignment to produce the first episode of Exposé, I was in the plum position of not having to cater to a series format. The one thing requested of me, though, was to find and present the classic investigative editor, like Jason Robards playing Ben Bradlee in the film All the President’s Men — towering, intimidating, irascible, loves to tell war stories over a glass of bourbon.

Enter South Florida Sun-Sentinel investigations editor Joe Demma: diminutive, sweet, a guy who wears Hawaiian shirts and doesn’t touch alcohol. He’s cute, not scary. He rides a scooter to work every day, for God’s sake, a fact he didn’t want anyone to know (and certainly wouldn’t let me film). Worst, he was just a week into the job at the newspaper when this story — a 70-article series of reports on Michael Brown and the Federal Emergency Management Agency starting a year before Katrina — began. The real heroes of this were the three reporters who did all the legwork — Sally Kestin, John Maines and Megan O’Matz: tough, dogged, insightful.

I quickly dismissed Joe as a main character in my film. What I focused on was the team, for this truly was a story of a group effort. This is what I wanted to get across, each reporter getting a vignette about his or her contribution to the reporting. The other theme that rose prominently was their collective refusal to kowtow to the official line — that there was no problem at FEMA, that if the agency’s head Michael Brown said there was no waste, fraud and abuse all was fine. During a time when reporters from the biggest news outlets were repeating official lines on all manner of issues, these guys would take nothing at face value.

And then there was Joe. What to do with Joe? No Jason Robards here. But one day while sitting in his office trading stories from the field with him it hit me like a category-five hurricane. As a filmmaker — as a storyteller — I find that my preconceived notions always give way to reality, and the reality of Joe was that he was the real McCoy: a three-time Pulitzer winner; a grand storyteller in his own right; elfin, yes, but someone who’d taken down mob bosses and drug cartels. His lesson to me: take the reality and play it for everything it is. He became the spine of the show, the guy whose presence exudes worldliness and a lifetime of knowledge — about reporting, about people and about life. He’d arrived in Ft. Lauderdale after a career in newspapers around the country thinking he’d slowly move into retirement. Instead he shepherded a great story into being nominated for another Pulitzer.

“I wanted to work with people who kick butt and take names,” he said, characteristically giving credit to John, Megan and Sally. But he is a binding glue, a guy who would never take no for an answer. Maybe that’s why, after weeks of my hounding him, he finally relented and let me get that scooter shot — he wouldn’t ever give up on a quest.

Tom M. Jennings is the producer of “Crisis Mismanagement.”
Reporters often rely on interviews and extensive reading to understand any system, and that is what Washington Post journalists Scott Higham and Robert O’Harrow Jr. initially did when the investigative team at the Post heard about greed and fraud in the awarding and spending of homeland security contracts.

But to thoroughly ferret out fraud and waste in government contracts, Higham and O’Harrow realized, they needed to first thoroughly understand how the purchasing system is supposed to work and what documentation is required by the system.

This would not prove easy. The reporters knew that documenting abuses in government contracts is time-consuming and complex, and that the documentation is voluminous and includes arcane procedural manuals as well as numerous legal terms.

Investigative journalists sometimes say their job is like getting paid to go to school, but in this case Higham and O’Harrow literally needed to go to school.

So they enrolled in a federally run class for government contracting officers. D. Kent Goodger, a veteran of nearly 40 years as a government contract officer, taught the class. At first, he wondered why two reporters had enrolled, and whether he should treat them differently than the rest of the class members.

Higham and O’Harrow proved themselves to be attentive and curious students. Goodger came to trust them. Through Goodger the journalists learned the benchmarks of how the federal government contracting system is supposed to operate. It was vital for them to know the line between legal and illegal conduct before looking for violations of the law. After winning the confidence of Goodger and other government contracting officers, Higham and O’Harrow were able to quiz them about specific situations that looked suspicious and also go over the language of the contracts.

Armed with their special education, the reporters were able to ask sharper questions than less well-versed journalists, such as whether or not the language of individual contracts seemed unusual, or if certain transactions appeared out of kilter. In addition, they had a better sense of when contracts might be missing a key point.

Also by completing the course with Goodger, the reporters achieved an understanding about what documents should be found in every contract file available to journalists. This came in handy when officials from the federal Department of Homeland Security claimed that documents requested by the Post contained too much sensitive information to disclose in a time of terrorist threats.

While appealing denials of access to the documentation, Higham and O’Harrow began to make sense of the information they had obtained. Pieces of the puzzle began falling into place. When some pieces failed to fit, the reporters could consult Goodger or other contracting experts, including those who had retired from government and could speak without fear of being fired.

The reporters read every contract document available — every page, from the cover sheet to the final modification. An obscure footnote on page 425 of a contract with a company trying to capitalize on the war against terrorism might contain just the details they sought.

As they read each contract file, Higham and O’Harrow took note of the government officer in charge of compliance. The reporters looked at the turnover of compliance officers on each contract. Contacting those who had departed government became part of the reporting protocol.

With their schooling and their follow-up homework, Higham and O’Harrow developed the savvy to recognize agencies piggybacking on existing contracts to avoid extra labor and new competition. They also found that bureaucrats tend to favor the status quo, allowing existing contractors to remain in place. The status quo meant bureaucrats could go home earlier in the day.

Reporters reading contracts and adding up numbers need to get out into the field. Higham and O’Harrow did that, visiting work sites and the hometowns of the contractors. At the work sites, the reporters sometimes learned about cost overruns and shoddy materials. In the hometowns, the reporters sometimes learned about suspicious behaviors or past criminal activity of the contractors they wanted to monitor.

Lessons learned kept coming back to the reporters. For example: “If a government agency claims that a contract will be worth one billion dollars over five years, and it appears from reading of the contract and modifications that they are on a pace to spend one billion dollars over two years, you may have a story about runaway spending,” Higham and O’Harrow wrote in a tip sheet for other journalists.

Another example from the tip sheet: “If a contract officer or senior official cannot produce documentation for contract changes or additions to a contract, press them on why. Get them on the record. Write a story.”
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think about the reporters attending a class for government workers in order to advance the story?
- Do you think journalists are qualified to write about complicated government transactions? Why or why not?
- What problems do reporters encounter when using Freedom of Information requests as a tool?
- What should happen to government employees who participate in the waste of public money?

TIPS FROM THE REPORTERS ON “THE HIGH PRICE OF HOMELAND SECURITY”
(From the IRE Resource Center)

When doing stories on government contracts:

1. Develop a broad and deep network of sources within a department and its agencies to understand the system and get documents.
2. Be persistent in seeking documents.
3. Don’t rely only on Freedom of Information requests to get documents.
4. Master the system and the documents within the system. Take a class about a topic if you need to understand it.
5. Don’t just skim documents. Read contract documents closely for nuances and problems.
6. Think constantly about how to translate difficult material into stories that people can understand.
7. When working on federal contracts and lobbyists use Web sites such as sopr.senate.gov for looking at Senate lobbyist filings to see contract trends.
8. When backgrounding businesses that are publicly traded and you need to examine corporation filings with the government go to www.sec.gov/searchedgar/webusers.html

When Scott Higham told me that he and his reporting partner Robert O’Harrow were going to meet a key source for their series on homeland security contracting at a Rosslyn Virginia hotel, I asked if I could tag along with a camera. As we parked in the hotel garage, there was an unexpected revelation. O’Harrow turned to Higham and said, “You know I think this is it. I’ve never been here before but this is where Woodward met Deep Throat.” A quick conversation with a bellhop and a call to the Post’s research desk confirmed it. This is where Bob Woodward met Deep Throat, the critical secret source who helped Woodward and Carl Bernstein expose the Watergate cover up.

Before the cameras were rolling, when I first met O’Harrow and Higham, we sat for a couple of hours in a Washington Post conference room and talked about their wide ranging series that has uncovered what amounts to billions of dollars of fraud waste and abuse in homeland security contracting. What most impressed me about their series is the range of it. Everyone from powerful congressmen, to multinational corporations, to a woman in San Diego who paid herself two million dollars for a few months of event planning, are part of their systematic exposé. As we sat chatting, I felt the weight of history. Hanging in that conference room behind Higham and O’Harrow was an original press plate from a Washington Post front page thirty years ago. “NIXON RESIGNS,” it said, (albeit backwards because the press plates are always reversed.)

In 2005 — after more than thirty years — Mark Felt, the former deputy director of the FBI, ended perhaps the best kept secret of the 20th century and revealed that he was “Deep Throat.” Both O’Harrow and Higham are history buffs and I could tell they got a kick out of being in the “Deep Throat garage.” It also made them reflective about all the confidential sources who made their homeland security series possible. Standing in front of an iron gate, Higham said, “I constantly invoke Bob and Carl’s name when people are reluctant to talk to us and they’re in very sensitive positions. I say, ‘Look, we kept the identity of Deep Throat secret for thirty years, we can protect you. And, we’ll go to jail to protect you, and I’ll stay in jail, and I’ll never give your name up.’ And I’m really serious about that. It’s a promise that we make and that we keep no matter what.”

Joe Rubin is the producer of “Nice Work If You Can Get It.”
RESOURCES

WEB SITES

pbs.org/expose
Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR)
www.muckraker.org
Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE)
www.ire.org
Columbia Journalism Review
www.cjr.org
The Fund for Investigative Journalism
www.fiji.org
The Center for Public Integrity
www.publicintegrity.org/default.aspx
The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting
www.pulitzercenter.org
The Smoking Gun
www.thesmokinggun.com

ARTICLES

Blame Somebody Else
Pipeline to Peril, Chicago Tribune
4847.special?coll=chi-newspecials-hed

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An Inside Job


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www.sun-sentinel.com/news/local/southflorida/sf-i-femareport,0,7651043.storygallery


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Sally Kestin. “Residents Received Emergency Katrina Money, Sometimes for Minor Damage.” South Florida Sun-Sentinel, October 20, 2005.

Nice Work If You Can Get It
